

# CONCEPTUALIZING UKRAINIAN POSTMODERNISM

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Review of: Hundorova, Tamara:  
Pisliachornobylska biblioteka.  
Ukrainskyi literaturnyi postmodern.  
Kyiv: Krytyka 2005, 263 pp.

1 Andruchowytsh, Jurij: Spurensuche im Juli. Trans. by by Anna-Halja Horbatsch.Reichelsheim Brodina 1995; Andruchowytsh, J.: Das letzte Territorium. Essays. Trans. by Alois Woldan. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2003; Andruchowytsh, J.: Zwölf Ringe. Roman. Trans. by Sabine Stöhr. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2005; Andruchowytsh, J.: Moscoviada. Roman. Trans. by Sabine Stöhr. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2006; Andruchowytsh, J.: Engel und Dämonen der Peripherie. Essays. Trans. by Sabine Stöhr. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2007; Andruchowytsh, J./Stasiuk, Andrzej: Mein Europa. Zwei Essays über das sogenannte Mitteleuropa. Trans. by Sofia Onufriv and Martin Pollack. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2004.

2 Zhadan, Serhij: Geschichte der Kultur zu Anfang des Jahrhunderts. Gedichte. Trans. by Claudia Dathe. With photographs by Vladyslav Getman and afterword by Juri Andruchowytsh. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2006; Zhadan, S.: Depeche Mode. Roman. Trans. by Juri Durkot and Sabine Stöhr. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2007; Zhadan, S.: Anarchy in the UKR. Trans. by Claudia Dathe. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2007.

3 Sabuschko, Oksana: Feldstudien über ukrainischen Sex. Roman. Trans. by DAJA. Graz: Droschl 2006.

4 Cf. also Alexander Kratochvil, who in his review of Hundorova's monograph criticizes the fact that Hundorova does not offer any explication of her personal notion of a non-Western postmodernism (Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie 64/1 [2005/06], p. 208).

Ukrainian literature, almost completely ignored among a German readership for decades, has in recent years become more and more popular due to new and aesthetically convincing German translations of works by authors such as Iurii Andrukhovych,<sup>1</sup> Serhii Zhadan,<sup>2</sup> and Oksana Zabuzhko.<sup>3</sup> Each of these writers represents, albeit in different ways (rooted in the different artistic traditions in the Western and Eastern parts of the Ukraine), the various forms of postmodernism in contemporary Ukrainian literature. By means of their novels, poems, and essays, they demonstrate how closely their literary devices of today are linked to the overall Western trends of postmodernism, which include, for example, the use of irony, intertextuality or pastiche-like forms of writing. Tamara Hundorova has previously published some outstanding studies on Ukrainian modernism around 1900 in general, as well as on the major Ukrainian writers Ivan Franko and Olha Kobylanska. She turns her attention in her latest book to these new and very actual trends in Ukrainian literature.

According to the title of Hundorova's study, the specific form of Ukrainian postmodernism can be described by means of the central metaphor of a post-Chernobyl library. Hundorova, however, interprets the nuclear disaster of the year 1986 not so much in terms of a social and ecological catastrophe resulting in a martyrdom-like discourse of the victim (which has become typical for a pre-postmodern way of Ukrainian writing), but rather she looks at it »through Western eyes«, namely through those of the postmodern philosophers Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard, who in their essays created a specific post-apocalyptic manner of thinking based on the concepts of hyper-reality and simulacra. Tamara Hundorova, in a very solid way, presents the central issues of these Western, late-capitalist theories, linking them to the Chernobyl catastrophe, which in her interpretation became an outstanding event in the development of contemporary Ukrainian literature and which made it impossible for Ukrainian writers to publish works in which were not shaped by postmodernism. At least such is the impression one gets in reading Hundorova's opening chapters, which also encompass the genesis of a specific symbolic Chernobyl-text as an index for the total breakdown of language as a medium for (totalitarian Soviet) representation and an index for the rise of popular culture in the Ukraine. These new tendencies, as well as the publication of hitherto forbidden writers after the political collapse of the USSR, and along with a renewed scientific appreciation for literary schools such as of the Baroque or the neoclassicism and futurism of the 1920s, resulted in an eclectic synchronicity of different styles and artistic features at the end of the 1980s. In these chapters, Hundorova evidentially explains the main paradigms of postmodernism primarily to her own Ukrainian readership, using well-known keywords such as phallocentrism, sexism, and racism, in a rather unidirectional manner, which could possibly even be interpreted as an unintentional act of epistemological colonisation by shifting elements of Western thinking to the completely different, post-totalitarian Ukrainian context in a rather mechanical and unsatisfactory way.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, Hundorova's textual analysis becomes more and more precise and refined in the following four chapters of her book, which are focussed on the specific devices of Ukrainian postmodernism. The author first delivers a detailed sketch of Ukrainian postmodernism's historical framework, based on the notion that it could be interpreted as a reflection and addition to Ukrainian high modernism, which had not been able to develop to its fullest level due to the former colonial status of Ukrainian literature in the context of the Russian empire and to the prevailing impact of »low« literary genres in the tradition of Ivan Kotliarevskyi's burlesque mock-poem *Eneida* (1798). As a result of this, one can find a combination of avant-gardist, neo-avantgardist and postmodern elements in the Ukrainian literature of the 1990s. Hundorova then turns her attention to the specific postmodern way of dealing with the canonical cultural heritage of the past, first of all with the works of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (they no longer serve as objects of avant-gardist iconoclasm as in the case of the futurist writer Mikhail Semenko, but more as a source for ironic and luddistic intertextual games), and turns next to the encounter with the »Other«: in order to destroy the totalitarian Soviet discourse, the heroes in Ukrainian postmodern works strive to hide their own identity and are depicted as having either autistic (Zhadan) or narcissistic features (Andrukhovych).

