

Alternative Constructions of Reality in Maksim Kurochkin's Play *Medea Type Fighter*

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Conspiracy is the interpretation of historical and political events and facts that can be characterized as an endeavor to reveal ‘the one truth’ that has been hidden from most of society’s members. It is based on the theory of conspiracy, i.e., “on the entirety of hypotheses trying to represent an event or a process as the result of a secret group’s conscious actions with the intention to influence a historical process.”¹ Conspiracy theories have gained particular prominence in the twenty-first century, and that is for a good reason. The new media, especially the so-called social media, are associated with a perpetual and total stream of information, a stream with which not everyone is able to cope. The contemporary rhythm of life and its continuous acceleration provoke chaos in an individual’s processes of thinking. Furthermore, the new media forces recipients to comprehend whole chunks of diverse, often contradictory information at a time, to discern truth from falsehood and to abandon obsolete information.² Examples of this kind of information include the presentation of new or alternative reasons for a catastrophe, alternative developments in history, documentaries or pseudo-documentaries about ‘secret societies,’ propaganda for the polarization of the world, for its division in terms of good and evil, etc. As a result of such an overwhelming amount of information, the individual is increasingly less able to ana-

1 Pavlova 2013: 144.

2 Cf. Rudnev 2011: 8.

lyze the events in the world and the human mind becomes susceptible to manipulation.³

In order to separate real conspiracies in history from hypothetical ones, scholars from various disciplines—historians, social scientists, and philosophers—have tried to understand how and why conspiracy theories spread, and just what makes them so popular. Correspondingly, specialists in language and literature speak of the beginning of an era of fiction evolving around conspiracies and conspiracy theories. One example of such fiction is the conspirological novel. Scholars have recently tried to identify the dominant features of novels belonging to this genre, certain narrative formulas that influence the basic forms of the poetics of fiction, such as plot, subject, composition, the system of characters, the motifs, and the images. The following features may be considered as characteristic of conspirological narration:

- extreme polarization of the protagonists (their division into “good and evil” characters) and of space
- exciting and captivating subjects such as emergencies and the protagonists’ desires to solve a mystery
- a concept of two worlds in the text
- a new way of playing with worlds (the creation of ideal, concealed worlds, and the search for an ultimate, final objective reality)⁴

The question of society’s organization, and of interpretations of reality as such in the light of new media, is not merely one of the most important questions for scholars, but also one of the prominent subjects in the work of Russian writers and playwrights alike. One expressive and authentic playwright who refers to conspiracy theories throughout his work is Maksim Kurochkin (*1970). On the basis of an analysis of his play *Istrebitel’ klassa Medeia* (Medea Type Fighter,⁵ 1995), it will be shown which particularities of conspirological narration are present in the text and which goals the author strives to achieve by using them.

Maksim Kurochkin—a historian by profession—is one of the most noted and significant representatives of young contemporary drama. Having started his creative path at the Lubimovka Festival, he has since actively worked with junior

3 Cf. Pavlova 2013: 144.

4 Cf. ibid.: 145–49.

5 The text has only been published on the Internet (http://www.theatre-library.ru/files/kurochkin/kurochkin_1.html), therefore the further quotations are made without reference.

playwrights. He has also been a member of the organizational committee and an invited expert at the beginner playwrights' festival *Prem'era* (Moscow). Furthermore, he has worked with young participants of the project *Dokumental'nyi teatr*. Layers of time and the space of the past and the future are always shown from an unusual point of view through the usage of certain artistic skills, no matter what Kurochkin writes about in his plays. "It is always one monolithic, entire continent which is made up of fantasy and reality, and in which objects, things and people are transferred from one age to another."⁶

