

The Birth of Socialist Realism out of the Spirit of Radiophonia

Maxim Gorky's Project "Literaturnaja ucheba"

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This article is an attempt to combine a general media theory with a microanalysis of textual strategies. Firstly, I will offer some broad theoretical considerations on the role of media in Soviet culture. Secondly, I will try to show how the birth of Socialist Realism in Russia is linked to the radio and how its understanding can be based on a specific poetics of radiophonia. Finally, the third part will present a short microanalysis of Gorky's editing work on a manuscript sent to him by a young writer. This analysis will show how radiophonic poetics work in the concrete literary praxis.

Outline of a General Media Theory of Soviet Culture

The connection between the October Revolution in Russia and Soviet culture on the one hand, and the media revolution of the twentieth century on the other hand, is evident. Normally this connection is analyzed from a political and institutional perspective. Modern mass media, especially radio and film, but also mass printing, are considered to be instruments used by political leaders to influence and manipulate the masses in terms of Soviet socialist (totalitarian) ideology (Murašov and Witte 2003: 17-38).

Here I would like to propose a different point of view that focuses above all on structural components of communication—especially radio and film—reshaped in the Soviet culture of the 1930s under the impression of the new mass media. My argument holds that the new Soviet communication utopia is rooted in the well-known Platonic attempt to overcome those semantic and pragmatic unreliabilities of communication which result from the process of technologizing the word through writing and (in analogy to Plato's view) typography.

This paradoxical and therefore never realizable project is both the foundation and the moving force of the strange and complicated process called “sovietization”, which was pervasive during the 1930s in the Russian cultural system, having absorbed art and literature, science, philosophy, economy, law and justice, ethics, political power and, finally, love. Remarkably, it was not the plots, topics and contents that were most affected by socialist and Marxist ideology, but rather the *modi* and logics of representation and communication.

The media- and communication-based reconstruction of Soviet culture is helpful in explaining the late and very slow development and expansion of writing and typography in Russia. For a long time, print culture in Russia remained under the control of either the Orthodox Christian institutions or the Tsarist administration. Only beginning in the 1830s, the so-called “epoch of Smirdin” (named after a famous publishing magnate), publishing became a form of independent economic activity. The delayed process of social extension, institutionalization and mental internalization of the effects of writing and typography is the reason for the late functional differentiation of cultural spheres and subsystems such as law, economics, political power and love in Russia. The sceptical and sometimes downright obstructionist attitude towards the technologically processed word, complemented by the artificial imitation of orality in discourse, can be found in the specific poetological strategies of nineteenth-century Russian literature, such as Gogol's *skaz*, Dostoevsky's “polyphony” and even Tolstoy's rhetorical device of estrangement (*ostranenie*), which culminated in the writer's late rejection of his own oeuvre and his corresponding moralistic anti-aestheticism.

This delayed institutional and mental recognition of writing and typography, together with the notorious skepticism towards both of them, explain the unprecedented popularity that new electronic media, especially radio, gained in Russia during the media revolution. Those media produced the so-called “secondary orality” which promised to overcome semantic and pragmatic treacherousness of writing and print by eradi-

cating such menaces of Russian culture as formalisation and abstraction, semantic ambiguity and individualization.

At the same time, the political and social concepts and utopian ideas of the nineteenth century were adjusted to the potential of the new media at the beginning of the twentieth century. It suffices to mention Lenin's famous definition of communism as socialism plus electrification, or the characterization of radio as a "megaphone of the Revolution".

While during the utopian avant-garde period of Russian culture (from the late 1910s through the early 1920s) the connection between the new media and Soviet society remained more or less a declaration of intent, the situation changed considerably in the following decade: new electronic media, especially radio and film, but also traditional print media, became relevant in a technological, institutional and social sense. Two simultaneous processes are particularly visible: the traditional Russian scepticism towards writing and print culture increased, while at the same time the new Soviet attitude towards orality within the framework of literacy led to the paradoxically-schizoid mode of communication that began to permeate all spheres and discourses of Soviet culture. Most importantly, from that point on every self-definition and self-description of the Russian cultural system had to be based on this new Soviet oral mode of communication.¹