5 A short passage of this book can be found translated into German by Roman Dubasevych in Karin Warter and Alois Woldan's inspiring anthology *Zweiter Anlauf. Ukrainische Literatur heute*. Passau: Stutz 2004, pp. 154–61.

After two other chapters devoted to more general aesthetic topics – namely to the question of whether the imported »foreign« Western elements of postmodernism will fit into an organic, conservative concept of Ukrainian literature, and to postmodernism as a manner of ironic behaviour – Tamara Hundorova begins her analysis of literary texts *sensu strictu* under the overall sign of Mikhail Bakhtin's famous theoretical concept of the carnival. In this chapter of her book, the author presents first of all the Western Ukrainian group »Bu-ba-bu« and their »poezo-opera« *Chrylser Imperial* (1992), which intermingles outdated phrases of official Soviet-speak, elements of popular culture, and patriotic proclamations to a carnival-like event on stage, and the very successful novels *Recreations*, *Moscoviad*, *Perversion* and *Twelve Rings* of Iurii Andrukhovych, the most prolific member of »Bu-ba-bu« (next to Viktor Neborak and Oleksandr Irvanets), whose main heroes act in a Bohemian and Superman-like manner. Hundorova's subtle interpretation of the performative and literary activities of »Bu-ba-bu« as a continuation of the Baroque tradition, which according to her, remains to the present day the only fully developed literary school in Ukrainian literature, seems to me to be a very convincing point. While Andrukhovych recently has also become rather popular among a German readership due to several translations of his poems, novels and essays, the writers Hundorova presents in the following two chapters entitled *Rhetoric* and *Virtual Apocalypse* respectively, have so far unfortunately remained almost completely overlooked by German readers. Taras Prokhasko's essay-like novels, for example *neprOsti*<sup>5</sup>, do not fit into Bakhtin's carnivalistic concept, but represent the world of a marginalized intellectual by means of language-games (Wittgenstein) and rhizomatic structures (Deleuze). Hundorova sees a »visual« version of apocalypse at work in Iurii Izdryk's texts, for example in the novel *Votstsek* (1996), whose schizophrenic heroes are deprived of any certain individuality and of the ability to communicate with each other, and are instead embedded in a world of virtual simulacra.

I find especially fascinating Hundorova's turn to the East from Galicia and the so-called »Stanislau Phenomenon«, which embraced most of the writers analysed in the previous chapters of the book, and to the literary underground of the Ukrainian capital Kiev. According to Hundorova, Kiev's main writers of the '70s and '80s, such as Volodymyr Dibrova, Bohdan Zholdak and Lev Podervianskyi, with their short stories, novels and sketches which reveal the deficient social and psychological circumstances of the late-Soviet-era, while combining different strata of language (*surzhyk*, i.e. a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, or *argot*) and using textual devices of black humor and the theatre of the absurd, became significant forerunners to Ukrainian postmodernism. Whereas the works of such Ukrainian writers as Andrukhovych, Zhadan or Zabuzhko have already been the object of Western literary research, these writers and their possible aesthetic coincidences with similar Russian authors such as Daniil Kharms and Vladimir Kazakov, or even with Samuel Beckett, Václav Havel and Sławomir Mrożek, have up to now remained outside of a broader scientific interest and would certainly deserve further investigation. A translation of selected prose and drama of these three writers into German should also be considered.

