

Urban Culture in Oral and Web Texts

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Abstract

In the article the authors suggest ways of studying the 'city text' by means of methods of cultural anthropology and folkloristics. The central attention is paid to peculiarities of young people's familiarization of space of a Russian provincial town situated in the Volga region (Yoshkar-Ola), which claims to be the cultural capital of Mari republic. The article is written on the materials of texts obtained via special questionnaires, interviews and participant observation method. Also the authors have monitored some forums and public pages of social networking services. The article focuses mainly on interaction of two possible approaches to the study of urban space: city as a value-oriented idea of the given type of settlement and community, their history, the urban way of life and urban environment; the 'city text' as a synthesis of verbal codes of urban communities. The result of the research is a presentation of verbal ways of interiorization of the city cultural text (its spatial constituent in particular) by modern young people.

Keywords: text, city, youth communities, demotivator, fanfiction

1. Introduction

The latest decades of the 20-th century saw studies of urban culture as a primary trend of cultural anthropology and folkloristics (Alekseevsky, Dobrovolskaya, Ippolitova, 2010). The given disciplines regard the 'city text' as a complex of material objects, ideas, values and models of behavior in all forms of their manifestations (the verbal one is among them).

In its turn, the above mentioned trend is developed in two aspects: 1) city as a value-oriented idea of the given type of settlement and community, their history, way of life and city environment (Drannikova, 2010); 2) the 'city text' as a synthesis of verbal codes of urban communities (Zolotova, 2006).

In the article an attempt is made to show some interaction of the given aspects of research of the 'city text' on the example of verbal creative work of youth in the town of Yoshkar-Ola (Mari El Republic).

2. Materials and Methods

By the present moment as a result of active collecting process (methods of interview and the participant observation method) and studying a number of sites and discussion groups (mainly the social networking service VKontakte and its public pages: 'Typical Yoshkar-Ola', 'Mothers of Yoshkar-Ola', 'Yoshkar-Ola Eavesdropped', 'Yoshkar-Ola', 'Board of disgrace Yoshkar-Ola') the authors of the article have made and are currently using a solid research base (texts of different genres and comments to them) that allows the researcher to consider verbal creative work of the young as a communicative system in all its diversity of links and interactions. The first to apply such an approach was T.B. Shchepanskaya (Shchepanskaya, 2004). The central attention is paid to the verbal code of youth culture (themes, character types, style, values, types of interaction with traditions, elitist and mass culture).

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the collected materials has pointed to the fact that Yoshkar-Ola, like many other Russian cities and towns, has an oral history of its own (Drannikova, 2010). Besides, one cannot help mentioning some typical features of mental familiarization of the town by the young. The latest decade has been of unique nature in the history of Yoshkar-Ola

because of the unprecedented construction work. The image of the town has changed out of all recognition: a great number of new architectural ensembles have emerged, those of religious, cultural and sports character. Young citizens tend to feel interested in these innovations and develop a positive attitude to them. However, on the whole, the town is still considered to be a provincial one. Modern researchers see the phenomenon of provinciality as 'a painful experience of understanding one's isolation from a big city's rhythm, lack of access to social and cultural resources, separation from life perspectives connected with promotion, education, communication, leisure, etc.' (4, 2010). Some ways of overcoming it are stated as well (Tihomirov, 2010). Similar tendencies are observed in Yoshkar-Ola's citizens' behavior. In social networking services (e.g. VKontakte) there are public pages and groups of Mari fraternities (Mari is a name for the Finno-Ugric people traditionally inhabiting Mari El Republic and Yoshkar-Ola) which give young people a possibility to state their loyalty to the republic and its capital: 'Mari people of all countries, get united', 'Mari people of Moscow', 'Mari people of St. Petersburg', 'Mari people of Kazan'. There are specific public pages connected with the capital's life only: 'Typical Yoshkar-Ola' (56,000 subscribers), 'Yoshkar-Ola – city of joy!' (678 subscribers), 'Mothers of Yoshkar-Ola' (300 subscribers), 'Yoshkar-Ola Eavesdropped' (21,000 subscribers), 'Yoshkar-Ola' (21,000 subscribers), 'Board of disgrace Yoshkar-Ola' (16,000 subscribers). The groups enumerated above tend to improve the life of the town in different ways. The public page 'Yoshkar-Ola – city of joy!' aims at 'making our town cleaner, brighter and more beautiful'; they publish materials about volunteers' cleaning and various festivals both official and subcultural. The group 'Board of disgrace Yoshkar-Ola' warns citizens about bad-quality services, etc. Advertising in the town reflects certain attempts to overcome provinciality when such words as *city* and *capital* emerge in names of shopping centers, clubs, etc. One cannot help mentioning the beginning of formation of a peculiar topography of the town's 'sacred' objects (the monument to the Young Family in Victory Boulevard, Yoshka's Cat, the bridge to which newly-weds and sweethearts lock love padlocks, etc.). Like in big cities, in Yoshkar-Ola one can come across such phenomena as bombing, parcour and cosplay. The number of genres and plots of the specific urban mythology is increasing (urban legends, rumors, etc.). The genre of the so-called 'curious thing' is of special interest. One of the first attempts to define its typical features was made by P.A. Klubkov (Klubkov, 2000) and S.A. Tihomirov (Tihomirov, 2010). Thus, to distinguishing features of the 'curious thing' they refer exact portrayal of facts, complete lack of plot, substitution of any narration by a description and, what is more important, due to the progress of digital technologies, putting an object of interest into the photographic but and not into the verbal form. In their turn, cases of illogicality (mostly in slogans), situational humor should be referred, in their opinion, to the most vivid manifestations of the given genre in the sphere of expressiveness.