A Media Theory of the Socialist Realism

When we look at literature from the point of view of functional analysis, we may define it as a subsystem within modern culture which regulates and elaborates its strategies of dealing with the semantic and pragmatic complexities of the speech production, such as interrelation of language and writing, or the intricate eye-ear asymmetry of the production of meaning. From this point of view, it becomes apparent why the sphere of literature is so structurally relevant for all discourses and functional subsystems of modern culture. Furthermore, we are able to understand why even in comparison to the nineteenth century the relevance of literature in the Soviet era increased and acquired a key role in all self-definitions of the Soviet cultural system. Soviet literature had the paradoxical task of popularizing and practicing the new "secondary

1 | For several years now there has been an increasing interest in the acoustic, electroacoustic and acousmatic dimensions of Soviet culture, see especially: Gorham 2003; Gorjaeva 2007.

orality” by utilizing writing and print media. This refers to the social and mental adoption of an attitude towards writing that suppresses the specific hermeneutic effects of the written and visualized word, producing abstraction, formalization, semantic ambiguity, individualization, self-reflection and introspection.

This anxious rejection of the hermeneutic efficacy of the written word is common in Russian culture of the first (and perhaps even second) half of the twentieth century. It is noticeable in the texts of writers and intellectuals of all ideological stripes, from Mikhail Bakhtin to Nikolai Ostrovskii and from Vladimir Nabokov to Andrei Platonov. But the most impressive illustration is provided by the linguistic theory of Nikolai Marr, elevated by Stalin to the status of official doctrine. In one particular case, Marr identifies writing with the bourgeois class enemy against whom Soviet linguistics must guard itself:

[...] To this day, writing is the old enemy [...] and evil adversary in the science about language. [...] There was a time when writing, and written language as such, obscured language. Living speech escaped of attention of scholars, which was entirely preoccupied with written language.

“[...] письмо—старый враг [...] и злой соперник до наших дней в науке о языке. [...] Было время, когда письмо и вообще письменность заслоняло язык. Живая речь выходила из орбиты исследовательского внимания, захваченного целиком интересом к письменному языку” (Marr 1936: 353).²

At the same time, in Soviet culture of the late 1920s to early 1930s literature appears to be the foundation on which the new Soviet mode of communication as such, paradoxically oriented towards orality, was built. This construction connected literary production and its reception with the mass medium of the radio. One should note that this connection still remains largely unexplored, despite an abundance of research on the emergence of Socialist Realism and the first Congress of Soviet Writers.

Two examples may illustrate this close connection between the institutionalization of radio as a mass medium and the emergence of Socialist Realism in the beginning of the 1930s. The first is a quote taken from the editorial article “Pisatel’ i radio” in the radio journal *Govorit SSSR*:

For millions of people, the Congress of Soviet Writers has raised in all its depth and breadth the question of creativity, of the production of high mastery, of great ideas, great art and great simplicity.

2 | See for a more detailed analysis Murašov 2000a: 599-609.

By presenting their works on the radio, the writers put into practice the basic principle of Socialist Realism—creative work for the masses.

“С’езд советских писателей во всю глубину и ширь поставил вопрос о творчестве для миллионов, о продукции высокого мастерства, больших идей, большого искусства, большой простоты.

Выступая со своими произведениями на радио, писатели осуществляют основной принцип социалистического реализма—творчество для масс” (Anonymous 1934: 3).

The second example is an enthusiastic statement by the writer Marietta Šaginjan:

We writers must learn to communicate by means not only of the written, but also of the spoken word. When I speak before the microphone, I have a keen sense of being connected with millions of people, and I direct the word into space with a feeling of real, responsible aim. That is the enormous significance of the writer’s work for the radio.

“Нам, писателям, нужно научиться общению не только через написанное, но и через произнесенное слово. Когда я говорю перед микрофоном, у меня острое ощущение связи с миллионами людей, и я направляю слово в пространство с чувством реального, ответственного придела. В этом огромное значение работы писателя для радио” (Anonymous 1934: 7).

In contrast to the various avant-garde poetics which all focus—even in writing and visual culture—on the oral and otherwise sound word, Socialist Realism means a writing project par excellence which simulates an oral narration thus deletes all traces of its own discursive genesis in the process of text production. From this point of view, Social Realism with its keywords like ‘massovost’, ‘narodnost’, ‘ponjatnost’, ‘partijnost’, ‘tipizacija’, ‘položitel’nyj geroj’ can be characterized as the poetics of radiophonia.

