



Valentyn Terlec'kyj: Alcohol, Rock 'n Roll, Love

Generation next: Pop-Literature in Ukraine

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The paper will take a closer look at "how literature goes pop" in Ukraine (some indication gives the book cover above, Sex n' drugs n' rock n' roll), and by doing this we may find an answer to the question raised by Oleksandra Haj in her article in "Knyzhnyk reviu":

"The generation born after 1970 is in need of a Pop-Literature [поп-література] in an appropriate design. The question whether contemporary young Ukrainian prose exists and what we are supposed to read when the pioneering figures from the 1990s are going to retire because of a lack of ideas or die off like the dinosaurs - this question we need to start asking today."

(Oleksandra Haj www.reviev.kiev.ua/periodicals.shtm?id=177 (accessed 24.02.08))





The paper is divided into three parts, first we will look at Pop-Literature as a multi-layered narration, second, we will move to Pop-Literature as a brand of entertainment industry, and third, I will present a more in-depth definition of Ukrainian Pop-Literature. In Central Eastern Europe and in Eastern Europe, a new generation of young, often very young authors are starting to raise their profile. Stylistically influenced by pop art, pop music, video clips and consumer culture in general, they address the tension between mass culture, traditional/national culture and sub-cultural identities. In this process they benefit from the commercialization of sub-culture.

At the beginning of Svytlana Pyrkalo's novel *Green Margarita*, an ironic view of consumer culture is presented through use of a brand signifying the new era - what Pepsi symbolised in Viktor Pelevins *Generation P*, is represented in this narrative through a cheeseburger:

*I'm walking down the street chewing.
Do you want to know what I am chewing?
I'm chewing a cheeseburger. In my paper bag I have another
cheeseburger. The paradox of our existence includes the following:
Two ordinary cheeseburgers cost - at least at the moment - less than
a double cheeseburger. But then, what sense does it make
to buy a double cheeseburger? Who came up
with this? But first things first.*

*Я йду по вулиці і жую.
Що я жую, ви хочете знати?
Жую я чізбургер. А у паперовому пакуночку в
мене ще один чізбургер.
Дарадокси нашого життя включають і такий: два
одинарні чізбургери — принаймні зараз це так —
кошують куди менше, ніж один подвійний. Який
сєнс після цього купувати подвійні чізбургери?
Кому це може спасти на думку?
Але все по порядку¹*

¹ Svitlana Pyrkalo, *Zelena Marharyta*, Kyjiv 2001, pg. 15.

Pop-Literature as multi-layered narration

The quotation marks the beginning of the - on my opinion - first Ukrainian pop novel *Green Margarita*, published in 2001. The beginning of the novel written in lines that form the shape of a cheeseburger can be interpreted as a symbolic beginning of a new era in Eastern Europe. This new era goes hand in hand with a new self-perception and identity mainly of the younger generation. This generation adapts images and symbols of Western consumer societies, which is already demonstrated by the title *Green Margarita*, a variation of the Margarita cocktail.

The concept of a Europe based on global Westernization differs from the term "Central Europe" used by renowned representatives of authors and intellectuals now in their late forties: Jurij Andrukhovych, Mykola Rjabchuk and Oksana Zabuzhko for example create in their literary texts and essays a cultural model for Ukraine, which refers to the concept of Central Europe in the essays of Milan Kundera and Czeslaw Milosz:

"(...) a kind of geographic vision, a parallel reality, which used to be popular yesterday, but now is barely brought up on intellectual banquets - Central Europe. Not Europe as such, not its decline, but its centre, its East to be more accurate - as Europe's centre is paradoxically located in the Eastern part of the continent. Central Europe, a heritage of Kundera, Milosz and Konrád, an odd cocktail made of ideas, emotions, mystifications."²

This model can be differentiated from the ideas of those Ukrainian intellectuals, who propagate an isolationist national culture in a traditional and purist way. In their view, literature and writers have the duty to promote national and social interests - what *mutatis mutandis* also applies for other Eastern European societies, such as recently demands that youth organizations close to Putin make on literature and its authors.

Authors, who hold a traditionalistic view, have often already been published in Soviet times. Freed from the demands of Soviet party policy, they are now able to concentrate on a neo-populistic Ukrainisation of Ukrainian culture.