The distinguishing feature of Kurochkin's works is how he playfully employs cultural discourse. The playwright not only stylizes a certain cultural atmosphere, but also creates a dialogue between cultural mythology and contemporary language and experience. This may occur at the level of the external subject. The inner subject, however, becomes increasingly more important than the level of the external subject. The protagonists surpass the boundaries of their historical role and start discussing the situation of the play's subject from a contemporary point of view. The protagonists project their everyday life experience onto the mythological past. The famous researcher of the phenomenon of "New Drama," Mark Lipovetsky, defines Kurochkin's historical plays as anti-utopias that have more or less come true. Accordingly, Kurochkin represents the cultural myth in which the phantasmagoria found in the original, is confirmed by the contemporary experience of reality.⁷ In other words, through his texts the author expresses that nothing has really changed since ancient times. Despite all of humanity's progress and achievements, peoples' minds are still archaic, dark, and primeval. Kurochkin vividly displays how savagery and offended feelings are ever lurking behind a facade of culture. These motifs can be found in his plays *Kukhnia* (*Kitchen*, 2000) and *Vodka, eblia, televizor* (*Vodka, Fucking, Television*, 2005). A quotation from the latter goes as follows: "As in ancient times, as in the Stone Age, simple gods reign over us."⁸ These gods are in fact exposed as human instincts. Kurochkin combines historical events with a real experience in the present, and reality confirms the phantasmagoria of a mythological or legendary situation. The myth and the languages of European high culture act as an intermediary of the dialogues between the events of the past and the reality of today. A

6 «И всегда это монолитный, единый художественный материк, сплавленный из фантастики и жизненной достоверности, где предметы, вещи, люди из одной эпохи спокойно переносятся в другую». – Gromova 2009: 176.

7 Cf. Lipovetsky 2012: 222–23.

8 «Как в древности, как в каменном веке нами правят простые боги». – Kurochkin 2005: 28.

psychological footprint of violence—a trauma—characterizes these languages. The playwright takes a certain turning point in the life of the protagonists or a mythological situation, and illustrates that this very situation only emerges due to a “traumatic paradox.”⁹

The myth of Medea and the Argonauts is one such myth in the play *Istrebitel' klassa Medeia*. The play shows the last war in humanity's history. It evolves around an alternative future in which all conflicts in this world—racial, religious, international, social, and political—have been surmounted; only one war rages: a war between men and women. In his stage direction, the author warns us that “not a single one of those sitting here in this hall shall live to see the events this play is about.”¹⁰ A truly apocalyptic image of destruction emerges in the play brought about in the aftermath of an assault by the destroyer squad carrying the name of the mythological heroine—the avenger Medea.

The myth of Medea and the Argonauts, which has become famous through the classical interpretations of Euripides, Seneca, and Corneille, remains significant even in the twenty-first century, given that it deals with ethical and moral questions which concern human beings when faced with the choice between offended feelings and the morally forbidden. The myth represents the protagonist's inner fight trying to achieve her goal, which is to take revenge for the inflicted injustice.¹¹ In our analysis, we will, first and foremost, deal with the part of the myth that details how Medea cruelly takes revenge on Jason by murdering their shared children—an episode with tremendous meaning for the understanding of the author's intention and the basic idea of the text.

As we know, during the quest for the Golden Fleece, the Argonauts were helped by the sorceress Medea who fell in love with their leader Jason. Jason reciprocated her feelings. Thanks to Medea's skills, he acquired the fleece and, making her his wife, went home with her. According to the myth, Medea and Jason soon had children upon their arrival in Corinth. But Jason, captivated by the beauty of another woman, decided to leave Medea. However, only with Medea's assistance, could he accomplish such a great feat as the retrieval of the Golden Fleece and could avoid death several times.

Medea, having learned of her husband's betrayal, fell into despair, which grew into fierce anger and a thirst for revenge. However, Medea's rage affected

9 Lipovetsky 2012: 223.

10 «Ни один из сидящих с этим зале, не доживет до событий, о которых пойдет речь». – Kurochkin 1995.

11 Cf. Savinykh 2017: 126–27.

not only the guilty party, Jason, but also their children. In other words, Medea turned her anger against herself.

