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## RUSSIAN "WORLD-CLASS" LITERATURE: RUSSIAN DETECTIVE NOVELS SINCE THE 1990S

In the 1990s the book market and the production and reception of literature in Russia radically changed, conforming to Western patterns. This transformation is mostly – and even from the side of scholars – estimated as an emancipatory development. But unlike vanguard postmodern literature, which considers and ironically reverses clichés and stereotypes, mass fiction provides unambiguous elements to identify with (positively or negatively). The paper focuses on Russian detective novels since the 1990s – exemplarily on the basis of a novel by Aleksandra Marinina – to show how Russian stereotypes are preserved in universal patterns of character and plot and how the reception against the background of Russian as well as of Western society is made possible.

Key words: Russian literature; 1990s; reduction of social complexity in detective novels; affirmative reception

"Poor Charlie Brown! In his attempt to get through his required reading for school before the New Year, he broke down on the last meters of a marathon reading session. His head bedded on *War and Peace*, he oversleeps the New Year's Eve-party alone on the porch. This *Peanuts* episode does not really help to provide confidence in somebody who already has a negative picture about the height of Russian literature: too fat, too many characters, too depressing" (Zerpner 2004:34). This estimation, penned by a reviewer of a *Russian Literary History*<sup>1</sup> in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, describes the connection between pretension and the hypnotic effect of Russian literature and thus marks a stereotyped perception of Russian literature that has been both very common and, above all, in the last two decades outlived.

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<sup>1</sup> Dutli, Ralph. 2003: Russische Literaturgeschichte 1-4. CD-ROM. Hamburg: Hörbuch Hamburg.

As Stephen Lovell states, reading in the Soviet Union was a myth, "reflected in the Russians' self-image as the 'most active readers in the world'" as well as "the most spiritually profound" (Lovell 2000:21-22). Lovell traces this back to the fact of an anti-commercial ethos concerning reading and book-selling in the Soviet Union: "Soviet society immediately veered off this path of cultural development [i.e., differentiation in print production in Western Europe]. It was not granted the luxury of the gradual, 'organic' broadening of the reading public. (...) In the fifteen years after the Revolution [1918] the ruling party went about the task of creating a mass reading public. At the same time it gradually brought its ideology to bear on all institutions of cultural production and diffusion; in particular, it protected culture against any incursion of market principles. As a result, the growth of differentiation in print culture – which in Western Europe had been the necessary corollary of the mass reading public – was stunted" (Lovell 2000:23). Since the deregulation of the Russian book market in the late 1980s the production and reception of literature in Russia changed so radically that Lovell feels bound to call this development the *Russian reading revolution*. To illustrate the dimensions of this progress, I will give in short some facts about the Russian book market from the end of the 1980s until the end of the 1990s: Before the Perestroika books were goods in short supply. To counteract this shortage in the 1980s books were sold second hand, exchanged, or to be obtained through unofficial channels. In 1986 the rights and independence of publishing houses in Russia were broadened, and from 1987 on non-state publishing houses began to appear. By 1991 the deregulation of the book market was carried out. But what does that mean concerning the production of books? The publishing houses aimed to identify the books most in demand. In the 1980s they tried to overcome the book shortage with a mass publication of Russian classics like Puškin, Lermontov, but also Majakovskij, and other interesting Russian writers for the period of Glasnost' and Perestroika like Anna Achmatova, Osip Mandel'stam, Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Nabokov, and Aleksandr Solženicyn. But this demand decreased in 1991 and detective fiction, textbooks on economics and management, and erotica substituted the traditional genres. First it was translated popular literature from Western authors, but shortly after, Russian fiction gained mass popularity too: detective fiction and thrillers first, later historic and romantic novels, and fantasy (Lovell 2000:77-140).

