

Russian Postmodernist Metafiction

Nina Kolesnikoff

Peter Lang

RUSSIAN
POSTMODERNIST
METAFICTION

One of the most outstanding properties of Russian postmodernist fiction is its reliance on metafictional devices which foreground aspects of the writing, reading or structure, and draw attention to the constructed nature of fiction writing. Some common metafictional strategies include overt commentary on the process of writing, the presence of an obtrusive narrator, dehumanization of character, total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization and the undermining of specific literary conventions.

This book examines the most representative postmodernist texts and addresses the following questions: How widespread is the use of metafiction in contemporary Russian literature? What are its most pronounced forms? What is the function of metafictional devices? How innovative are Russian postmodernist writers in their use of metafictional techniques?

This study reveals the unique contribution of postmodernist writers to the development of Russian literature through their systematic use of metafiction and their bold experimentation with new metafictional devices on all the principal levels of the text, including narration, plot, characterization, setting and language.

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Introduction

Russian critics and literary scholars began using the label “post-modernist” with regard to Russian literature at the end of the 1980s. Initially they used the term “postmodernism” along with other labels, such as “the new wave literature,” “the post-avant-garde,” “conceptualism” and others.¹ Within the next few years, they settled on the term “postmodernism” and focused their attention on the questions of the origin of postmodernist literature in Russia, its relationship to its Western counterparts, and its most prominent features.

It should not be surprising that the opinions of Russian critics were sharply divided. A generation of older critics, educated during the Soviet period, firmly believed that Russian postmodernism was a weak imitation of Western models and had no chance to establish itself permanently in the Russian context. A strong negative attitude toward postmodernism was overtly expressed in the titles and subtitles of critical articles, such as Vladimir Novikov’s “Zaskok” (A Crazy Idea) and “Prizrak bez priznakov: Sushchestvuet li russkii postmodernizm?” (A Ghost without Features: Does Russian Postmodernism Exist?), Karen Stepanian’s “Postmodernizm: bol’ i trevoga nasha” (Postmodernism: Our Pain and Anxiety), and Evgenii Ermolin’s “Mezhdu kladbishchem i svalkoi: postmodernizm kak paraziticheskaia versii postmoderna” (Between a Cemetery and a Dump: Postmodernism as a Parasitic Version of the Postmodern).²

- 1 See Mikhail Epshtein, “Iskusstvo avangarda i religioznoe soznanie,” *Novyi mir*, no. 12 (1989), pp. 222–235; A. L. Kazin, “Iskusstvo i istina,” *Ibid.*, pp. 235–245; Irina Rodnianskaia, “Zametki k sporu,” *Ibid.*, pp. 245–249.
- 2 Vladimir Novikov, “Zaskok,” *Znamia*, no. 10 (1995), pp. 189–199; “Prizrak bez priznakov: sushchestvuet li russkii postmodernizm?,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 5 June 1997, p. 8; Karen Stepanian, “Postmodernizm: bol’ i trevoga nasha,”

Among the earliest negative assessments of Russian postmodernism none was more scornful than Vladimir Slavetskii's "Posle postmodernizma" (After Postmodernism), published in the prestigious literary journal, *Voprosy literatury*. Slavetskii did not hide his contempt for Russian postmodernist literature which he defined as:

[...] omnivorously secondary, esthetically conciliatory, patient to the point of indifference and eclectically ragged. It can feed off scraps of quotations, reminiscences, echo-backs, consciously bared like an armature or building timbers, reconstituting not cultural background and context but discordant noise.³

As for the practitioners of this type of literature, Slavetskii characterized them as those "who lost the gift of imagination, active perception and vital creativity, ... and involve themselves not with creativity, but with constructions from components of culture itself."⁴

A positive assessment of postmodernism as a new type of literature expressing an anti-mimetic attitude and searching for new forms of artistic expression was articulated by critics of the younger generation, many of whom came from outside the academic centers of Moscow and Leningrad. That group included Mark Lipovetskii (Ekaterinburg), Viacheslav Kuritsyn (Sverdlovsk), Andrei Levkin (Riga), and many others. Unanimous in their acceptance of postmodernism for its innovative approach to literary and artistic forms of expression, the proponents of the new art offered different opinions as to its most salient features.

