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Understanding Explosion: The Case of the Russian Dandy

Now that the contextualisation and re-evaluation of Jurij Mihailovič Lotman's (1922–1993) semiotic cultural theory has finally begun (see Schönle 2006 and Andrews 2003, for example), it is possible to start making preliminary conclusions. In his last book *Culture and Explosion (Kul'tura i vzryv, 1992)* Lotman synthesized his theory (cf. Delcheva & Vlasov 1996, 148) by concentrating on two features of historical cultural progress: gradual (predictable) and explosive (unpredictable) processes. The gradual processes of motivated predictability in culture meant for him something that is obvious, with certainty understood and inescapably received by consumers – it meant processuality, continuity and the logical evolution of consistency (Lotman 1992, 17–18). Against the background of Lotman's general theory, these gradual processes should be understood as neutral communication from the point of view of cultural history, since Lotman – following M. Bakhtin's example and agreeing with Russian cultural theory in general – was interested in cultural formations that would revolt against norms, even against understanding. This was obvious in his theory of the semiosphere, where he described the asymmetry of semiotic space as an altering dialogue and interaction between weakly structured dynamic peripheries and strongly structured static centres (Lotman 1990, 127–130). In his latest work, already Post-Structuralist in nature, he was looking for a general theory opposed to neutral, accepted and understood communication in culture – he suggested the category of explosions, unexpected eschatological turnovers in culture, which are able to influence the complete semiotic space of a certain culture. Based on the definition of these two different cultural processes, Lotman (1992, 266–270) would define cultural formations as either binary or ternary, categorizing Russian culture as a binary system and something opposed to the Western European system of ternary structures. This conclusion, however, was already evident on the basis of his and Boris Uspenskii's classical work on the dual models of medieval Russian culture and its symbolic structure (Lotman & Uspenskii 1977). Therefore, it is reasonable to

read *Culture and Explosion* as a synthesis of Lotman's semiotics of culture, notwithstanding the fragmentary and, in places, arbitrary structure of the book.

The dynamic processes of culture are in a complex antithetic dialogue with the static processes, and this asymmetric dialogue – typical of semiospherical processes – is one of the presuppositions for cultural and intellectual activity in a semiotic understanding of human societies. In the transition to a new culture (from the individual to the level of general cultural formations), the unpredictability of the explosive processes is hardly ever the only visible or noticeable dimension, because we can decipher simultaneous predictable processes at different levels of the culture. In technological imagination a new phenomenon – an innovation – is the realization of something predictable, expected. A new cell phone from Nokia is supposed to answer consumers' expectations; at the same time as in science and art, new phenomena are realizations of something unexpected. The appearance of a technological innovation thus means a gradual and predictable process of understanding, which we cannot find in the case of artistic or scientific innovation. As a matter of fact, the case is the opposite with artistic phenomena. A genuine artistic innovation is always an explosion, which is why artistic and technological innovations produce a complex semiotic combination if considered in relation to each other, and even more complex if considered in relation to scientific innovation. The semiotic processes of understanding differ crucially between these phenomena. Imitations, however, as well as translations and adaptations of the genuine innovation (an artistic or cultural text, for example), always represent a more predictable and gradual process. In fact, the ability of the audience to understand the best of Aki Kaurismäki's or Lars von Trier's films, or Vladimir Sorokin's prose, for example, requires an inevitable cooling down of the explosive process. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these works would not be celebrated by critics, scholars or cultural institutions. In fact, they should be, since in the case of a cultural text this process of cooling down produces new phenomena which are crucial for the audience's correct understanding, such as translations, criticism, adaptations, studies and other kinds of imitations (meta-texts) of the original, authentically genuine and innovative text. In other words, a new cultural text needs to become predictable in order for readers to understand it, but the newest cell phone needs nothing but instructions written in the language of the consumer. After the explosion has changed into a more gradual process, people are able to decipher certain causalities behind it, processes leading to it. This is the case with wider cultural, historical and even political explosions as well as revolutionary phenomena. For contemporaries they are eschatological, but for future generations they are understandable phenomena with their own laws of causality. Suddenly something that had seemingly happened by chance, unexpectedly,

appears as the only possible choice. The unpredictability becomes replaced by predictable regularity.

For instance, if we consider the language of fashion in culture, we are dealing with a grammar which is made to break all the norms. Fashion is a language that is meant to test the borders between what is allowed and what is prohibited in the culture. This is why it can be regarded as a sign system, where the unpredictable processes dominate the field. Lotman (1992, 207) even calls it a catalyst and a metronome, providing a beat to the evolution of several different cultural languages. The regular change of fashion guarantees the continuum of dynamic, explosive processes in the culture. Fashion could be defined as a generator of cultural explosions. In the case of fashion, misunderstandings become normative instead of being anomalies, since the speaker of the language, the fashion maker, is – for the audience gathered around the catwalk, for example – a sender of unpredictable and unexpected information. In fact, the receiver of these messages is not supposed to understand, but rather to become confused in his or her efforts to understand the messages.