The phenomena mentioned above have found their reflection in a collection of photos contained in the albums called 'Jokes by your eyes', 'Yoshka's fotos', 'Yoshka's creative (Memes)' on the public page 'Typical Yoshkar-Ola'. The albums are located on the social networking service VKontakte (Typical Yoshkar-Ola, 2015). They comprise both photos and the so-called demotivators derived from urban life facts that are familiar to all citizens of Yoshkar-Ola and possess the status of memes. Researcher Irina Bugayeva states that a demotivator is 'a picture containing a graphical component in a black frame and a slogan created according to specific rules' (Bugayeva, 2011) and 'a new specific speech genre possessing communicative –pragmatic characteristics of its own' (Bugayeva, 2011). One of the albums used to be called 'Demotivators' and the term reveals the general idea of demotivating, destroying or criticizing a stereotype. A considerable number of pictures are connected with the unprecedented construction work changing the town: authors of demotivators feel sorry for some sights and views of the town that were taken away to clear grounds for new architectural complexes: 'Not everyone will understand / But many will recollect', these lines accompany an old view of Yoshkar-Ola's embankment or the building of Yoshkar-Ola Hotel demolished some years ago. Another popular subject matter of demotivators dealing with the new look of the town is the building of a great number of churches and cathedrals: 'Why not just/ quit building another church'. The demotivators reflect social and often anti-social reputation of certain districts of the town: the picture shows two famous cartoon characters, parrot Keshka, in plaster all over, and the boy, his owner, saying, 'I told you not to go to Tarhanovo!' (Tarhanovo is a remote suburb of Yoshkar-Ola). A typical problem of many Russian provincial towns – bad-quality roads – has been reflected in demotivators as well: 'Quick-dissolving roads. Just add some water!'

The albums also contain photos of humorous character where the basis of situational humor is not unique for Yoshkar-Ola. To such phenomena one can refer interpretation of spelling mistakes or missing letters in different titles, names, announcements, etc. Examples like that are hard to be translated into English but the general idea is as follows: the announcement meaning in Russian *free parking (Platnaya stoyanka)* due to missing letters turns into a ridiculous statement with the meaning *I am a parking lot (ya stoyanka)*. This misspelt announcement is accompanied with the phrase '*The parking lot with an expressed I-concept*'. Photos of announcements and advertisements containing all sorts of logical incongruities also enjoy popularity: '*In the department 'Crockery' Book store has been opened,*' '*Porter service*' on a poster of a popular music band, etc.

Photos of familiar views of the town, its yards, typical events and phenomena processed in Photoshop have a great humorous and sometimes sarcastic effect and attract a lot of attention what is proved by numerous comments. An example of it is a picture of a tree with an announcement 'Help for addicts' with phone numbers attached; on another brunch there is a rope with a loop obviously added in Photoshop. Below a shocking inscription runs 'Self help'.

There is another tendency of the town life that is displayed in choice of photos published in the town's on-line communities. Young citizens tend to treat humorously the existing rivalry between three higher educational institutions of the republic in their attempts to attract applicants and to display their brand wherever and whenever possible. Thus, one could see a photo of a trashcan with the abbreviated name of a well-known commercial university and the words 'place for litter', written in white paint.

The space of the town is familiarized by young people by means of *language play* (Tihomirov, 2010) connected with active rethinking of official toponymy of the Soviet epoch: like in other towns, it is popular to turn Sovetskaya Street into Sovok or Sova, Lenin Square into Lennon Square. The House of Friendship, where there is a bas-relief portraying profiles of Lenin, Marx and Engels situated over the entrance, got the nickname of Three Foreheads, etc. The principle of likeness is widely used as well: the most famous town stele is referred to as Pencil or Soldier, etc.