Viacheslav Kuritsyn characterized postmodernism as "the new primitive culture," which, instead of reflecting external reality, cycles back on itself and eliminates the difference between subject

Voprosy literatury, no. 5 (1998), pp. 32–54; Evgenii Ermolin, "Mezhdu kladbishchem i svalkoi: postmodernizm kak paraziticheskaia versiia postmoderna," *Kontinent* no. 89 (1996), pp. 333–349.

3 Vladimir Slavetskii, "Posle postmodernizma," *Voprosy literatury*, nos. 11–12 (1991), pp. 37–47; translated as "After Postmodernism," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–94), pp. 40–52.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

and object.⁵ Kuritsyn outlined several tendencies common to postmodernism and primitive culture, such as a tendency towards syncretism and the merging of diverse artistic and generic conventions, the elimination of the category of authorship and the use of palimpsests, the concern with ritual, and the importance of the device of enumeration. As for literary postmodernism, Kuritsyn noticed several outstanding features, such as the abundant use of quotations, the preoccupation with commentary and self-reflection, hybridization of different generic conventions, radical irony and carnivalization, and the obliteration of semantic structures. Kuritsyn acknowledged a low quality in Russian postmodernist literature which resulted from the rejection of originality and the preoccupation with the recycling of cultural patterns free of any hierarchy or value. Despite his low assessment of the overall quality of postmodernist fiction, Kuritsyn was convinced that postmodernism was “the most vital, most esthetically relevant aspect of modern culture, whose best examples included some excellent literature.”⁶

Mikhail Epshtein placed Russian postmodernism in the context of simulacra which substitute signs of the real for the real itself and threaten the difference between real and imaginary, true and false.⁷ Epshtein distinguished three stages of Russian postmodernism: a pre-Soviet period, characterized by simulations and deconstruction of some aspects of Western culture, a Soviet period which subjugated all aspects of life to Communist ideology

5 Viacheslav Kuritsyn, “Postmodernizm-novaia pervobytnaia kul’tura,” *Novyi mir*, no. 2 (1992), pp. 225–231; translated as “Postmodernism: The New Primitive Culture,” *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–1994), pp. 52–66; “Nederzhanie imidzha,” *Vestnik novoi literatury*, no. 7 (1994), pp. 199–213; “Velikie mify i skromnye dekonstruktsii,” *Oktiabr’*, no. 8 (1996), pp. 171–187; “Vremia mnozhit’ pristavki. K poniatiiu postmodernizma,” *Oktiabr’*, no. 7 (1997), pp. 178–183.

6 Kuritsyn, “Postmodernizm,” p. 66.

7 Mikhail Epshtein, “O novom soznanii v literature,” *Znamia*, no. 1 (1991), pp. 217–232.

and created an all-encompassing hyperreality (simulacrum), and a post-Soviet period which recognized the simulated nature of hyperreality and foregrounded it with the use of irony, parody and play. In a highly controversial fashion, Epshtein considered Russian postmodernism as a mature and more advanced stage of Socialist Realism and pointed to their remarkable similarity in the production of simulacra, based on determinism and reductionism, ideological and aesthetic eclecticism, and the elimination of the boundaries between elitist and mass cultures. He also acknowledged some crucial differences between the two methods, with Socialist Realism maintaining faith in reason, progress and objective laws of reality in its attempts to construct a utopian vision of the future, and postmodernism rejecting both the past and the future in favour of the never-ending present and creating its own conventions by ironically subverting traditional models and following the patterns of mass culture.

The most comprehensive and insightful analysis of Russian postmodernism was offered by Mark Lipovetskii, a young scholar from the Ural Pedagogical University in Ekaterinburg. Lipovetskii articulated his views in a series of articles published in *Novyi mir*, *Voprosy literatury* and *Znamia*, in his doctoral dissertation and in a book-length study *Russkii postmodernizm: Ocherki istoricheskoi poetiki* (*Russian Postmodernism: Essays on Historical Poetics*).⁸ Lipovetskii placed the development of Russian postmodernism in the framework of chaos theory which recognizes the chaos of existence and a sense of disappearing reality, and conveys them through

8 Mark Lipovetskii, "Zakon krutizny," *Voprosy literatury*, nos. 11–12 (1991), pp. 3–36; translated as "The Law of Steepness," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–1994), pp. 5–39; "Apofeoza chastits ili dialog s kaosom," *Znamia*, no. 8 (1992), pp. 214–224, transl. as "An Apotheosis of Particles, or Dialogue with Chaos: Notes on the Classics, Venedikt Erofeev, the Poem Moscow Petushki, and Russian Postmodernism," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–1994), pp. 67–90; *Russkii postmodernizm: Ocherki istoricheskoi poetiki*, Ekaterinburg: Izdatel'stvo Ural'skogo universiteta, 1997.

a radical transformation of established cultural signs and codes. The new postmodernist literature, according to Lipovetskii, captures the chaos of social and historical relationships by eliminating the boundaries between literature and reality, between the imaginary and the real, between text and context.