As a specific phenomenon in the language of fashion I shall, still following Lotman's (1994) path, turn to the question of *dandyism* in culture. The very category of "dandy" is dependent on the difference between the genuine dandy and the imitator. The genuine dandy represents an explosion, a breaking down of the existing grammar of fashion and a creation of a new language, whereas his imitators represent more structured phenomena carrying less explosive potential – they are merely adaptations of the genuine explosive process, being gradual and predictable. In fact, they represent the type of fashion we, the consumers, usually wear. The path of a garment from the catwalk to regular shopping centre represents a process of gradual understanding, where the unpredictable turns predictable. This is why the imitators often appear to audiences as if they were genuine dandies, i.e. as something opposite to the dominating tendencies in fashion and society. A dandy is at the same time elitist and non-elitist – the language of the behaviour of a genuine dandy should always be misunderstood by the audience, since without a confused audience a dandy does not exist. Therefore, a dandy is always shadowed by a fear of being left unnoticed, which is an essential part of the dandy's grammar.

The category of the dandy is essentially related to the category of the avant-garde, even though in the Russian avant-garde of the early 20th century, for example, there are not many dandies for cultural history to reconstruct (see Vainštejn 2005). An avant-garde artist, as any dandy in the history of culture, stresses his or her own role as the first representative of the new language (movement, tendency, "ism" etc.) in the culture, and is a pioneer, a founder. The artist's role is considered exceptional in both juxtaposing systems, in the old and in the new. In relation to the Russian avant-

garde, the category of dandyism should be considered as an explosive phenomenon, a part of a highly conflictual – catachrestic, according to Igor Smirnov (1986) – worldview.

The Russian Imaginists (1918–1928) represent a group of bohemian hooligans, who appeared somewhat dominant in Moscow literary circles during the post-revolutionary transition period. They were privileged to have extraordinary relationships with the Bolsheviks, which made it possible for them to publish their poetry, organize or establish literary cafés, journals, bookshops, a film theatre etc. during the years of civil war, paper shortage, famine and cannibalism. Already in this sense they represented an explosive conflict in the new society. I shall focus on the case of Anatolij Mariengof (1897–1962), the most obvious dandy among the Russian Imaginists according to memoirs and other evidence from his contemporaries. The famous director Vsevolod Meyerhold even called him “the last dandy of the republic” (see Mariengof 1990, 155), although Mariengof himself responded to this definition with a laconic understatement: “this dandy had four handkerchiefs and two shirts – both of them French silk, of course”. Nevertheless, the descriptions of contemporaries tend to emphasize Mariengof’s visibility, astonishing guise as well as his detailed style of everyday life (cf. Olesha 1974, 447). His appearance is closely related to a conscious disconnection from the surrounding reality – post-revolutionary Moscow during the hard years of military communism. In my earlier dissertation (Huttunen 2007) I examined Mariengof’s dandyism as part of the Imaginists’ social programme of scandals and bohemian hooliganism. Here I shall focus merely on certain details of the dandy Mariengof’s biography and oeuvre from the point of view of the process of understanding, that is of his audience, the readers of his guises.

Mariengof moved to Moscow from the city of Penza in 1918. In Moscow he acquainted himself with Vadim Šeršenevič and Sergej Esenin, and with these comrades-in-arms he would create the first Imaginist *Declaration* in 1918, which was published in the newspaper *Sovetskaja strana* in Voronež. However, from the very beginning of their collaboration even Mariengof’s closest colleagues and opponents noticed him being an Imaginist par excellence. This is significant in the context of the fact that he had been practicing his poetry of astonishing metaphors already in Penza during the 1910s. Although the history of the Russian avant-garde ignores his pre-Imaginist oeuvre and biography, it is not only a curiosity that in Penza Mariengof attracted around himself an interesting group of poets and artists. They published a literary journal called *Komediant*, which was accused in the local press of decadence in the spirit of the great dandy Oscar Wilde. It is worth mentioning that the two famous dandies – Oscar Wilde and his illustrator Aubrey Beardsley – influenced immensely the Imaginist Mariengof, including his dandyism, poetry, prose and theory of radical aestheticism. This

last aspect of his oeuvre becomes apparent in the years of the Imaginist literary journal *Gostinica dlja putešestvujuščih v prekrasnom* (The Hotel for Travelers in the Beautiful). Mariengof was the chief editor of the journal, which appeared in only four volumes during the years 1922–1924.

The Imaginist dandy, Mariengof, manifests his controversiality and independence from the surrounding culture, revolts against the dominating tendencies of fashion and disconnects from any of the current cultural systems. He represents a living declaration against any existing fashion in culture. At the same time he is a self-made man. His predecessors, the representatives of the most contemporary fashion in pre- and post-revolutionary Russia, the Cubo-Futurists (Vladimir Majakovskij, Velimir Hlebnikov, Aleksej Kručënyh), used to emphasize their independence from F. T. Marinetti's Italian Futurism, though they remained indebted to Marinetti's manifestos, which were translated into Russian very quickly after their appearance in Italy in 1909. For the Imaginist dandy, the independent birth of Russian Imaginism without a connection to Ezra Pound's Imagism, or Vorticism, would be just as important, even though the connection with Pound's or T. E. Hulme's ideas of composing poetry in the shape of image catalogues, or metaphoric chains, was obvious.