Looking at this short historic survey only, one can arrive at the conclusion that the development of Russian literature orientates on Western Patterns: First, Western literature is brought in, then Western literature is regarded as a prototype according to which Russian literature is produced now. There is of course something to be said for that, but at the end of the 1990s this literature began to reach the West and was received there as something remarkable. This development started in Germany, where my interest is focused on, with the translation of detective novels: the books of Aleksandra

Marinina first (since 1999), and then, two years later, of Boris Akunin, and Polina Daškova. Since then detective stories in German have been available from more than a dozen Russian writers: Beside Marinina, Akunin, and Daškova, Dar'ja Doncova, Viktorija Platova, Elena Topilskaja, and Tatjana Stepanova can be mentioned. Alongside with the interest in detective novels in the West an interest in Russian fantasy came up. Particularly the novels and the successful film adaptation of Sergej Lukianenko's *Dozory* (film: *Nočnoj dozor* [The Night watch], 2004 and *Dnevnoj dozor* [The day watch], 2006) caused a great deal of public interest. If the term 'world literature' applied to so called trivial or popular novels too, Russian literature would thus have reached this level with its detective novels and fantasy again. But taking into consideration that Western Patterns were first reproduced in Russia, that the genre 'detective novel' itself is by far not new, and that Soviet detective novels didn't play any role in Western reception, the question comes up, why are Russian detective novels successful not only in Russia, but in the West too?

From a general point of view one can say that Russian detective novels are nothing particularly unusual: The cases the detectives have to solve are the common types of crimes, mostly capital crimes like homicide, in some cases kidnapping, thievery and deception. The detectives are often protagonists of not only one book, but of a whole series of stories.<sup>2</sup> They are the typical ingenious criminal high achievers and often engaging outsiders one can find in this genre. The central elements of the plot: crime, investigation, and clarification, and the central characters: victim, detective, and suspect or criminal are in a structural regard not distinguishing Russian detective novels from any other. And like the whole genre Russian detective novels too manipulate the reader insofar as they are made to produce excitement on the part of the reader (Suerbaum 1984:13-14). But according to Ulrich Suerbaum, who concentrated in his study on the genre from its ancestors until contemporary examples, there is another aspect mediated within such literature. Suerbaum describes this aspect as a certain additional information which is mostly related to the protagonists and implies social norms and attitudes of a certain epoch. He characterizes for instance the social embedding of Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle's detective: This character is as scientist who represents a new educational ideal which is science-orientated, and breaks with the classical middle-class ideals concerning education. Besides the captivating plot Canon Doyle thus induces a secondary information: He touches upon a shift in social values (Suerbaum 1984:50-57). And Suerbaum describes another aspect of this phenomenon: The acting characters often belong to the highest or the lowest social group which for the average reader are both dis-

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<sup>2</sup> Marinina's heroine is Anastasija Kamenskaja; Marinina's novels are subtitled 'Anastasija's first, second and so on case'. Akunin created two detective series with two different protagonists.

tant, and made to satisfy curiosity (Suerbaum 1984:62). Additional information in detective stories thus play a double role: First, they reproduce social facts, and secondly the reproduced social facts are only small parts of a much more complex reality. Detective stories are relatively simple narrative constructs. They tend to generate specific effects on the reader and therefore have to reduce social reality to an understandable degree. Still, this has to be interesting enough to attract the interest of the recipient.

Supposing this fact a general characteristic of the detective novel, it should of course be identifiable in Russian detective novels too, and above all, it is likely that such facts in particular are responsible for the attractiveness of Russian detective stories abroad. This assumption is also obvious because Russian detective novels very often deal with facts that seem to belong to present-day life in Russia, like Mafia, corruption, the so called New Russians and so on. Just by looking on the book covers of Russian detective novels in German translations it strikes that Russian 'reality' is focused. One can find certain Moscow buildings like the Kreml, the Red Square, the Metro, the St. Basil's cathedral or other orthodox churches recognizable by the many onion domes. Other covers show stereotyped symbols of Russian culture – or what is considered to be a common Russian attribute, for instance the red star, huge ribbons, the fur cap, the datcha and the Russian cottage.