Lipovetskii identified a number of prominent features of Russian postmodernist literature, which included among others the device of polystylistics, based on extensive quotations and paraphrases, stylistic heterogeneity of the narrative fabric, the new relationship between the author and the text, the radical transformation of temporal and spatial relations broken up into autonomous chronotopes, the new type of hero representing simultaneously a life-like character, a metaphor and a sign, the central role of irony and a playful garishness, and a desire to shock the audience with the outrageous subversion of established norms.

In examining the radical experimentation of Russian postmodernist writers, Lipovetskii recognized a close link between postmodernism and the avant-garde. He considered Russian postmodernism both as a continuation of the avant-garde tradition and as a conclusion of that important period in the history of Russian literature. As for the relationship between Russian modernism and postmodernism, Lipovetskii acknowledged some common sensibilities and formal innovations, but stressed the differences in their philosophical and aesthetic approaches. Whereas modernism was governed by epistemological considerations, postmodernism was clearly concerned with ontological questions; the modernist preference for mimetic forms of modeling was replaced by artistic modeling, and the modernist principles of originality and novelty gave way to the postmodernist practice of borrowing and repetition of earlier forms.

Lipovetskii distinguished three phases in the development of Russian postmodernism: the early period which began at the turn of the 1960s and the 1970s, the intermediate period which emerged at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, and the period of

“steep” postmodernism in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.⁹ The early period, according to Lipovetskii, was characterized by a highly critical attitude to ideological and cultural models, the rejection of metanarrative, the dissolution of a unified structure and experimentation with new forms of artistic expression. The best examples of this stage of Russian postmodernism, according to Lipovetskii, include Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkinskii dom* (*Pushkin House*) and *Kommentarii k obshcheizvestnomu* (*Commentaries on the Widely Known*), Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moskva – Petushki* (*Moscow to the End of the Line*), the late texts of Vasilii Aksenov, Vladimir Makanin, and others.

The second period was distinguished by a pronounced play with cultural systems and codes, a high degree of irony and absurdity, and a startling narrative and stylistic polyphony. These tendencies were clearly evident in Sasha Sokolov’s *Shkola dlia durakov* (*A School for Fools*) and *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom* (*Between Dog and Wolf*), Evgenii Popov’s *Dusha patriota, ili razlichnye poslaniia k Ferfichkinu* (*The Soul of a Patriot, or, Various Epistles to Ferfichkin*) and numerous short stories by Tatiana Tolstaia, Viktor Erofeev, Viacheslav P’etsukh, and others.

The third period of postmodernism, labeled by Lipovetskii as “steep postmodernism,” emerged in Russia in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, and was represented in fiction by such writers as Tatiana Shcherbina, Mikhail Berg, Andrei Levkin, Boris Kudriakov, Ruslan Marsovich, and others. The label “steep postmodernism” captured the notions of bold formal experimentation and an absence of meaning on the levels of logical and stylistic connections between components of the text. Lipovetskii pointed out the apparent contradiction between the verbal refinement of narration and the impossibility to saturate words with meaning and the overall effect of aesthetic silence produced by such texts. In his critical examination of the third period, Lipovetskii

9 Lipovetskii, “Zakon krutizny,” pp. 217–230.

acknowledged a crisis in the overall aesthetics and practice of Russian postmodernism. The scholar was, however, reassured by two circumstances, first by the fact that the crisis was limited largely to fiction, and second, that postmodernism managed to break the monopoly of the prevailing realistic tradition.