In the play, the playwright realizes this motif in an unexpected way: he draws a picture of a last great war, a war that affects the whole world, which is further illustrated by the presence of three characters from different countries and the fact that they are united by the shared desire to survive, i.e., there is an emergency situation—an indispensable condition for a conspirological narrative. Somewhere on a small piece of land on Coney Island, three soldiers—Uncle Kolia, a Ukrainian sergeant; Sergei, a Russian; and Peter, an American—are all struggling to resist the brutal ‘man-haters.’ There is a categorical division into ‘bad’ and ‘good’ characters, which is another important hallmark of a conspirological narrative.

The men would rather die than surrender to the savage female warriors. For men, captivity turns out to be a fate worse than death, since the exterminators make “housewives” out of their captives: they force them to “do the dishes and wash their socks.” By the end of the play, however, it turns out that the conflict, which has been built is a false one, because there are no more real, “ancient” men. They were slaughtered long ago, and women now play the role of men. This becomes evident when the soldier Sergei takes off his shirt, revealing his female breasts in a bra. It becomes clear that the women are waging war against themselves:

Sergei: If you are asking about the ancient men, well, they were all slaughtered at the beginning of the war. I didn't cross any of them.

Woman: So whom have we been fighting with all this time? With ourselves.

Sergei: You have been fighting with men. With those who feel and act as men. The ancient ones didn't make it. They were weak. Now we are men.¹²

The mystery is revealed: initially, it appears to the reader that the play presents a gender conflict—a conflict with the social other, but in the end it turns out that women are exterminating themselves. The pseudo gender conflict turns out to be an existential conflict, as the only female character speaks about her inner anxieties and contradictions.

12 Сергей: «Если ты говоришь про древних мужчин, то их перебили ещё в самом начале войны. Я их уже не застал» – Женщина: «Так с кем мы всё это время воевали? Сами с собой» – Сергей: «Вы воевали с мужчинами. С теми, кто чувствует себя мужчиной и поступает как мужчина. Древние не справились. Они были слабыми. Теперь мы мужчины».

The play begins with the men crawling out from under the rubble. The action takes place “among the chaos, destroyed guns, shell boxes, rubble, helmets, backpacks, dead bodies and other military debris,”¹³ the stage set is created using minimal artistic means. The initial description of the scenery creates an apocalyptic atmosphere and the feeling of an extremely exposed world on the verge of extinction. The debris is a warning to civilizations what the consequences of the outbreak of war could be, because war always fatefully turns on its instigator. It is symbolic that the play begins and ends with scenes of destruction. At first, the viewer does not understand who the characters are fighting against, the enemy is not referred to by name. The play’s structure is strongly linked to the creation and preservation of intrigue from beginning to end. Each of the three male characters has a name, an indication of rank, and a nationality, while the only female character, simply called Woman, is a kind of universal category, a collective image of all women. Initially, there is only the knowledge of the war between two camps, but the very essence of this war is revealed only on the last pages of the play. The “mystery” of what is happening gradually dawns on the viewer in accordance with the laws of the conspirological strategy of narration. One could argue that there is a bipolar system of characters: three male characters as “positive heroes,” allegedly seeking to defeat evil, on the one hand, and a woman as a villain or antihero and the embodiment of this evil on the other, which is another integral feature of conspirological narrative.

Interestingly the play does not emphasize and elaborate on how the characters look and what their motivations are, but instead strives to create a terrifying picture of the world and a specific war (Sergeant: “At this terrible moment, when our own way of thinking and the very existence of our species is threatened”¹⁴). A war that is absurd and paradoxically meaningless in its essence and in which there can be no winners as a matter of principle, because if one gender is destroyed, then the other will simply disappear. Thus, the forces actually waging war are revealed closer to the finale and gradually, we come to understand that the war is being fought not between different genders, but within the same sex—women.

In the play, the characters are portrayed in a state of confrontation with extremely tense feelings. Realizing that they actually have nothing to lose, the characters return to the fundamentals, begin to look for the meaning of life, and

13 «Среди хаоса, развороченных орудий, снарядных ящиков, щебня, касок, ранцев, мертвых тел и прочего военного мусора».