The first fact, the relation between the genre and the conceptual description of the epoch, seems to be undoubtful: In 2002 the proceedings of a conference held about Aleksandra Marinina were published under the title: *Tvorčestvo Aleksandry Marininoj kak otryženie sovremennoj rossijskoj mental'nosti* [The Work of Aleksandra Marinina as a Reflection of Contemporary Russian Mentality]. But the social embedding of the protagonist described by Suerbaum is realized in the statements of the scholars on different levels: Some of the contributors admire Marinina's fiction on account of her competent description of Russian everyday life, for instance Sara Hägi (Chegi 2002:144), but the contributions of Anatolij Viševskij and Viktorija Petrova have further implications: Viševskij argues that Marinina "treats her readers just as a good and kind teacher would treat her students who need support, advice and guidance" and characterizes her novels as "contemporary 'Bildungsromane' with elements of a soap opera" (Viševskij 2002:152). Petrova on the other hand writes: "В книгах её есть то, что так или иначе было и есть в жизни каждого человека" [In her books there is what in one way or another occurs in the life of every human being.] (Petrova 2002:178). This affirmative reading is no singular case, but can be found in the studies of other scholars too (mainly Schlüchter 2005:7-8, q. v. Menzel 2000:238). But this opinion does not stand undisputed. One of the contributors of the above mentioned proceedings, Marija Černjak, regards Marinina's novels as ironical (Černjak 2002:81). I don't want to discuss the studies of the mentioned scholars in extenso. I just wanted to point out that there is something in the detective stories

– not only in Marinina's – that can serve in different ways: It can be read in an affirmative as well as in a more critical or, to put it differently, multidimensional manner. And it is likely that not the description of the crime, the investigation and the clarification will be the important elements, which provoke different interpretations of the novels, but the modality of secondary information given in these texts.

For my explanation I will concentrate on one writer. Because there already exist some studies about her, I have chosen the just mentioned Aleksandra Marinina. Marinina is one of the most successful authors of detective novels in Russia. Her literary career started at the beginning of the 1990s. Marinina's detective is the policewoman Anastasija Kamenskaja. The novel I chose is *Ne mešajte palaču* [Do Not Interfere with the Executioner], Anastasija's 5th case (1996). In the novel two types of characters exist, basically: on the one hand the hardworking people, living under difficult conditions, and on the other hand a group of people which ignore social norms and values. One of the central characters in the first group is Anastasija, a workaholic, who in her everyday life is confronted with the banalities and difficulties of Russian daily routine and the dirt and smell of public places. She and her husband are rarely getting paid punctually, they have financial worries, and their standard of living is not high. To the second group belong the criminals, who are simultaneously the victims. They either come directly from government circles or are recruited from these circles. In short, the situation can be characterized like that: Some administration officials want to get the government, particularly the president, under control. To reach their goal they recruit a hit squad to kill other administration officials. One of the hired hit men who formerly worked for the KGB sees the relatives of some of his victims on TV, realizes his guilt and starts to kill his principals. But he becomes aware of the pointlessness of his undertaking and finally commits suicide. In the end the cases are clarified – of course also due to Anastasija's intelligence, although she doesn't play the leading part – which results in the imprisonment of some state officials: the chief public prosecutor is arrested, some others resign or are suspended. The plot of this novel is very hard to believe: Instead of an elaborate story the reader is confronted with about a dozen killed characters. The method of killing is very strange: The hit squad is trained in hypnosis. The hired hit men hypnotize their victims either to commit suicide or to kill some other person.<sup>3</sup> The change of one of the hit men is just as strange as everything else and absolutely irreproducible.

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<sup>3</sup> "– А теперь, с это самого момента, – заговорил он медленно, но не меняя интонации, – вы будете слушать только меня. У вас больше не будет собственных мыслей и побуждений, вы будете слышать только мой голос и делать только то, что он прикажет.

The question is, why do people like to read such incomprehensible and far-fetched stuff? Suerbaum asked the same question concerning a detective novel by an American author and explained it with the reduction of some structural elements and the culmination concerning others (Suerbaum 1984:154-160). In Marinina's case there are in my opinion two facts that can be considered in this respect: The quantity of dead people and the confrontation of the two above mentioned groups. In Marinina's novel, a comprehensible plot is substituted by the quantity of murders. The auctorial perspective is focused on the criminals within the hit squad and the description of their 'method', the hypnosis. It appears like a *deus ex machina*, and the detective has of course no chance discovering this riddle; it has to be solved by itself, by the head of the hired hit men who changed his allegiance. Even if Anastasija, Marinina's detective, is characterized by her affectation for logic, in this novel logic cannot be found, and the mere number of action compensates for it. The division of the characters in two groups, belonging to different social spheres, is completed with the one character the reader can identify with: Anastasija Kamenskaja. Her self-representation – realized through internal monologues – shows her as a considering and successful person who is self-reliant, independent, and likes to solve her cases on her own. She is a workaholic with almost no privacy. She is very changeable and can – like an actor, or her great predecessor Sherlock Holmes – play the part of persons be-

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В отличие от Михаила, более щедро наделенного природой, Гарику для работы нужно было произносить формулу целиком, чтобы ввести Изотова в гипнотический транс, и на это ушло некоторое время. На конец он подошел к главному.