Maxim Gorky’s Project “Literaturnaja učeba”

A highly significant effort to institutionalize the structural relevance of literature in Soviet culture is Maxim Gorky’s project “Literaturnaja učeba”, which attempts to engage the masses of uneducated workers in the active production of literature. The genesis of the project (including

its institutional and political aspects) is well described in Evgenij Dobrenko's book *Formovka sovetskogo pisatelja* (Dobrenko 1999), which gives a lively impression of the megalomaniac scope of the project.

Yet what has not been analyzed so far is Gorky's concrete pedagogical involvement in his own project—for example, his corrections and editing of manuscripts sent to him by young and aspiring writers.³

Gorky's editorial practice is highly interesting because it shows his own work on language and specific effects of writing. The writer's editing of his admirers' manuscripts shows how the radiophonic poetics of Socialist Realism regulates textual and editorial practice.

To illustrate this point, I would like to refer to Gorky's editorial work on the manuscript of a novel "Vor" ("The Thief") sent to him by the young writer Michail V. Luzgin (1899-1942). "The Thief" describes a moral and political development of the protagonist Pogodin, who manages to get out of a criminal milieu, develops mature political consciousness and finally joins the Bolshevik party. This case is remarkable, because it is one of the rare cases, when a manuscript received in this way managed to sustain Gorky's severe criticism. In 1936 the novel was published in two parts under the titles *Medvezhatnik* (The Apartment Robber) and *Oshibka* (The Mistake) in the collection *The Bolshevtsy. Essays on the History of the Iagoda Labor Commune of the NKVD (Bolshevtsy. Oчерки po istorii bolshevskoi imeni G. G. Iagoda trudokommuny NKVD)* in the series *History of Plants and Factories (Istoriiia fabrik i zavodov)*. Luzgin's 86 page-long typescript retains Gorky's pencil corrections made in different colors (red, blue, black) which makes it likely that Gorky went over Luzgin's text three times (Luzgin 1936).⁴

Looking at Gorky's corrections, one has to acknowledge his high professionalism as editor and proofreader able to work thoroughly and with a remarkable consistency. It is also remarkable that Gorky's corrections are not explicitly ideological but rather stylistic ones, concerning textual and narrative structure. In his essays published in the journal *Literaturnaja ucheba* Gorky repeatedly pointed out how important the "technique of writing", orthography and the basics of rhetorics and stilistics were.⁵

When we look at Gorky's corrections we see that he consistently elimi-

3 | Hereafter I rely upon the results of the research project on Social Realism carried out at the University of Constance together with Natalia Borisova and Tomaš Liptak and supported by the German Scientific Foundation (DFG).

4 | This material was found by Tomaš Liptak.

5 | See Gorky's characterization in Makar'ev (1932: 5): "[...] для него [Горького] вопрос о мировоззренческой учебе автора неотделим от вопроса о его технической учебе" ([...] for him [Gorky] the question of the

nates all elements of narration and textual structure that may function as recursive loops of self-reflection and self-observation in the narrative process. He also lets down all elements of the text hinting at the inner ambivalence of the protagonist which may stake his inner feelings and self-reflection against the plot and narrative logic:

Note the following example of Gorky's corrections:

Luzgin's original:

His meeting with Muromtsev, despite the impudent words about his parents, left Pogodin with a feeling that resembled sympathy.

“От встречи с Муромцевым, несмотря на нахальные его слова насчет родителей, у Погодина осталось чувство схожее с симпатией к нему.” (Luzgin 1936: 4).

Gorky's corrected version:

The conversation with Muromtsev left Pogodin with a feeling resembling sympathy for the old man.

“От беседы с Муромцевым, у Погодина осталось чувство похожее на симпатию к старику.”

Here we find an interesting detail: Gorky replaces the “meeting with Muromtsev” (“встречи с Муромцевым”) with a “conversation” (“беседа с Муромцевым”) reducing the complex encounter, which may have included both verbal and visual elements, to a simple verbal exchange. For him, it is the verbal impression that is relevant for the protagonist's judgement. Unacceptable for Gorky is the personal, self-reflecting perspective of the protagonist which may run counter the logic of the plot and the intentions of the objective narrator:

Luzgin's original:

He even wondered if he should not join the Bolsheviks and offer them his services. A wariness acquired through the years, the knowledge that everything would not end today or tomorrow, and an intuitive, sharp sense of protest unclear even to himself, stopped him.

ideological training of the author is inseparable from the question about his technical training).