The collected materials allow, on the one hand, to observe how 'contemporary young people interiorize the cultural 'city text' (its spatial constituent in particular). On the other hand, defining axiological dominants in perception of urban environment helps us to learn the young citizens better' (Tihomirov, 2010).

Studying the 'city text' as a synthesis of verbal codes of the town communities and subcultures, the authors of the article have brought out peculiarities of the so-called virtual communication, principles of constructing Web communities; have classified ways of virtual communication. In one of the previous researches the communicative situation of fanfiction on Harry Potter fandom was modeled (Efimova, 2006).

Second, there has been a successful attempt made to systematize verbal creative work of a number of youth subcultures of Mari El Republic. A profound classification of the verbal creative work by representatives of the post-tolkien-roleplaying subculture was created. Within the classification one distinguishes two large fields of verbal creative work: 1) post-tolkien creativity (grounded on motives and images from J.R.R. Tolkien's works and books by other fantasy writers, from historical literature, mythological and folkloric systems); 2) roleplaying creativity (it has much to do with subjects of role-playing games). Each of them includes genres of prose and poetry. Besides, under the influence of game rules, both attain elements of the dramatic form (dramatization, dialogues, mass scenes, or combinations of the three). Game emphasis explains the advent of works of serious and comical nature within each field. The serious genres comprise game documents, artistic publicism and fiction. The latter group is represented by traditional genres of verbal creative work (narrations, short fiction, tales, etc.) and by genres born in the game situation (apocrypha, glitches, concepts). The comical genres include parodies, anecdotes, baikas. Such genres as ballads and songs, as a rule, enter the bulk of serious genres, though they might possess humorous equivalents incidentally [Abukayeva, 2006].

Third, the question of referring certain fields of verbal creative work produced by youth communities to folkloric phenomena has been solved. The given statement can be illustrated by the following example. Fanfiction of the Harry Potter fandom has been formed under the influence of professional literature (mass literature, in particular) that tends to be grounded on folkloric and mythological clichés. The same clichés are actively applied to in fanfiction texts but used in two opposite directions: on the one hand, fanfic writers are loyal to them creating but slight variations within the canon (the original books, in fans' terms); on the other hand, fanfic writers deliberately destroy them transforming the archetypes so that they change out of all recognition. In the first situation one can state the phenomenon of folklorism as understood by literary critics: fan writers, similar to the author of the canon, make use of the mythological tradition on different levels. In the process of investigating the story line some elements of the traditional scheme of the fairy-tale/ monomyth, traditional-like characters, magic nature of the 'universe' are easily discernible. In the second situation the number of formal signs of the mythological/fairy-tale tradition goes down. They are either present in a parody form (the fairy-tale world is inside out – the reader faces a coward hero, a silly donator, etc.) or totally absent (the whole story is an explicit scene, an episode from a minor character's life, etc.). In its turn, parody is a famous and well-tried way of existence of folkloric phenomena what cannot be denied.

Some fanfiction texts do not contain any formal elements of mythological / fairy-tale tradition or parody but they do include elements of psychological analysis, drama and (or) erotica. Folklorism of such texts is defined through their origin – authors tend to realize all the potential of the favorite book. Characters' relationships, pseudo-historic details of the Harry Potter universe, a name or a place incidentally mentioned by the writer or even the whole mythological/fairy-tale tradition are perceived as a possibility that needs revealing, a starting point, ground for interpretation, a chance to complete the text.

4. Conclusions

The peculiar feature of researching the given field is the necessity to investigate a modern, dynamic and constantly changing phenomenon. Within youth culture new trends emerge and develop. In the process of formation and evolution they absorb achievements of youth subculture of previous years, clichés of contemporary mass culture and even elements of elitist culture. Suchlike eclecticism gives rise to a great number of cultural interactions, alternative scenarios; some of them might stay in the future culture for a long time. Thus, studying the state of youth communities and their creative work allows, to a certain extent, to foresee the upcoming cultural development of the town/region, to define their beneficial and detrimental effects. It is suggested that possible models of development of future art are tested in youth subcultures, or, at least, one can speak about typological similarities between some phenomena of professional art and those of youth creative work.

As far as perspectives of the research are concerned, it is necessary, first, to extend the basis of the research. Second, it is supposed to deepen the subject matter in the context of a model of development of the contemporary culture and literature as a result of interaction with the core of the basic culture. It is challenging to find out the universal codes of youth culture that have a potential to enrich the content of Russian culture, on the whole.

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