

Abstract

The book deals with various Russian and Soviet cultural texts (literature, film, and popular culture) from a comparative perspective and through the methodological frameworks of myth, class, and gender. These are observed through their own performativeness and symbolic languages, but also in their interdependence: almost all analyses show that class articulations are coded through gender power relations, while some claim that the mythological gradually transfigures the class and gender field of the Russian and (post-)Soviet literatures and cultures.

The book is divided into four parts: 1. Consumption, Class and Gender; 2. History, Memory and Trauma; 3. City, Resistance and Commodification; 4. Mother, Motherhood and Literature.

In the first part, I explore the meanings inscribed in the representation and articulation of consumer practices and materiality in general and the ways in which these representations contribute to our understanding of class and class relations in the context of Russian and Soviet literature and culture. The analysis of Tolstoy's famous novel *Anna Karenina* (1873–1878), which depicts Russian aristocracy during the period of its severe crisis, shows that, while articulating and positioning herself/himself through the various forms of the Other and *otherness* (which, as the novel demonstrates, are to be understood as specific perspectives and not stable entities), an individual simultaneously also produces her/his own *otherness* – her/his own exposure, criticism and vulnerability. Furthermore, in the chapter about the film *Conspiracy of the Doomed* (*Zagovor obrechennykh*), the novels *The Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Golden Calf* (1931) by Il'f and Petrov, and advertising posters, I explored the precarious position of traditional gender roles as a mechanism of promotion and regulation of consumption in (early) Soviet socialism, which was a period marked by the NEP (New Economic Policy) and Stalin's formation of a privileged class in the 1930s. Political and ideological treatment of certain consumer practices – a synthesis of abundance for some and “rational consumption” for others – required constant negotiation of the boundaries of the ideologically and morally acceptable. This is where gender roles, and particularly the role of women as consumers and of women as keepers of (symbolic) boundaries came to the forefront.

In the second part of the book, the complex relationship between history, memory and trauma are analyzed, where trauma is at the same time the Other of national histories, but also where the memories of the excluded, “voiceless” individuals unfold. In the comparative analysis of Karlo Štajner's memoirs *7000 Days in Siberia* (1971) and Danilo Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), I explore the paradigm of literary exchange and circulation in the text through the cultural transfer of Štajner's memories in Kiš's literary masterpiece. I observe this transfer as a diegetic expression of Kiš paying off his so-called “literary debt”, which includes the following: Kiš's *Tomb* on the one hand canonizes the status of Štajner as an immediate witness of the Gulag, and on the other hand, Kiš expresses his position as a writer burdened with postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsch. The chapter about Soviet melodramas from the period of late Soviet socialism (*Cranes are Flying*, 1957, and *Ballad of a Soldier*, 1959) shows that both films, rooted in a specific metaphysics of time “out of joint” (J. Derrida), can be seen as an expression of the deconstruction of the optimistic myth of a “socialism with the human face” which announced (a bright) future. The films are also observed through their gendered “blind spots”: since war is perceived as an exclusively “male zone”, *Cranes are Flying* could not have had such unreserved support from the public and political elite as *Ballad of a Soldier*. As in Kiš's *Tomb*, in the films *Wings* (1966) by L. Shepit'ko and *The Thief* (1997) by P. Chukhrai, the figure of the absent man/father (*the lost object*) is where the mythical and the traumatic simultaneously unfold. Through the complex theoretical frameworks of memory and postmemory, myth and trauma, and of the uncanny as the very core of traumatic recollection, the chapter analyzes complex relationship between history, memory and trauma, where the cruelty of war turns into the cruelty of a lie.

The third part of the book analyzes the ways in which the city produces the Other and *otherness* in literature and popular culture. This perspective opens up a series of insights relevant for

both the local (Russian/Soviet) and the global context. The comparative analysis of Aksenov's and Slamnig's novels, both written in 1959, aims to answer the question to which extent the cultural contract between gender and the urban, which carries distinctly progressive and liberal meanings, reverberates through the novels' poetics of gender. The chapter about the graffiti in Moscow and Saint Petersburg analyses what (post-)modern graffiti in these two Russian cities can say about the wall as the object of authority *par excellence* in the context of urban political economy through the dual nature of resistance and commodification of graffiti.

Departing from the image of women as "ahistorical bearers of children" ("ahistorijska rađalica", B. Despot), i.e. as subjects that biologically, symbolically and culturally reproduce the nation (N. Yuval-Davis), the final part of the book analyzes the representation of motherhood by juxtaposing the mythological image of women in the role of mothers on the one hand, and the literary and artistic articulation of motherhood on the other. This opposition, exemplified through the forms of representation of motherhood in the popular Soviet journal "Rabotnitsa" and literary works of I. Grekova (1963), N. Baranskaia (1969) and L. Petrushevskaja (1992), shows that the intersection of the mythical and the literary is a place of deep inner tensions and conflicts. The novel *Medea and Her Children* (1996) by L. Ulitskaya, analyzed in the final chapter of the book, presents a fictional world in which gender differences are not mutually exclusive. Ulitskaya's Medea serves as an alternative or, more precisely, a compromise subject: she is the "other" First, or, even more precisely, she is "above", "on the other side" of the binary gender oppositions.

The title of the book is, of course, of an intertextual nature and refers to the canonical travelogue written by Miroslav Krleža. The following quotation from Krleža's afterword to his *Journey to Russia* illustrates my reading of Russian and Soviet literature, film and popular culture: "During this journey, more than in the statistics, the author was interested in people, human relationships, developments, political movements of the masses, public lighting, the broad Russian spectrum of this Slavic continent. The author observed the Russian churches and the ungodly with a lyrical eye, listening to the song of the Russian wind and thinking about the past and about the cultural issues more than about the statistics." (Krleža 1973: 299). These desires – to observe people and human relationships in the broad spectrum of the "Slavic continent" and the wide field of art and popular culture – shaped my analytical optics and motivated me to go on a journey, me, the other, a foreigner and an alien, to Russia as the Other, but also to the otherness of Russia – through her myths, gender and class relationships and tensions, to the places where they intersect, blend and evade articulation.