“Он даже подумал не пойти ли к большевикам, не предложить ли им свои услуги. Годами выработанная осторожность, сознание, что все это кончится не сегодня, завтра и стихийное неясное самому острое чувство протеста останавливали его.” (Luzgin 1936: 25)

Gorky's corrected version:

A wariness acquired through the years, the knowledge that everything would not end today or tomorrow, and an intuitive, sharp sense of protest unclear even to himself, stopped him from joining the Bolsheviks.

“Годами выработанная осторожность, сознание, что все это кончится не сегодня, завтра и стихийное неясное самому острое чувство протеста останавливали его идти с большевиками.”

This example shows how Gorky changes the entire perspective of the narration by eliminating the following sentence: “He even wondered if he should not join the Bolsheviks and offer them his services” (“Он даже подумал не пойти ли к большевикам, не предложить ли им свои услуги”). Instead of immediate acquaintance with the protagonist's self-reflection (“He even wondered” (“Он даже подумал”)) the reader is confronted with his behavior through the eyes of an “objective narrator” in the course of his teleological movement towards membership in the Bolshevik party. Gorky pays attention even to short sentences which may weaken the plot by referring to the protagonist's self-reflection; he crosses out, for instance, the following short sentence: He realized that he would spend his last hours in Voronezh (Он понял, что в Воронеже проводит последние часы). In other cases, Gorky tries to define the plot structure of the novel more sharply and to increase the speed of narration by deleting the protagonist's introspections and loops of self-reflection (see: *Figure 1*):

It was so obvious to Pogodin, and so clearly did he see the future toward which the communists were striving, when each would have that which he needed and perhaps the very word “carouse” might fall out of use. But how unbelievably difficult it was to explain this to others!

“Так очевидно это было Погодину, так отчетливо рисовалось ему то будущее, к которому стремятся коммунисты, когда каждый будет иметь все ему нужное, и может быть самое слово ‘кутить’ перестанут понимать. Но как невероятно трудно было это объяснить другим.” (Luzgin 1936: 33)

The following is another example in which a self-reflective passage is deleted in its entirety (see: *Figure 2*):

And in the end, who could say to whom it is known? Mistakes occur even in the shrewdest calculations of the wisest of men. Perhaps everything Pogodin had believed to be immutable, an inevitability, or a law, contained a blunder lesser men would someday laugh about. Is life not richer, more inventive and more sly than all of one's intentions?

“И кто наконец может знать, кому это известно? И в самих тонких расчетах самих умных мудрецов случаются ошибки. Может быть во всем, во что поверил Погодин как в непреложное, как в неизбежность, как в закон имеется промах, над которым когда нибудь буду смеяться ребятишки. Разве жизнь не богаче, не изобретательнее, не хитрее любых предположений?” (Luzgin 1936: 42)

The first of these deleted passages characteristically discloses the difficulties of externalizing and communicating mental pictures and utopian ideas that point at certain structural problems of communication.. A similar attempt by Gorky to strengthen the plot can be found in his fine-tuning of the following sentence:

Pogodin waited as though he had asked someone—not himself, but someone who loves to think everything over, who does not hurry with his answer.

“Погодин ждал, точно спросил кого то, не себя, человека, который любит обдумать все, который не торопится с ответом.” (Luzgin 1936: 47)

Here is Gorky's revised version:

Pogodin asked not himself, but someone who loves to think everything over and who does not hurry with his answer.

“Погодин спрашивал, не себя, а—человека, который любит обдумать все который не торопится с ответом.”

In the place of confrontation between the empirically observable behaviour “waited” (“ждал”) and the possibility of the protagonist's inner self-questioning, there remains a single fact of life—he “asked” (“спрашивал”). Now the act of self-questioning seems to be externalized and orientated towards a moral authority.

Besides eliminating and shortening text pieces potentially leading to the breakup of the plot into two (inner mental sphere and an external sphere of action and behaviour) Gorky does not shy away from adding passages linking the inner mental disposition to the active, externally observable emotional reactions.

Luzgin's original:

Well, that won't happen, Pogodin will manage to deal with it, he hardly restrained himself.

“Ну, этого то не случится, с этим Погодин сумеет справиться, он с трудом сдерживал себя.” (Luzgin 1936: 50)

Gorky's corrected version:

Well, that won't happen, Pogodin will manage to deal with it. He wanted to sing, dance, laugh. He could hardly restrain himself.