Mark Lipovetskii's diagnosis of a postmodernist crisis was essentially correct, but proved to be short-lived. By the mid-1990s there occurred a remarkable upsurge in the publications of new and innovative works of fiction, many of them written by new authors. These works included Anatolii Korolev's *Golova Gogolia* (*Gogol's Head*) and *Eron* (*Eros*), Victor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* (*The Russian Beauty*), Valeriia Narbikova's *Okolo ekolo* (*In the Here and There*), Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev i Pustota* (*Chapaev and Void*), and many others. The newcomers to Russian postmodernist literature included among others, Iuliia Kisina, Egor Radov, Anastasiia Gosteva and Dmitrii Dobrodeev. The works published in the mid-1990s represent a fourth stage of Russian postmodernism characterized by a strong Menippean orientation and the presentation of serious philosophical issues in a highly comical fashion, a fascination with historiography and the creation of fictional works which offer alternative versions of the past, a dominant role of intertextuality and a merging of divergent cultural codes, including film, television and computer technology, and a highly innovative use of language and typography.

The aim of the present study is to examine the most representative works of Russian postmodernism which have been published in the past thirty years, with a particular focus on the texts which foreground the fictional character of literature and do so with an array of new and innovative techniques. The foregrounding of fiction making became the dominant characteristic of Russian postmodernist fiction, as well as the area of its most daring experimentation. And the innovations have been carried on all narrative levels, including thematic and ideological, structural and compositional, linguistic and typographical.

Chapter One

Postmodernism and Metafiction: Theoretical Considerations

Postmodernism

The term “postmodernism” is one of the most widely used concepts in contemporary literary criticism and at the same time it is marked by a striking semantic instability. Instead of a single sharply formulated definition there are varying and often contradictory statements concerning its historical roots and its typological properties. Among varied approaches to postmodernism one can distinguish three distinct trends, each focusing on different philosophical and ideological aspects and delineating their most pronounced features.

The most general and overtly ideological approach links postmodernism to the socio-economic system of late capitalism. The best known exponent of that approach is undoubtedly Fredric Jameson who defined postmodernism as a cultural expression of late capitalism and its expansion into hitherto uncommodified areas, such as the media and the advertising industry.¹ For Jameson, the radical break occurred in the late 1950s and the early 1960s as a result of the integration of aesthetic production into commodity production and the demand to produce ever more novel goods, including new art.

1 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1983), pp. 53–94.

Jameson outlined several pronounced features of the postmodern culture, including, most notably, its lack of depth, weakened historicity, new emotional tone and deep relationship to new technology. More specifically, he referred to a new depthlessness in the post-structuralist critique of hermeneutics, the fragmentation of the subject, the predominant use of pastiche and the cannibalization of past styles. In his analysis of weakened historicity, Jameson signalled the postmodernist rejection of temporal organization which was replaced by spatial logic, the prevalence of heterogeneous, fragmentary and aleatory practices, and a "linguistic schizophrenia," expressed in a rubble of distinctive but unrelated signifiers. As for the new emotional tone, Jameson defined it as a unique form of euphoria or hysterical sublime, expressed in the hallucinatory splendor of photorealistic cityscape, the privileged anti-anthropomorphic space and the eclipse of nature. The deep relationship of postmodernist culture and the new technology manifested itself in the postmodernist fascination with machines of reproduction, such as computer or television, which led to the thematic representation of processes of reproduction as well as the high-tech paranoia, conspiracy theories and cyberpunk.

What is remarkable about Jameson's theory of the postmodern culture is its vast frame of reference, which includes both high and low culture, ranging from literature and pop culture, through visual arts and film, to contemporary architecture. Its greatest weakness, however, results from the dogmatic Marxist view of a direct link between culture and the socio-economic system which postulates that aesthetic production is not only shaped by political and economic forces, but can be interpreted as a commentary on the political and social organization of society.

The second approach views postmodernism as a distinct cultural phenomenon with a set of dominant characteristics, evident in all aspects of contemporary life in the second half of the twentieth century. The most influential theory of postmodern culture was developed by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in

his study, *Simulacres et simulation*.² According to Baudrillard, contemporary culture is defined by the overwhelming presence of simulacra which substitute signs of the real for the real itself and threaten the difference between real and imaginary, true and false. Baudrillard outlined several successive stages in the relationship between image and reality: the image as a reflection of basic reality, as a distortion of basic reality, as a marker of the absence of a basic reality, and as a pure simulacrum which bears no relation to any reality whatsoever. In Baudrillard's view, contemporary postmodern life is governed by the production of simulacra which instead of exchanging what is real offer the exchange itself in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.

