

**Theses of PhD dissertation**

**Down with Socialist realism – Long live postmodernism!  
Paradigm shift in Russian literature in the second half of the 1980s**

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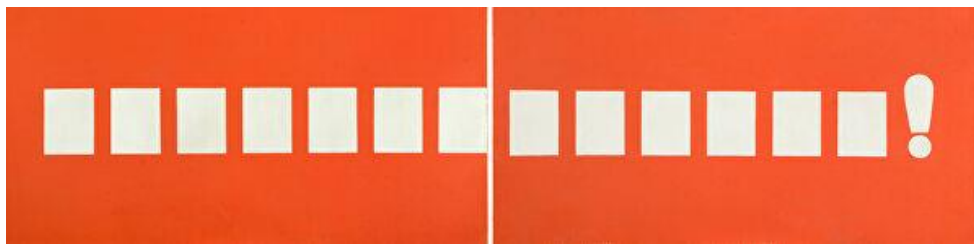
UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies

Debrecen, 2021.

## I. Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

With the Soviet poster-like subtitle of my thesis (Down with Socialist realism – Long live postmodernism!) I aim to evoke official Soviet propaganda slogans together with their postmodern parodies made by Sots artists like V. Komar or A. Melamid (see the picture below). The dash in the title represents a sharp shift between two completely different literary paradigms: Socialist realism and postmodernism. My dissertation explores this significant change in Russian culture, which has had a palpable effect on the process of literature up to the present time. The relevance of my research is proven by the fact that postmodernism serves as a point of reference because of which recent literary trends can be defined and described, even though it has lost its leading role in Russian literature.



V. Komar & A. Melamid, “Perfect Slogan” 1984.

The historic events that took place in the Soviet Union in the mid-eighties fundamentally changed the country’s cultural and literary life. This decisive transformation happened fast and seemingly chaotically. Socialist realism lost its reputation and leading role with surprising speed. Despite the sporadic publication of a few works (mainly novels of the *Village Prose* literary movement) Socialist realism totally disappeared from most literary journals, which began to simultaneously publish banned literature from the twenties and thirties, *expository literature* (разоблачительная литература), and *another literature* (другая литература). During this time a new experimental literature appeared, which came to be known as *postmodern* merely a few years later. Thus, the appearance and strengthening of postmodernism hinged upon conditions that were not present in Western cultural and political life. As Socialist realism was knocked off its pedestal Russian literature ceased to serve ideological purposes. As a result, postmodernism grew into the strongest trend during the 90s. The dissertation focuses on these Russian literary processes, which I refer to as a paradigm shift.

The organizers of the uncensored almanac “Metropol” provide a good illustration of how rapidly and unpredictably this paradigm shift happened. Vitor Yerofeyev, Vasily Aksyonov and Yevgeni Popov were ostracised from the Union of Soviet Writers in 1979, but a few years

later their text began to appear in leading literary journals and by the late 90s they became the most prominent postmodern authors. In order to treat this rapid and unpredictable change (during which Socialist realism was replaced by postmodernism) as a paradigm shift, it is inevitable to thoroughly explore and describe the underlying literary processes. The dissertation examines the Russian literary scene between 1986 and 1995 through the literary fiction of this era together with its literary criticism and theory. I describe the deconstruction of Socialist realism in literature, the stages of the creation of the new art concept and also highlight the main characteristics of Russian postmodernism. My research is divided into four main tasks:

1. A thorough examination of the issues of three *thick Russian literary journals* (“Voprosy literatury”, “Novy Mir”, and “Znamya”), published between 1986 and 1992).
2. The issue of the definability of Russian postmodernism in three different eras: in the eighties, nineties and today.
3. Analysis of prose writing from the almanac “Metropol”.
4. Analysis of novels by two authors of the almanac: “On the Eve of the Eve” (1993) and “The Soul of a Patriot or Various Epistles to Ferfichkin” (1994), by Yevgeni Popov and “The Island of Crimea” (1990) by Vasily Aksyonov.