14 «В этот страшный момент, когда свойственный нам образ мыслей и само существование нашего вида находится под угрозой».

make attempts to find themselves. This becomes obvious in the second act, when the Woman asks Sergei to teach her how to pray. In addition, some time before the murder of Sergei, the heroine hesitates in doing it leading the spectator to suppose that she longs for a “real” man. However, her doubts do not last long. They are replaced almost immediately by confidence in the righteousness of the act she is supposed to commit—Sergei must die. The next sign of conspiratorial narration appears here: the hint of a new secret. The reader inevitably asks the question: “What will follow next?” Before the play’s finale in which the reader is offered a new riddle we briefly gain access to the Woman’s inner world, to her mental anguish:

Woman: “Then why all this? War, these corpses? We are told: fight to win. If we win, we will destroy the worst men. Only those who do not want to wash the dishes and wash socks. And then we will live, better than before … Aaa, I don’t want to live! I do not want to – kill me … Why live? Who shall I kill? Who shall I love?”¹⁵

Although it turns out that the women are not fighting their enemies, they continue their destructive actions, they continue to kill each other out of habit. The parallels with the myth of Medea are thus realized on several levels in the play. The title itself sets the stage and doubles the motif given—the image of Medea is transformed into an instrument of the extermination of men, which is again emphasized by the choice of military weapons (fighter aircraft). Seen from the outside, the traditional plot motivation of revenge comes down to the confrontation of the sexes; the reason for the killings is the desire to affirm matriarchy. It seems that the use of the myth is limited to these superficial functions at first glance. As is known, Medea, having decided to take revenge on the unfaithful Jason, raised her hand not only to him, but also to herself, killing their shared children. This is exactly what the women in Kurochkin’s play do; they exterminate themselves even after they have found out what is really going on: there are no more real men. That any war is pointless and absurd is one of the play’s main ideas, but the author develops this idea further, giving it a metaphysical meaning: no matter what kind of war, against or for whom and whatever its ideals—war is always self-destruction. It is a defeat for both sides. Therefore, the

15 Женщина: «Зачем тогда всё это? Война, эти трупы? Нам говорят – воюйте, чтобы победить. Когда мы победим, то уничтожим самых плохих мужчин. Только тех, которые не хотят мыть посуду и стирать носки. И тогда мы заживём – лучше, чем раньше… А-а-а, не хочу жить! Не хочу – убей меня… Зачем жить? Кого убивать? Кого любить?».

original situation in the play is brought to the point of absurdity: women were fighting men when it turned out that there were no men anymore. However, women continue to fight because war itself has become their reason to live. The idea of the absurdity of war is reinforced by the incompatibility of two concepts that the author combines: on the one hand, the fact that it is women who are created by nature to give life. On the other hand, war means cruelty, violence, and death. In the play, these features are united in one entity, that is, in the women as fighters and as destroyers. Women are the embodiment of violence in the world.

The world as depicted has been divided in two: the “ancient” real men have become extinct, one half of humanity remains truly female, while the other half has decided that they know how real men should behave. This latter half even feels like men and, therefore, starts to play their role. Men, in their understanding, should be despots and some kind of uncouth boors (it should be noted that this is a kind of playful playing with stereotypes):

Sergei: “Men are not gone. They stayed. Close your eyes. I smell like men’s sweat and tobacco. I know how to swear, you bet. I will never wash the dishes after dinner, I will sink into the sofa and look only at the newspaper. If I get drunk, then I can fulfill my marital duties. … It is easier for me to remove the socks from a slain enemy than to wash them myself. I pick my teeth at dinner. I will chase after every skirt. I will hide my salary from you. I will never notice your new dress, your new hairstyle. Never.”¹⁶

The author creates an unexpected cultural conflict: the entire world’s culture, up to recent centuries, was created not by women, but by men. Within this culture there are many examples of art and literature in which a certain image of an ideal woman has been formed, as well as the unspoken rules for her behavior. Men formed an image of femaleness that was both flawless in their eyes and convenient for them, and women were brought up accordingly, modeled after men’s ideas. In the play, the opposite situation can be observed: although women have