“Ну, этого то не случится, с этим Погодин сумеет справиться ему. Хотелось петь, плясать, смеяться. Он с трудом сдерживал себя.”

In another case, Gorky introduces aesthetic judgments into the plot by adding to the narrative structure the interplay of cause and effect:

Luzgin's original:

Pogodin read her poems by Bal'mont and Blok. Dusia listened obediently, her little child-like brow furrowed intently.

“Погодин читал ей стихотворения Бальмонта и Блока. Дуся слушала напряженно сморщив детский лобик.” (Luzgin 1936: 21)

Gorky's corrected version:

Pogodin read her poems by Bal'mont and Blok. The gloomy lines evoked melancholy and sadness. Dusia listened obediently, her little child-like brow furrowed intently.

“Погодин читал ей стихотворения Бальмонта и Блока. Сумеречные стихи будили печаль и грусть. Дуся покорно слушала Напряженно сморщив децкий лобик.”

Systematically purging self-reflection from the edited texts, Gorky is equally harsh in his treatment of references to literature, language, writing and the problems of representation. The following passage is an example in which the self-reflection of the protagonist acquires an evidently metapoetic dimension that signifies the problems of representing mental dispositions through the written word. It is entirely deleted by Gorky (see: Figure 3):

Well, you envied the Muromtsevs because you didn't wish to work for them, because you considered it happiness to be able to live without working, while someone else works. Isn't it so? Am I not right? So admit it, dear Aleksei Nikolaevich, admit it. Now you no longer need to pretend—were you happy? In all honesty—were you happy? Were you or not? If Pogodin had been able to write stories instead of letters he would have covered many pages and would have told the story of a paltry, difficult, humiliating and meaningless life.

“Да потому, что вы не желая работать на Муромцевых завидовали им, потому что вы считали счастьем когда можно жить не работая, когда работает кто-то другой. Так? Правда? Ну так признавайтесь дорогой Алексей Хиколаевич, признавайтесь, теперь уже не приходится отвертываться: оили вы счастливы? По совести—были счастливы? Были или нет? И если бы умел Погодин писать не письма, а повести, исписал бы он много страниц, рассказал бы историю жизни ничтожной, тяжелой, обидной, бессмысленной.” (Luzgin 1936: 47)

A highly interesting deletion of a text passage is shown by the following example (see: Figure 4): Here Gorky furiously excises all traces of the evil resulting from the protagonist's confrontation of the process of introspection and self-reflection. This example is interesting because it echoes an old Russian Orthodox tradition of writing and representation, in which the depiction of evil becomes taboo—in contrast to the Western view exemplified by Saint Augustine or Rousseau, which sees the representation of evil in writing as an agent of change or the promise of cathartic redemption. We can find the remnants of this apophatic stance in Nikolai Karamzin's famous essay “Čto nužno avtoru” (1794/1795) as well as in Lev Tolstoy's anti-aesthetics discussed above, but the tradition surely remains in force in Russia at the end of the 19th century, and even later, as we see in the example above.

Conclusion

Summing up our observations on Maxim Gorky's editing and correcting of Mikhail Luzgin's manuscript of *The Thief*, we may state that the renowned editor reacts very sensitively to all textual elements that indicate alternating structures and include some recursive or self-reflecting plot movements. This is remarkable insofar as we know that the written word, as a visual medium, works as a generator of differences, which become observable in the process of writing and reading. In writing, the production of meaning is essentially accompanied by the experience of differences, of broken, unstable and hybrid identities. While in oral performance the differential structure of sense-making seems to be eliminated by the volatility of the word being pronounced and sounding in time (or sometimes even under the extra time pressure), in the process of writing the production of meaning is not an external and technical procedure, but rather an event and a corporeal as well as mental experience.

In his editing work on Luzgin's text, Gorky achieves the simulation of an oral narration by deleting all traces of the text's written genesis. In this way, Gorky's project of "literaturnaja ucება" finally implements the poetics of radiophonia in Luzgin's novel and creates a text of Socialist Realism which tries to deny its own origin from writing and wants the reader to believe in immaterial processes of sense-making and communication. At this point, the poetics of radiophonia and Gorky's "Literaturnaja ucება" join the general production of a totalitarian ideology.

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Figure 3