According to Baudrillard, the production of simulacra has far-reaching effects on modern culture, since it undermines the traditional mode of cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and the means. As a result, there occurs a radical explosion of meaning, based on the absorption of the radiating mode of causality, and of the differential mode of determination with its positive and negative charges. This process, according to Baudrillard, occurs in all domains of contemporary life, including the political, the biological and the media-related, all of them determined by absolute manipulations and the lack of differentiation between the active and the passive.

Significant as it is in its new and provocative examination of postmodern culture, Baudrillard's theory is only distantly concerned with literary production. By its nature, literature is always dependent on its own production of simulation, and as such becomes a never-ending simulacrum. Moreover, in the process of literary evolution, literature is inspired by established conventions, thus becoming a simulacrum to a second, a third, or a fourth degree.

2 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Paris: Galilée, 1981; translated by Sheila Faria Glaser as *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

A third distinct approach to postmodernism treats it as a literary and artistic movement which arose in the second half of the twentieth century in opposition to modernism. One of the first scholars to define postmodernism in terms of its opposition to modernism was Ihab Hassan. In his 1971 essay "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography" Hassan outlined some basic differences between the two movements in their treatment of urbanism, technologism, dehumanization, primitivism, eroticism, antinomialism and experimentation.³ In his subsequent book-length study of postmodernist literature, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, Hassan presented an even more detailed analysis of the dichotomies between modernist and postmodernist tendencies summarized in the following table:

Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion
Art Object/Finished Work	Process/Performance/Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization	Decreation/Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypostaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy
Selection	Combination
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface
Interpretation/Reading	Against Interpretation/Misreading
Signified	Signifier

3 Ihab Hassan, "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography," *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1971), pp. 5-30.

<i>Lisible</i> (Readerly)	<i>Scriptible</i> (Writerly)
Narrative/ <i>Grand Histoire</i>	Anti-narrative/ <i>Petite Histoire</i>
Master Code	Idiolect
Symptom	Desire
Type	Mutant
Genital/Phallic	Polymorphous/Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
Origin/Cause	Difference-Differance/Trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Transcendence	Immanence ⁴

Having outlined a long list of distinct differences between the two movements, Hassan condensed them into a single term of “indeterminance,” a neologism which combines two central tendencies in postmodernism, one of indeterminacy, and the other of immanence. “Indeterminacy” included the notions of ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, plurality, randomness, revolt, perversion and deformation. “Immanence,” on the other hand, was understood as the capacity of the mind to generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more in nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions, and so become increasingly its own environment. These two tendencies of indeterminacy and immanence, according to Hassan, are not dialectic, for they are not exactly antithetical, nor do they lead to a synthesis. Each contains its own contradictions, and alludes to elements of the other. Their interplay suggests the action of an ambilectic, pervading postmodernism.

Hassan’s analysis of the central properties of postmodernism, and particularly his observations on postmodernist “indeterminacies”

4 Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, p. 268.

are echoed in David Lodge's study, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature*.⁵ Taking as a point of departure Roman Jakobson's theory of two basic types of literature, metaphoric and metonymic,⁶ Lodge points to a cyclical rhythm in literary history, alternating between a writerly and metaphoric mode exemplified by modernist, symbolist and mythopoetic literature, and a readerly and metonymic mode evident in realistic and antimodernist literature. While acknowledging some shared attitudes of modernism and postmodernism in their critique of mimetic art and their commitment to innovation, Lodge defines postmodernism as a distinct movement characterized by its refusal to choose between metaphoric and metonymic principles and its deployment of both techniques in radically new ways.

Like Hassan, Lodge outlines the most distinctive traits of postmodernist literature, several of which fall under the rubric of Hassan's "indeterminacies." Among them Lodge includes contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess and short circuit. More specifically, he defines contradiction as an oscillation between contradictory assertions, permutation as a refusal to rank alternative statements in order of authenticity, and discontinuity as a random juxtaposition of passages often disparate in content. As to randomness and excess, Lodge identifies the former with a mechanical selection of the presented material, and the latter with an excessive permutation of variables which prevents the possibility of synthesizing them into a whole. Finally, Lodge acknowledges the metafictional impulse of postmodernist literature, which he calls "short circuit" and describes as a combination of violently contrasting modes of the obviously fictive and

5 David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature*, London: Edward Arnold, 1977.

6 Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance," *Fundamentals of Language*, The Hague: Mouton, 1956, pp. 55-82.

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