After these less prominent writers, Hundorova returns to a central figure of contemporary Ukrainian literature, referring to Oksana Zabuzhko's notion of a feminist postmodernism. Notwithstanding her various collections of poetry and essays, Zabuzhko became (in)famous in Ukraine for her scandalous novel *Field research in Ukrainian Sex* (1994), which portrays a love-story as a postcolonial drama reaching into the most intimate spheres between man and woman and presents the female body and its sexual desires in a totally new and radical manner. Hundorova analyses the different roles of gender in this novel, as well as its widespread and polyphonic intertextuality, and in addition to this central work of Zabuzhko, also turns her attention to the smaller, fairy-tale-like story *The Tale of the Viburnum Pipe* (1999), in which Zabuzhko masks her reflections on gender behind a folkloristic literary model. Hundorova's competent presentation of this text possibly would have benefited from a comparison with Lesia Ukrainka's modernist lyrical folk-drama *The Forest Song* from 1911.

Hundorova goes on to look at the Ukrainian postmodernist topography between nostalgia and revenge, which strives to rid itself of Moscow and Russian cultural dominance and to (re-)unite Ukrainian culture into a Central European context. Hundorova, as a matter of fact, puts it clear that the postmodernist turn to Europe is no more a longing for an overall European cultural model, as it has been the case with Ukrainian high modernism, but a

6 Cf. the short review of *Anarchy in the UKR* in: *Western Punk. Profil*. 2 (2008), p. 101.

historical-topographical strategy to reconstruct the common past of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with the help of smaller narratives typical of Galician writers such as Andrukhovych, Prokhasko or Izdryk. Under the title *The Chernobyl library*, Hundorova then turns her attention to Ievhen Pashkovskiy's essay-like novel *The Daily Baton* (1997), in which the rescue of culture is presented in the manner of an Old Testament prophet, using biblical motives. As in the case of Dibrova, Zholdak and Podervianskyi, Hundorova presents another less known, but nevertheless fascinating writer; his novel, notwithstanding its dense net of intertextual allusions, would however hardly fit into the limits of postmodernist thinking with its proposed »death of the author« and its cult of compassion for all kinds of minorities, due to the extremely strong position of the author in the text itself and his aggressive verbal attacks against homosexuals, feminists and intellectuals. Pashkovskiy's novel (at least as it is presented by Tamara Hundorova) looks more like a solid piece of phallocentrism at its best, rather than a genuine postmodernist work.

Under the overall sign of a *Postmodernist Homelessness*, Hundorova puts the poems and prose works (*Depeche Mode* or *Anarchy in the UKR*) of Serhij Zhadan, a younger writer from the very East of the Ukraine. Starting from the second title's intertextual allusion to *Anarchy in the UK*, the very first single of the British punk band »The Sex Pistols«, Hundorova presents Zhadan as kind of punk-writer<sup>6</sup>, who refuses to become an adult and instead prefers youth-culture fighting against the rules of society. She also puts into the foreground the constant being »On the Road« in Zhadan's work, which opens up another allusion to Beat culture and Jack Kerouac's famous novel with the same title.

Hundorova then presents the somewhat estranging collection *Majn kajf (My High)* by Volodymyr Tsybulko; the poet, in a dubious play with the symbols of totalitarianism (for example the title's allusion to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*), uses elements of mass literature and reworks second-hand emotions and motives into a post-totalitarian synthesis of high and popular culture; this strategy at first sight seems to realize Leslie Fiedler's famous call to »Cross the Border – Close the Gap« (between high and popular culture) and thus to produce a genuine postmodernist text. Tsybulko, however, opposes these postmodernist tendencies by creating an odd concept of *novoliteryzm*; this *novoliteryzm* is, due to its creator, directed against postmodernist ideology and should strive to regain honesty in literature, but nevertheless produces a sort of an aggressive and expansive post-totalitarian kitsch. While reading Hundorova's analysis of Tsybulko's personal aesthetics, one can't help but wonder whether it really is worthwhile to pay such an amount of scientific attention to this writer (and this at the cost of other, definitely more promising Galician poets, such as Halyna Petrosaniak or Tymofii Havryliv, who are mentioned in Hundorova's study only *en passant*).