## **II. An outline of the applied methods**

The identified tasks required the application of hybrid methods. In the first part of the dissertation I rely on approaches of literary history and literary theory while in the second part I examine the allocated texts, focusing mainly on poetic structures and narrative techniques. In the meantime, I create the social-historical context necessary for the understanding of the new literary concepts and processes. The introductory chapter deals with the definition and description of the paradigm shift in three different eras: in the eighties, when the process itself was unfolding; in the late nineties, when the first Russian language monographs on the new paradigm (already unanimously referred to as postmodern) appeared and finally today, when postmodernism has already lost its dominance in Russia. I apply diverse temporal points of view, approaching the subject of my research from different distances. Firstly, the examination of literary sources from the eighties reveal how the deconstruction of clichés belonging to the socialist culture and the formation of a completely different, pluralistic concept of art in literary criticism can be appreciated from the position of the contemporary observer. Then, the revision of the monographs leads to an objective definition of Russian postmodernism, placed in the context

of world literature. Finally, by looking at the paradigm shift through the lens of a contemporary Russian literary trend called *New Realism*, which rejects and replaces postmodernism, we can identify the main and later overused features of the new paradigm. The monographs discussed in this part (such as works of Mark Lipovetsky, Mikhail Epstein, Irina Skoropanova, Vyacheslav Kuristyn, Galina Nefagina and Nadezhda Mankovskaya) represent an important reference point in analysis as well. The dissertation also draws upon works of several Hungarian scholars such as Goretity József, Kalafatics Zsuzsanna, Regéczi Ildikó, Hetényi Zsuzsanna, Turi Márton, Szóke Katalin and Bagi Ibolya.

Examination of the almanac “Metropol” in my dissertation can be regarded as a new contribution, because, although the volume itself is legendary and often referred to as some kind of turning point, literary criticism has not paid attention to its texts themselves. After a short description of the cultural and literary history of the almanac I highlight the major recurrent characteristics of its texts. As a starting point of this process I use an article by Sergey Chuprinin (1989), in which the researcher refers to the almanac “Metropol” as a “visiting card of another literature” (визитная карточка другой прозы). In connection with the methodology of the second, third and fourth chapters it is important to note that, in the course of the analyses, I do not only illustrate my earlier statements about paradigm shift but continue to examine it, switching the emphasis from literary history to aesthetic evaluation. Although in contemporary criticism, novels of Y. Popov and V. Aksyonov tended to be examined inseparably from socio-political issues, my intention was to create an interpretation exclusive to the discourse of aesthetic criticism. When analysing these novels in their artistic complexity, I link several concepts of Russian literary theory (including the carnivalized nature of postmodern literature, the concept of the Petersburg and Crimean Texts, the phenomenon of the author’s mask, the issues of adaptation, as well as of the genre of utopia/anti-utopia) to the theoretical and historical problem of paradigm shift. A historical examination of these phenomena and their definition in the context of certain postmodern literary works highlight the poetic aspects of paradigm shift.

As the second main actor of paradigm shift, Socialist realism is also approached and analysed from diverse viewpoints in different parts of the dissertation. This movement becomes interesting in the dissertation not by its very nature (as a collection of principles and rules dictated by the political power), but, rather, only in the context of postmodern paradigm. Thus, in order to define Sots Art as a specifically Russian postmodern trend I closely examine the origin of Socialist realism, together with its schematic language relying on clichés.

### III. The results of the dissertation

1. The first chapter describes the way in which postmodern literature, postmodern literary criticism and postmodern theory appeared and became popular in the Soviet Union/Russia.

The first part of this chapter discusses the debate that was unfolding in the columns of *thick literary journals* (толстые литературные журналы) in the second half of the 80s. In reviewing these journals, I expose the diversity in the points of view, revealing that the dispute focused on politico-historical and ethical questions, rather than aesthetics. I argue that this enormous critical acclaim, which accompanied the publication of works written much earlier but banned until the end of the 80s, greatly contributed to the sudden success of postmodern poetry in Russia.

I shed light on the fact that, even though readers finally had access to literature that they had only been able to read in *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, Socialist realism was present for a few more years, mainly due to the endeavours of the literary journal “Voprosy literatury”. Literary scholars of this journal, including D. Urnov and V. Ozerov tried to maintain it (which was otherwise appreciably falling into discredit), discussing its future perspectives. Accepting the fact that Socialist realism had lost its exclusivity, they defined it as “an arsenal of artistic methods”, trying to broaden its previously tight framework. They encouraged their fellow critics to examine the Socialist literary canon “through fresh eyes” even if it meant restructuring it. Novels of the Soviet officious literature (официозная литература) previously seen as masterpieces were now replaced by novels of Village Prose writers (деревенская проза) and works by the generation of the 60s (шестидесятники). Their main aim in supporting Socialist realism over increasingly popular postmodernism was to save the social function of literature.