In texts written by the younger and most recent generation, linguistic and visual signs of a global and westernized consumer culture (e.g. cheeseburger) replace the signs and metaphors connected with an imaginary Central European or a national Ukrainian culture. The "cheeseburger-quotation" shouldn't be interpreted as a non-critical agreement of the "generation next", but as an ironic agreement with the global world of consumer culture. Therefore, the cheeseburger carries a double meaning as a linguistic-visual sign. Double meanings and multi-layered text can be found in almost all novels of Pop-Literature, which

² Jurij Andrukhovych, *Час і місце, або Моя остання територія*, in: *Дезорієнтація на місцевості*. І.-Франківськ 1999, pg. 120.

on the one hand seem to take an affirmative position towards the global world of commerce, but on the other hand by exaggerating the affirmation, it simultaneously creates an ironic distance within the same text. So, the narration is held in suspense, an abeyance. The cheeseburger figures as an emblematic beginning in a novel about the everyday life of young people; it figures as a sign of western consumption and the desire for the western way of life (the greatest wish of the female hero being - *I want to study in the "country of the cheeseburger"*).

But the cheeseburger is ambiguous, is visualized by the arrangement of the lines, its form is made visible. This underlines its constructed, symbolic character explicitly. In addition, the narrator deconstructs this image from the inside. The narrator's viewpoint is voiced not from the world outside the cheeseburger, but he is a part of it, he virtually speaks from within. This irony is carried to extremes, when the narrator reflects upon the value of a double cheeseburger, ponders on the paradox of life, considers the question of meaning and value. As illustrated, a cheeseburger can be interpreted in Pop-Literature as a complex symbol. With ironic distance and its implicit subversive potential, Ukrainian Pop-Literature forms a part of European-American Pop-Literature and can be compared to well-known texts of this genre such as *High fidelity* or *About a boy* by Nick Hornby.

Finally, the last sentence the quotation "First things first" (*Але все по порядку*) announces the beginning of a traditional first-person narrative and finishes the visual literary experiment for the time being, turning towards topics "easier to digest" and at the same time, towards literature easier to sell.

It is now possible to give a first description of Pop-Literature:

It is literature, which addresses the values and behaviour of mass culture and everyday culture, and by adopting it puts into question the modernist perception of culture. Pop-Literature has become a brand within the entertainment industry, but keeps ironic distance from the world of commerce.

Pop literature as a brand of entertainment

Since the mid-1980s, economy has absorbed the critical potential of Pop-Literature through marketing strategies. Many sub-cultures that once signalled protest or dissociation from mainstream, quickly came into fashion and have become trendy as a result of marketing promotions. The consciousness of being part of a commercial pluralism and being merchandised can also be found in texts by authors of the younger generation in East Central Europe and Eastern Europe. For known historical reasons, a sense of the dangers of

"instrumentalising" literature is well developed in these countries. Whereas the writings of the earlier generation of Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko reflect and reconstruct ideology and meta-narratives of the past, the younger generation mainly adopt a self-deprecating distance between their texts and positions of social, political and cultural identity. In a globalised world cultural values seem to be commodities, which can be marketed, consumed and then replaced at any time. An example, which illustrates this, is to be found in Serhij Zhadans novel *big mak*, where the first-person narrator describes the planning of a pub tour in Vienna (the title of the novel *big mak* is ambiguous. It refers not only to fast food culture, but also to a famous jazz musician, thereby making the title itself an ironic allusion):

Зійшовши ввечері важкого суботнього дня з палуби на берег, перейнявшись ідею, скажімо, набратися і не оминати жодного більш-менш гідного закладу, ти раптом виявляєш, що можливостей не так уже й багато – або запхатися у який-небудь паб і слухати ірландське народне караоке, або запхатися у який-небудь бар, де бувають росіяни, і слухати – прости господи – емігрантський шансон, чи – чого гірше – коматозну калінку-малінку, або, врешті, знайти що-небудь місцеве і просто обригатися від самого духу старої-доброї Дунайської імперії, який все ніяк не вивітриться з її кав'ярень і тютюнових крамничок. Отже, треба добре подумати, перш ніж на щось зважитися у цьому місті, де вже котре десятиліття остаточну перемогу святкують японські брокери і перські емігранти, радості тут мало, і її ретельно дозує якийсь апостол, відповідальний за культмасовий сектор в об'єднаній Європі.³

When at the end of a stormy Saturday, I was finally back on dry land, I thought about hitting the road without missing one of the local pubs, when I suddenly realised that the choice was not that great - either I could booze-up in a bar, showered by Irish folk karaoke, or I could booze-up in a tavern, where Russians lounge around and - terrible thought! - being washed with emigrant chansons or - Yuk! - with kitsch songs in kalinka-malinka style, or finally, something local and simply puke because of the stink of the good old Danube monarchy one can never escape even with open windows. That means think carefully before making a decision in a town where Japanese brokers and Persian immigrants are celebrating ultimate victory for decades, exuberance is rare and an apostle responsible for the EU mass culture measures the dosis.

³ Serhij Zhadan, *big mak*, Kyiv 2003, pp.74-74.