In the last two chapters of her book, Tamara Hundorova at first returns to the »Bu-ba-bu« group and raises the question of what comes next in Ukrainian literature after the break-up of the group, and whether Ukrainian postmodernism has come to an end. Hundorova answers to this question in a twofold way: yes, because the forceful devices of »Bu-ba-bu's« irony resulted in the end in mass culture and kitsch and lead to a creative crisis for each member of the group; no, because the carnivalistic strategies of »Bu-ba-bu«, in Hundorova's interpretation were, as a matter of fact, not postmodern at all. Hundorova, in a most inspiring way, also reflects on Bakhtin's concept of carnival in connection with the whole group, but especially with the novels of Andrukhovych, and based on her post-structuralist position splits up Bakhtin's basically binary structures into several additional discourses. On the other hand, especially in this chapter of the book, the reader sometimes gets the impression that Hundorova's study represents more a collection of mostly brilliant, but nonetheless separate essays (albeit without bibliographical references to first publication), than a compact monograph. This impression is evoked by several superfluous repetitions in Hundorova's argumentation, as well as by repetition of one same quotation. In Iurii Tarnavskiy's experiments with drama, Hundorova at least detects an *Attempt to Deconstruct Postmodernism* (the title of her final chapter) from an aesthetic position of the avant-garde. Hundorova brings up the writer's experiments with the forms of antique drama and the theatre of the absurd, mentioning Tarnavskiy's commentary of his own works, in which he tries to lead the reader towards a »correct« interpretation of his texts – this strategy according to Hundorova is closer to the tradition of high modernism *à la* T. S. Eliot, rather than to a postmodernist luddistic game played with the reader's expectations.

7 Two novels by Deresh are also available in a German translation, Cf. Deresch, Ljubko: Kult. Roman. Trans. Juri Durkot and Sabine Stöhr. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2005; Deresch, L.: Die Anbetung der Eidechse oder Wie man Engel vernichtet. Roman. Trans. Maria Weissenböck. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2006. As in the case of Zhadan's *Anarchy in the UKR*, the Austrian weekly *Profil* also presented Deresh's second novel to its readers by means of pop-culture and used the name of the British band »Bad Company« as the title for the review (Bad Company, *Profil*.1[2007], p. 61).

In addition to this, Hundorova, offers some insightful gender-based analysis of Tarnavskiy's deeply misogynistic attitude towards the female, but on behalf of postmodernism itself, it may have been better to conclude the book with a writer of the younger generation, such as Liubko Deresh, whose novels became an outstanding success, especially among a younger readership, due to their deconstruction of national-patriotic and Soviet discourses and the remixing of high and popular culture mainly from the United States (as for example »The Doors« in *Pokloninnia iashchirytsi* [*Adoring the Lizard*] or »King Crimson« and H.P. Lovecraft in *Cult*). In his famous novel *Cult*, Deresh, by the way, plays his intertextual games with Stas Perfetskyi, the main hero of Iurii Andrukhovych.<sup>7</sup> In finishing her book with Deresh, Hundorova would have had the ability to demonstrate the constant impact of postmodernist aesthetics on the next generation of contemporary Ukrainian writers after Iurii Andrukhovych.

Instead of an (English) summary, Hundorova puts her previously published essay *The Canon Reversed: New Ukrainian Literature of the 1990s* at the very end of her study. This article comes as a concise résumé of Hundorova's argumentation and also offers some new insight into her methodological conception. Only here at the very end of her monograph, does Hundorova mention (albeit only in passing), the novelist Andrei Kurkov, who at least among German readers, became popular much earlier than other writers such as Andrukhovych or Zhadan. Unlike all the other authors mentioned before, Kurkov writes his novels in Russian, but nevertheless considers himself to be an Ukrainian writer. Hundorova's understanding of the concept of »Ukrainian literature«, therefore seems at its base to be more orientated towards writing in Ukrainian, and only to a lesser extent towards living within the borders of the Ukraine. There certainly is nothing wrong with conceptualizing »Ukrainian literature« in this way, only it somewhat does not fit into the various postmodernist strategies of de-essentializing seemingly definite and clear-cut ideas to which Hundorova clings to in her study (which, by the way, is completed with an index which is almost hyper-correctly split up into Ukrainian and English parts of the names cited, but unfortunately, does not offer any bibliography of the works cited).

These minor shortcomings notwithstanding, Tamara Hundorova offers a highly elaborated and methodologically refined survey of the currents trends in Ukrainian postmodernist literature and its main writers and in addition to this, combines general methodological reflection and textual analysis at an outstanding level. She definitely offers a subtle form of »close reading« of all the analysed literary works, which paradoxically enough always remains open to the intertextual and interdiscursive games so typical for postmodernist literary works. As already mentioned before, one does not necessarily have to agree with Hundorova's sometimes unidirectional borrowing of postmodernist keywords coined in the West, but without any doubt an unbiased reader will appreciate the fact that this brilliant overview of Ukrainian literature comes so-to-say from within, and thus demonstrates the vitality of the scientific community in the Ukraine itself. To put it clearly by means of a prescriptive, classifying and monological statement, which will certainly not come to terms with postmodernism's longing for dialogue and plurality: nobody working on contemporary Ukrainian literature in a serious way will be able to pass up this fascinating book.