Despite all of this, the years 1987–1988 represented a turning point, since the long-coveted principle of literary pluralism had started to set in again. Names of authors who had been forced into silence for decades began to appear in the columns of journals. This resulted in an extraordinary situation, in which their works (such as novels by Mikhail Bulgakov, poems by Anna Akhmatova, short stories by Daniil Kharms; or “Doctor Zhivago” by Boris Pasternak, “The Island of Crimea” by Vasily Aksyonov, “Pushkin House” by Andrei Bitov's, “The Foundation Pit” by Andrei Platonov and “The Place of the Skull” by Chinghiz Aitmatov) were regarded as contemporary ones, although they had been born in an entirely different social-psychological and aesthetic context.

I also highlight the crucial points of the dispute that ensued following the publication of *expository literature* (разоблачительная литература) reflecting on the Stalin and Brezhnev eras. Due to the general intention to restore historical truth there was enormous interest in books like Vladimir Dudintsev's "White Garments", Anatoly Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat*", Lydia Chukovskaya's "Sofia Petrovna", Yury Dombrovsky's "The Faculty of Useless Knowledge". But in a short time, these works turned out to be shallow in terms of poetics and narratology. In addition to this, literature of the 20s–30s was only treated as counter-culture literature. According to my hypothesis the heated debates around the en-masse publication of *expository literature* and the literature of the 20s–30s led to the fact that Russian literary criticism gradually returned to the aesthetic dimension and therefore ignored political and social points of view. This generated a demand for Russian postmodern poetry.

While examining the way in which postmodern terminology was taking root in Russia, I also review the first monographs on Russian postmodernism in the second part of this chapter. I argue that literary scholars were facing two challenges in defining Russian postmodernism. On the one hand, they had to reinstate Russian literature (which was stopped from developing organically in the first third of the century) in the context of world literature and global postmodernism. On the other hand, they also had to identify the characteristic features of Russian postmodernism, which was fundamentally different from Western postmodernism. Furthermore, the rudiments of philosophy and aesthetics of Western postmodernism also needed to be introduced into Russian literary theory, since poststructuralism and deconstruction had hitherto been unfamiliar concepts in Russia. Although postmodernism in Russia has only been the subject of literary criticism since 1991, rather different theories have been created on how long it has been present in Russia and what its relationship to modernism is. Mikhail Epstein, for example, believes that it was in Russian culture that postmodernism first appeared in the 18th century and describes communism as its mature version. Boris Groys regards Stalin's Socialist realism as a peculiar version of global modernist culture while he views post-Soviet culture as a peculiar subtype of postmodernism. According to Raoul Eshelman, Russian postmodernism first appeared not as a style but as *episteme* in novels of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Valentin Rasputin, Yuri Trifonov and Vasily Shukshin, representatives of Socialist realism. Mark Lipovetsky regards Nabokov's writings in the 30s as reflections of the beginning of Russian postmodernism and believes that the peculiarity of Russian postmodernism lies in the very fact that it does not oppose modernity (unlike Western-European and American postmodernism), instead, it represents an important stage of its

development. Without doubting Lipovetsky's above premise on Russian postmodernism, I point out (relying on works by Richard Sheppard, and Linda Hutcheon, and also on the articles of *The New Modernist Studies*) that it is not only Russian postmodernism that has roots going back to modernism. The concept of postmodernism as defined in contrast with modernism underwent radical changes in Western criticism as well, resulting in the deconstruction of the binary opposition modernism/postmodernism.

Finally, in the last part of this chapter I examine Russian postmodernism and its further prospects from the perspective of today's literary processes. I argue that the manifestos of *New Realism* (a current Russian literary movement) are interesting not only from the aspect of the new trend that they advocate but also in terms of the postmodern paradigm that they reject and intend to replace. The features of Russian postmodernism (such as rejection of dealing with social issues, overconstructed texts, unnatural language, as well as continuous irony and parody) are reflected in the manifestos in an exaggerated, caricature-like way against which representatives of the *New Realism* determine their own writing method. Even though the fight between realism and postmodernism was decided in favour of realism in the 2010s, postmodernism has not completely disappeared in Russian literature to date. On the one hand, this means that the classic masters of Russian postmodernism such as Victor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin are publishing even today, and there are also debut authors, e.g. Vladislav Gorodetsky, who define themselves as postmodernist authors. On the other hand, there are those e.g., Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Mikhail Shishkin or Eugene Vodolazkin, whose art cannot be regarded as postmodern on account of their world views and anthropological concepts and yet, their works feature postmodern literary conventions; such as irony, intertextuality, or doubt.