This quote illustrates the contingency of cultural activities including the mainstream and sub-cultures polished by marketing strategies. This also concerns the texts of Pop-Literature. Production and merchandise not only affects Pop-Literature, but also its authors. For almost two decades, the merging of pop literature and life style with the adoption of presentation strategies of the media have become obvious. It seems as if an appealing self-presentation/self-dramatisation of the author is just as relevant for the success of a book as the presentation of the novel. This mainly concerns author's readings, where authors are presented like pop stars, but also the presentation of the literary scene in general. Of course, self-presentation, which brings with it a high degree of publicity has been evident during other periods, especially during the classical avant-garde era, but the latter type of self-presentation implicated an ideology, which the authors embodied in their everyday life - more or less successfully and consequently.

By contrast, the self-presentation of contemporary pop authors deals with marketing strategies generated by the advertising and music industries, where an artists consciously assimilates their impact from the outset.

In Ukraine book covers from Irena Karpa, Ljubko Deresh and others show the influence of these marketing strategies. Another example is the three-week "Punk-Pop-Tour" of Serhij Zhadan and Irena Karpa through Ukraine in September 2004, when both marketed and sold their latest books very successfully. Pop authors often raise the topic of the commercial aspect of publication itself, often with a good deal of self-mockery.

The examples of Karpa or Pyrkalo also present a parallel in the education and careers of pop authors: many have a journalistic background, master more or less perfectly the literary tools of trade, work or have been working for print media, TV or radio stations and some of them are also very successful musicians. The most famous example is to be seen again in Irena Karpa, the face of Ukrainian MTV, also known for her band Faktychno samy (now Quarpa), Svitlana Pyrkalo also works as a journalist successfully (for the Ukrainian program of the BBC), the same goes for Larysa Denysenko. This trend can be observed for pop authors in other countries too, but does not necessarily imply a coerciveness.

Music and lyrics play an important inter-textual role in contemporary Pop-Literature. At first sight, parallels between the music, lyrics and youth sub-cultures of the 1960-1980 generation seem to exist in terms of style and content (known as revival/retro), but the difference is rooted in the non-formulation of explicit criticism on the social and cultural mainstream. They do not want to distance themselves. They are part of a mainstream, a mainstream that has become pluralistic and open for margin and sub-cultural phenomena. Songs and lyrics of former rebels like the Rolling Stones or Jim Morrison have lost their

critical potential and serve as an aesthetic performance, comparable with an intellectual game with patterns of classical literary legacy in postmodern texts. One can find both original and sometimes fictitious quotations from lyrics and literature. They can also form an important element of novel composition, such as in *Depesh Mod*, a successful novel by the probably most interesting contemporary Ukrainian author, Serhij Zhadan. Another felicitous example is the novel *Kult*, written by Ljubko Deresh. Again the novel title (as in Pyrakalo's *Zelena Marharita* or in Zhadan's *big mak*) contains double-meaning, here it is an expression from youth slang. Indeed, the book caused a hype in Ukraine, and even in translation, the book became 'Kult'/ cult.

Besides all international features of Pop-Literature Ukrainian Pop-Literature differs in terms of its language momentum and has a special socio-cultural aspect due to the long lasting stated or subtle restrictions against Ukrainian language and literature. Therefore the use of colloquial Ukrainian has social and cultural dimension. At the end of the eighties Andrukhovych and others started reinventing the Ukrainian language and formed among other things the conditions for the breakthrough of Ukrainian as an updated colloquial language. Authors like Karpa, Deresh and others enrich the standard language by breaking with the taboos of traditional language, literary and social values, eg. they use different slang lexis and surzhyk (the Ukrainian-Russian language mix). With their individual speech and youthful idiom they build up a convincing, attractive Ukrainian language which is more than just the language of Shevchenko, folksongs and "dumy"; rather it becomes a living, dynamic language and has potential to replace step by step Russian between young urban speakers.

Against a background of these characteristics we can modify our preliminary description of Ukrainian Pop-Literature and present a more in-depth definition:

It is literature, which adopts consumer culture and pop art and - against the background of postmodern condition - is characterized by the pluralism of values. The presentation of cultural and sub-cultural patterns is staged in a setting of youth-related topics in the broadest sense (e.g. school, university, friendship, sex, drug and alcohol abuse, parties, music). This implies a tendency to reject other peer identities/groups and other generations. But this differentiation can't be equated with a social "rebellion". Pop-Literature hence evolved from a rebellious literature, denying common literary, linguistic and social values/norms in favour of a brand of entertainment industry. In terms of language use, Pop-Literature is presented in a stylised way using typical colloquial speech with an element of

slang and other informal language.