16 Сергей: «Мужчины не умерли. Мужчины остались. Закрой глаза. Я пахну мужским потом и табаком. Я умею материться. Я знаешь, как умею материться. Я ни за что не стану мыть за собой посуду после обеда, я завалюсь на диван и уткнусь в газету. Если меня хорошо напоить, то я могу исполнить свой супружеский долг. … Мне легче снять носки с убитого врага, чем постирать их. Я ковыряюсь в зубах за обедом. Я буду волочиться за каждой юбкой. Я буду прятать от тебя зарплату. Я никогда не замечу твоего нового платья, твоей новой прически. Никогда».

exterminated men, they continue to create the image of them that they want to see. The conflict cannot be solved: gender roles have been reversed, but the situation remains unaltered.

The system of images and motifs in the play is linked to mass media metaphors and stereotypes that are broadcast in popular culture. The exposure of such stereotypes is often another sign of conspiratorial narration. It should be noted that the choice of place (America) is determined not only by the author's desire to illustrate the global nature of the conflict, but is also a play on various fictional hypotheses related to the political relations between Russia and America, as well as to common gender clichés. The characters of Uncle Kolia, Sergei, and Peter are indispensable to introducing the reader to the course of events and to forming ideas about the male world ("I like to lie down and watch baseball,"¹⁷ as one of them remarks), although there is no unity even among these representatives of the male world. Internal ethnic conflicts flare up throughout the course of events. Furthermore, the motif of American culture's dominance ("Sergeant: Some [pointing to Sergei] have been cleaning rotten potatoes in camps since their childhood, while others have been eating fricassee sitting in banks. Don't worry, it's quite alright."¹⁸) and the notion of the Americans as "a stupid people" can be clearly identified. We learn that the whole world has been destroyed more or less; the play mentions Moscow, Kiev, and New York as the last bastions that still continue to exist. In addition, the motif of the Inquisition, the return to the Middle Ages, which in turns is connected with all sorts of gender stereotypes, can also be found in the play. Women, as Sergeant Uncle Kolia understands, are a terrible dark force that must be extinguished at all costs ("Sergeant: Let your steadfastness and your very death ... Your very death ... stop this eternal dark power humanity has nurtured on its bosom."¹⁹). The male characters use supernatural mechanisms to try and influence the course of the war. Thus, men's secret weapon is hatred, which traps enemy fighters with the help of a special device. This device, the so-called indicator, which generates a certain emotional field, is the author's attempt to play with a stereotype: Women are considered to be more frequently guided by an emotional impulse than by rational reasoning.

17 «Я люблю лежать и смотреть бейсбол...».

18 Сержант: «Одни (показывая на Сергея) с детства в лагерях гнилую картошку чистят, а другие в банках в это время фрикасе едят. Всё нормально, ничего тут такого».

19 Сержант: «Пусть ваша стойкость и сама ваша смерть... Сама ваша смерть... останавливают эту извечную тёмную силу, которую пригрело на своей груди чеоло-вэчэство».

In the play, this idea manifests itself in its literal, grotesque meaning. Women are some sort of mythical creatures for the three male characters, they are shrouded in a veil of mystery. It is not by chance that Uncle Kolia asks Peter if it is true that the Statue of Liberty is a woman, as if he could not believe that a woman could embody freedom.

The artistic space of the play can be called two-worldliness: the initial false conviction that the play shows a war of the sexes (the war of women against men), and the subsequent dispelling of this belief reveals a second layer of reality, which is the natural and logical ending of what is happening. As a result, the reader discovers the actual reality; namely, that the species of men has been exterminated, women are killing each other, their time is running out, and humanity is on the verge of extinction. It is particularly important to realize that the play's two-worldliness has nothing to do with the two-worldliness of romanticism, when two different places intersect only in the protagonist's imagination. *Istrebitel' klassa Medeia* is localized on a single plane, the line between the worlds is embedded in the initial misconception of reality, in the erroneous interpretation of the events. Therefore, concepts such as "ideal" or "enemy" become vague, indefinite, easily blurring the line between each other. The world that is revealed in the play is a fanatical and inhuman one.