2. In the second chapter I analyse the almanac "Metropol", which represents the underground era of Russian postmodernism. This manually created, uncensored almanac provoked enormous indignation in the representatives of official literature as it was seen as an attempt to overthrow the monopoly of Socialist realism. Close reading of the texts (claimed as *another literature* by Sergey Chuprinin [другая литература]) reveals features that I identify as evidence of the new paradigm. Even though these texts describe reality, certain aspects (such as the representation of alcoholic heroes living on the periphery of society; their spontaneous language, which is not exempt from the use of expletives; or the description of physical or even sexual abuse) did not fit into the framework of official Soviet literature, which provided sufficient grounds for the volume not to be published. Later literary works by the editors of the almanac (Yevgeni Popov, Vasily Aksyonov, Viktor Yerofeyev and even Fazil Iskander, who

did not associate himself with postmodernism) reflect the postmodern world view and way of thinking, which I have detected during examination of the almanac “Metropol”.

3. In the third chapter I examine two novels by Yevgeni Popov, written at the time of the paradigm shift: “The Soul of a Patriot or Various Epistles to Ferfichkin” (Душа Патриота, или Различные послания к Ферфичкину) and “On the Eve of the Eve” (Накануне накануне). In the first part of the analysis of the latter I determine the genre *remake* popular with postmodern writers by distinguishing it from *paraphrase*, *travesty*, and *parody*, which are often treated as its forerunners or synonyms by literary critics. I arrive at the conclusion that *remake* and *paraphrase* have entirely different aims in imitating earlier texts. The imitation of postmodern literature does not express respect for the author, on the contrary, it undermines the author’s prestige.

Popov’s remake clearly alludes to Ivan Turgenev’s “On the Eve” and undeniably parodies it. Nevertheless, I argue that it rejects and deconstructs the novel’s canonised interpretation that became popular during the Soviet era rather the novel itself. I point out that Popov’s remake refers not only to Turgenev’s novel but also to an essay “When Will the Real Day Come?” by Dobrolybuv. In this essay the author considers Turgenev’s novel as a contribution to the transformation of contemporary social-political life by providing a positive model. In other words, he approaches the novel from a realistic point of view, entirely neglecting its fictional nature and using it for ideological purposes. It is my thesis that in this remake Popov discredits the political opinion deposited on the Turgenev novel, and by so doing he breaks with the century-long moralising tradition of Russian literary criticism, carried to the extreme by Socialist realism.

In my analysis of the novel “The Soul of a Patriot or Various Epistles to Ferfichkin” I prove my hypothesis that this novel is of utmost importance from the point of view of paradigm shift. On the one hand, it is connected to this era thematically (it captures the final days of the Brezhnev era), and on the other, the paradigm shift is also accomplished in the text itself.

The narrator of the novel refers to himself as Yevgeni Anatolyevich, using the name of the real author. First, I examine the use of *authorial mask* and define this popular postmodern mode of narration. According to Carl Malmgren, by using the real author’s name a narrator always ridicules the reader’s expectations of the author’s identity. This statement requires me to examine the changing role of the author in literary criticism. It is through this that I am able to determine what the irony of Popov’s narrator-author is directed at. I conclude that, on the one hand, it ridicules the concept according to which the author’s biography is the key to his work.



On the other hand, it makes fun of the concept of Vinogradov, according to which there is always an *abstract author* hiding in the text who carries the real meaning of the text. I come to the conclusion that Popov uses this narrative technique to emphasise that it is impossible to look at a literary work as an arsenal of ultimate truths and statements.

In addition to this, I also explain that I consider this novel the realisation of carnivalized Sots Art. Although initially it might seem that the narrator is under the influence of Soviet propaganda language, I demonstrate that his narration is characterised by the freedom of carnivalized culture both thematically and stylistically. This kind of narration reaches its climax at the end of the novel in the description of Brezhnev's funeral. Due to the montage technique, incongruent elements are juxtaposed, which leads to the deconstruction of narration within *Socialist realism*, to be replaced by a new postmodern way of writing regarded by the narrator-author as *paraliterature*.

4. In the fourth chapter I point out that the paradigm shift, which took place in Russian literature in the second half of the 80s, also unfolds in Vasily Aksyonov's oeuvre. Aksyonov started his career in the early 60s as a representative of the literary movement called *youth prose* (молодежная проза), remaining in the confines of Socialist realism. But in the wake of the "Metropol" scandal after his novels "The Island of Crimea" and "The burnt" published in America he was branded anti-Soviet.

Examination of Aksyonov's early works sheds new light not only on the first part of his career but also on the art of the entire *60s generation*. I demonstrate that characteristics of *youth prose*, such as subjective narration, young heroes, or urban slang, appear as artistic innovation only in contrast to the official literature of the Stalin era.