– Вы сейчас вернетесь к жене и будете вести себя, как будто ничего не произошло. [...] Вы посидите в ресторане еще полчаса, потом пойдете домой. Если жена предложит вам поймать такси, не соглашайтесь. Вы много выпили, в зале накурено, у вас разболится голова и вы захотите пройтись пешком до метро "Тверская". Пойдете по Тверской, не спеша. Нервничать не надо, все будет хорошо. Когда дойдете к "Пицца-хат", скажете жене, что передумали и хотите поймать машину. Выйдете вместе с ней на проезжую часть и толкнете ее под быстро мчащийся автомобиль... После этого вы выйдете из транса, но про меня и про наш разговор никогда не вспомните и никому не скажете." ['And now from this moment on', he said in an unhasty and monotonous voice, 'you will obey only me. You will not have an own option and will, you will listen only to my voice and do what it commands.' Unlike Michail, who was more talented, Garik had to perform the whole formula to put Izotov into a state of hypnotic trance, and therefore he needed some time. Finally he came to the main point. 'You will return to your wife now and you will act as if everything is alright. [...] You will stay in the restaurant for another half an hour, then you will start back for home. If your wife suggests to take a taxi, you will reject. You will tell her that you drank too much, that the hall has been smoked up, your head was aching and you wanted to walk to the metro station 'Tverskaja'. You will walk to Tverskaja, you will not hasten. Don't panic, everything is going to be alright. When you will get to 'Pizza Hut' tell your wife that you changed your mind and that you now would like to take a cab. You will accede the lane together with your wife and hit her under a fast driving car... After this you will recover from trance, but you will neither remember me nor this conversation and you will never tell somebody about it.] (Marinina 2002:160-161).

longing to completely different social classes. She is beautiful, desirable, but completely unromantic. She likes to pull the strings, but stays in secrecy. She is a kind of alpha female, but also an uncomplicated common girl, who likes to wear jeans and sneakers. Thus she is the negative pattern of the stereotyped Russian woman whose destination is either the hunt for a providing husband, an aim that surely is to be reached by being cute, handsome and presentable; or who has to provide for the whole family including the incapable and mostly drinking husband. But even though some scholars like to certify Marinina feminist intentions,<sup>4</sup> one must state that Anastasija simply fulfills a male role. She personalizes the reversal of commonplaces and thus confirms established stereotypes indirectly. Detective novels are not the place for consideration about society. If social facts are represented in detective novels, one must get straight that they are rather unconsidered attitudes made to affect the reader. Marinina's detective stories are of course no 'Bildungsromane' and if there is a recipient – even a scholar – who thinks Marinina describes "moral and psychological problems which all of us have to face in our life" it should be said that this person's reading is very naïve.

But how do detective novels represent social facts? And how is Marinina's novel to be interpreted? As I already pointed out, Marinina's detective, Anastasija Kamenskaja, is a stereotyped character, even though one must acknowledge that the cliché Marinina follows here is not typical. This description seems to be inconsistent, but actually the ambiguity is the clue: It is exactly this aspect that enables the reader to identify with the protagonist: Anastasija is a woman acting like a man. Especially female readers can find a role model in Anastasija, even if they cannot follow her example – and of course they don't have to, because their identification happens in a fictional world (q. v. Wolf 1993:12). Even Anastasija's imperfections, her addiction to coffee and cigarettes, her inability to get up in the morning easily and her difficulties to cope with everyday problems from which she has to be relieved by her husband make her more human and more likeable. The constellation we can find in the novel is as follows: There is a group of, let's say, common people, with ordinary everyday problems that seem to be typical for Russian reality, and another group, consisting of people living on the other side of this reality, beyond the norms and values of common people: state officials and their hit squads. The first group is mainly represented by Anastasija, the friendly alpha female that can solve everything. A great part of the second group will die during the course of the novel and, as is suggested already in