The creation of alternative constructions of reality eventually arises from the space of two-worldliness. Women live in self-deception and it is easier for them to close their eyes than to admit the truth and end the war. It is vital for them to recognize an enemy in someone and to destroy them. In addition to an existential and cultural type of conflict, there is a conflict over the spectator's perception of the play. The question put to the audience is the following: "Is wounded pride really worth such sacrifice; is it worth starting a war for this?" The author shows what is going to happen if people continue to fight each other—all of humanity will be doomed. The recipient of this message may come to the conclusion that conflicts need to be resolved otherwise, that is, by agreeing and uniting. These are the thoughts and the conclusion that the audience is supposed to come to while reading the play. The author does not force any decisions upon the reader, he simply shows the consequences. The play's central idea can be summed up as follows: if people fight each other, then they are doomed.

It is in fact thanks to the construction of an alternative world that the following fact becomes obvious: the confrontation of men and women has existed since the beginning of time; the conflict of the sexes has always been and will always be. Yet, the author develops this confrontation to the point of absurdity: he shows that there can be no winners in the conflict between the sexes, because in any case the victory of one side inevitably means its simultaneous defeat.

Sergei knows that he is a “she,” but the role of “the new man” has been forced upon him. He lives as a misconception of his own identity—an identity made that way by somebody else. The scene in the play in which the bra he is wearing under his clothes is first mentioned, comes as a surprise to the reader. This represents an equally big surprise for the female protagonist. Consequently, we deal with a greater conspiracy in the text. Someone had previously made the decision that a group of women shall identify themselves as men and act accordingly. The question of who remains open throughout the play. Since the sexes have been waging war against each other for centuries, and the original men were extinguished long ago, then the following may be presumed: it was either the last original men (*drevnie muzhchiny*) or the first women who claimed to be the “new men.” In the first case, it would be a legacy: those women who were willing to see themselves as men were supposed to preserve men’s place on earth. In the second case, it would be a usurpation because the women who saw themselves as “new men” forced another group of women to pretend to be men so that the sexes could continue fighting each other and so that the concept of the enemy could be perpetuated. Thus, they occupied a position that they are not in fact entitled to. The conflict is based on an intrigue that conceals the fact that there is no actual reason for the conflict.

Thus, in this play, we see the creation of alternative constructions of reality. This is achieved by transforming the plot of a famous myth, which provides the playwright with additional opportunities to express his individual position as well as the play’s central message, which in turn encourages the reader to think independently about ambiguous processes that occur in society. Furthermore, the creation of such an alternative reality contributes to the reader’s ability to come to their own conclusions, being aware of the existence of stereotypes and clichés imposed by mass media.

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Abstract

The new media, especially the so-called social media, are associated with a perpetual and all-embracing stream of information, a stream with which not everyone is able to cope. The question of society's organization and of imaginations about reality as such, in the light of new media is one of the most prominent subjects in the work of Russian writers and playwrights alike. The twenty-first century is characterized by freedom and the diversity of artistic expression as well as the author's desire to develop their individual strategy. This is most clearly visible in drama, which becomes active during periods of crisis in society due to its generic characteristics. The goal of "new drama" is to reveal the secret and hidden, to expose hidden actions and processes, to reflect upon and organize them and to point out situations of conflict. The famous contemporary playwright Maksim Kurochkin deals with exactly these questions throughout his work. This article is devoted to the problem of artistic representations of reality in his dramaturgy. Using the example of Kurochkin's play *Istrebitel' klassa Medeia* (*Medea Type Fighter*) it is possible to analyze and to interpret such alternative constructions. One may conclude that the depiction of collective elements of imagination is an integral component of the process of constructing reality and affects the properties of the artistic space in his plays. The result is the author's individual position regarding the opposition of "truth – fiction," offering original, non-standard mechanisms as a solution.