In the focal point of this chapter lies the novel "The Island of Crimea" (Остров Крым) from the second epoch of his writing career. Ever since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 much attention has been paid to "The Island of Crimea" (1979), Vasily Aksyonov's anti-Soviet alternative history. The 2014 events provoked a deep ethnic and geopolitical crisis in the peninsula, historically home to many nations. In the novel, national issues result in the birth of a new hybrid nation of the Yaki, uniting people of Russian, Tatar, Greek, Turkish, Italian, Bulgarian, and British origin. Parallels with reality enforce a contemporary reading of the novel through the prism of present reality, with some critics even saying it "predicts Russia's invasion of Crimea". In contrast with this view, I argue that the novel cannot be studied from any political perspective, as such an approach fails to account for the author's message conveyed

in the very title: his Crimea, unlike the real one, is an island, making the novel a piece of fiction. I propose a different reading of Aksyonov, based on the actual analysis of fictional Crimea and the key issues (Russian national identity, minorities, the role of intelligentsia in Russian history) from a cultural point of view, putting aside socio-political issues. I show that Crimea has a symbolic meaning in Russian culture, and the novel should be read in the context of *Crimean Text*, by analogy with the well-established *Petersburg Text* in Russian literature. I conclude that this context explains why Aksyonov's utopia turns into an anti-utopia.



Registry number: DEENK/20/2021.PL  
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Annamária Vass  
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies  
MTMT ID: 10058010

### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Vass, A.:** Ot sočrealizma k postmodernizmu: processy izmeneniya hudozhestvennogo yazika. Kritika tolstyh literaturnyh zhurnalov 1985-1992 gg.  
In: Hudozhestvennyj jazyk sovremennoj ruszskoj prozy. Sbornik statej / red. Jozsef Goretti', Kairosz Könyvkiadó, Budapest, [Közlésre elfogadva], 149-164, 2021.
2. **Vass, A.:** O knige Russkij kanon: knigi XX veka.  
In: Nastojashhee i budushhee ruszskoj literatury: kollektivnaja monografija / red. Jozsef Goretti', Didakt, Debrecen, 63-68, 2019. ISBN: 9786155212680

#### Foreign language international book chapters (1)

3. **Vass, A.:** "Vizitka drugoj literatury". Ob al'manahe "Metropol".  
In: Nové tendencia mladá rusistika a trendy III / red. Irina Dulebová, Ivan Posokhin, Stimul, Bratislava, 250-259, 2015. ISBN: 978808081271250

#### Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (1)

4. **Vass, A.:** A szovjet kisember és a posztmodern író tudata. Jevgenyij Popov: A hazafi lelke, avagy különféle közlemények Fityfircséhez.  
*Kalligram*. 25 (11), 53-57, 2016. ISSN: 1335-1826.

#### Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

5. **Vass, A.:** Razryv s moralizirujushhej tradiciej ruszskoj literatury. O remejke "Nakanune nakanune"  
Yevgenia Popova.  
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#### Other journal articles (1)

6. **Vass, A.:** Turi Márton: Rejtektutak a pusztságban.  
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#### Foreign language conference proceedings (1)





7. **Vass, A.:** Istorija neudachnogo remejka. O rasskaze "Dama s sobakoj" Galiny Shherbakovoj.  
In: Molodezhnye Chehovskie Chtenija v Taganroge : Materialy IX Mezhdunarodnoj nauchnoj konferencii / red. V.V. Kondrat'eva, Tanais, Taganrog, 18-22, 2017. ISBN: 9785990855380

### List of other publications

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

8. **Vass, A.:** Tyibor Gyeri, Krisztinya Tot, Milan Fjust... Mennyire ismer(het)ik a magyar irodalmat az oroszok?  
*Szépirod. Figy.* 19 (4), 80-89, 2020. ISSN: 1585-3829.
9. **Vass, A.:** A szépség halott. Viktor Pelevin: Ananászlé a szépséges hölgynek című elbeszéléskötetéről.  
*Tiszatáj.* 67 (8), 139-143, 2013. ISSN: 0133-1167.

#### Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (1)

10. **Vass, A.:** Pelevin ismétli önmagát?  
*Irod. Szle.* 5, 21-27, 2014. ISSN: 1336-5088.

#### Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

11. **Vass, A.:** Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance.  
*Can Slavon Pap.* 61 (1), 141-142, 2019. ISSN: 0008-5006.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2018.1552388>

#### Other journal articles (1)

12. **Vass, A.:** A véresen komolyan vett Tolsztoj. Viktor Pelevin T című regényéről.  
*Szkholon.* 2, 40-43, 2011. ISSN: 1785-0479.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

13 January, 2021