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast to these positions Irina Savkina shows that the gender thematic in critical articles dealing with the literary work of Marinina is represented as "minor, insignificant, and marginal" (Savkina 2002:18); Leonid Heller compares Marinina a differentiated view on the novels of Marinina's with that of other Russian female writers and comes to the conclusion that in Marinina's novels the role of the woman is a traditional one (Geller 2002:63).

the title *Ne mešajte palaču*, they do not die by accident but are executed, punished for what they did to others. But the punishment is not only the retribution for a specific guilt, it is also the punishment for the affiliation to a certain social group, a group which ignores social ethics and norms. Marinina does not go so far as to abolish the whole group. The system as such is untouched, but it must be a greater quantity of this category that the virtual society in the novel has to get rid of. At the end, Marinina points out that changes occur within the administration. Thus she holds out the prospect of a better life and stages at least a potentially happy ending. This conciliatory ending fortifies given structures as much as it is a kind of gratification for the common people who read the novel: The bad are punished and the recipient himself, identifying via Anastasija with the common people of the novel, is the moral winner.

To reach a conclusion I will look back to the West, to the reception of Marinina's novels in Germany. Concerning the presented novel the question comes up, why should something antiquated like a murder through hypnosis which is already common in connection with Sherlock Holmes<sup>5</sup> be interesting for a public, for whom detective novels have uninterruptedly been available? At the beginning of my paper I assumed that the simplistic and stereotyped social facts, given in the novels could be responsible for the attractiveness of Russian detective stories abroad. This supposition would be obvious if the represented pseudo-reality had two qualities: similarity and foreignness. To quicken interests, the fictional world must be at the same time recognizable, effortlessly understandable, but also strange. Such a perception is described by Sara Hägi who compares some of Marinina's novels with their adaptations for a German radio station. The "making of a two-hour radio play from a 300-page novel involved not only shortening and adjusting it to a different medium but also adding and changing certain cultural aspects. The analysis of the adaptation and its comparison with its source, the novel, show that the changes made can be treated either as *assimilation* (i. e., they make the text more familiar to a German listener), or as *dissimilation* (i. e., they emphasize the foreignness of the Russian setting)" (Chegi 2002:144).

Reduction of complexity to a few qualities or merely one helps the individual comprehend his environment, deal with a mass of information and cope with his life. In communicating the consistency of a certain system of norms and values to the individual, stereotypes guarantee self-protection and identity, and have a psychological function which explains their attractiveness and the attractiveness of artifacts dealing with them.

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<sup>5</sup> Hypnosis is part of the riddle in a Sherlock Holmes-motion picture not based on a novel of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*The Woman in Green*, USA 1945, direction: Roy William Neill).



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## RUSKA LITERATURA NA "SVJETSKOJ RAZINI": RUSKI DETEKTIVSKI ROMAN POSLIJE 1990.

### SAŽETAK

U Rusiji su se u devedesetim godinama dvadesetoga stoljeća tržište knjiga te proizvodnja i recepcija literature radikalno promijenili, u skladu sa zapadnjačkim obrascima. Tu je transformaciju većina, pa čak i stručna javnost, ocijenila pravom emancipacijom. No za razliku od avangardne postmodernističke literature, koja uvažava klišeje i stereotipe te ih ironično izvrcē, popularna fikcija pruža nedvosmislene elemente za identifikaciju i s pozitivnim i s negativnim. Analiza jednog od kriminalističkih romana Aleksandre Marinine pokazuje da pretpostavljene oslobađajuće implikacije, kao što su promjena uloge žene, razjašnjenje slučaja povezanog s političkim intrigama i kažnjavanje krivaca, u društvu koje prilično podsjeća na okolnosti u suvremenoj Rusiji, nisu dane radi izlaganja edukativnih ideja. One su prije svega iskorištene za povećanje empatije čitatelja prema protagonistima romana. Promjene koje se dogode u vlasti, a koje Marinina spominje na kraju romana, dovode ipak do potencijalnog *hepienda*. Taj pomirljivi kraj ojačava zadane strukture i funkcije kao zadovoljštinu čitatelju koji se identificirao s moralno ispravnim karakterima pa se stoga može osjećati u pravu.

Ključne riječi: ruska literatura; devedesete; redukcija društvene kompleksnosti u detektivskim romanima; afirmativna recepcija