In his Imaginism Mariengof emphasized the idea of bringing together conflicting elements (of purity and impurity) within a metaphor or between metaphors. This principle became an obsession in his Imaginist poetry and prose – nothing beautiful was described without its repulsive, contaminated counterpart. Even if he applies lyrical depictions of love scenes in his poems, they are systematically confronted by sadomasochistic episodes or messy violence. Should the beloved obtain a romantic detailed description, this is deconstructed in violent detail. This can clearly be seen in Mariengof's poem from 1916, where love is juxtaposed with the help of Biblical allusions (beheadings) with the imagery of violent revolution:

*Из сердца в ладонях
Несу любовь.
Ее возьми –
Как голову Иоканаана,
Как голову Олоферна...
Она мне, как революции – новь,
Как нож гильотины –
Марату,
Как Еве – змий.
Она мне как правоверному –
Стих
Корана,
Как, за Распятого,*

*Иуде – осины
Сук...
Всего кладу себя на огонь
Уст твоих
На лилии рук.*

(Mariengof 2002, 33)

Love is juxtaposed with revolution, and this is done with the help of the intertextual motives of beheading. This way the reader is led to find the key subtext of the poem, which serves as a motivation for certain fragments present in the current text. This subtext appears to be Oscar Wilde's famous play *Salomé* (1892), which was released from censorship in Russia in the second half of the 1910s and was interpreted as a justification of the bloody violence that occurred during the "terror of the masses" (Bershtein 2005, 44–48). This violent aspect of the revolution seems to have been of great importance for Mariengof, since he was searching for a detailed description of the immediate events related to it and was even given the nickname "meat grinder" by critics and colleagues.

Oscar Wilde's text is explicitly present in these lines describing the lyrical hero's love "Её возьми – / Как голову Иоканаана" ("You take it – / like the head of Jokanaan"). Nevertheless, considering the Imaginist composition of the poem, the beheadings seem to refer to Aubrey Beardsley's highly independent illustrations to Wilde's play, since the last lines of the poem could not otherwise be understood in this context. The lines "Всего кладу себя на огонь / Уст твоих / На лилии рук" ("I lay myself completely in the flame / of your lips / on the lilies of your hands") surprisingly contain the only metaphor of the poem, since all the other images are similes. The use of concrete and laconic similes is very typical of Mariengof and the Imaginists, who cultivated the juxtaposition of concrete with concrete in their imagery, in the spirit of the Futurists. "The lilies of your hands" would possibly be considered too vague or commonplace to have any metaphorical potential (referring to whiteness and transparency), if not for the juxtaposition of the heads of John the Baptist and Holofernes (from the Old Testament's Book of Judith). A beheading described by "in the palms of my hands", as well as "on the lilies of your hands" represents a specific visual and Biblical motif. Interpreted as such, the likely subtext is Beardsley's *The Climax* (1893), representing Salomé kissing John the Baptist's head.



Aubrey Beardsley. The Climax (1893). An illustration to Oscar Wilde's play Salomé (1892).

In the history of art the head of Holofernes is usually presented as a trophy, carried dangling by its hair (in the works of A. Mantegna [1495], C. Allori [1613], C. Saraceni [1615], M. Stanzione [1630s] etc.), whereas John the Baptist's head is carried on a silver plate. In his illustrations to Wilde, Beardsley referred to both of these traditions, which explains their simultaneous appearance in Mariengof's poem also. Usually these motives are mixed in the same way as the figures of Salomé and Judith in the history of literature and art. Gustav Klimt's two paintings, *Judith I* and *Judith II*, are famous, for example. The latter was generally renamed *Salomé* after the artist's death. The description "on the lilies of your hands" is to be found in Beardsley's *The Climax*, which describes Salomé's passionate love towards John the Baptist's head – his body, on the contrary, is repulsive to her. In

Wilde's text this episode of intimate love is composed with the help of similes and images referring to King Solomon's poems from *The Song of Songs*. It is worth mentioning here that the Imaginists went as far as declaring King Solomon "the first Imaginist" (Šeršenevič 2000, 199). These similes represent a most important source for Mariengof in his poems. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing Wilde's text with Beardsley's illustration and considering both the Old and New Testament as their sources, the final metaphor ought to be read as a symbol of Jesus Christ himself. It is a revolutionary (and contradictory, of course), but synthetic image of a Red Christ in a violent poem, even before Aleksandr Blok, whose oeuvre Mariengof adored, wrote his legendary revolutionary poem *Twelve (Dvenadcat'*, January 1918). The image of Christ is preceded by the motif of Judas Iscariot's betrayal. The image is thus expressed in the text explicitly, but, on the other hand, it becomes evident from a quotation of John the Baptist's speech in Wilde's *Salomé*: "After me shall come another mightier than I. I am not worthy so much as to unloose the latchet of his shoes. When he cometh the solitary places shall be glad. They shall blossom like the rose (Пустыня возликует. Она расцветет, как лилия)" (Uajl'd 1908, 42). In this episode Wilde intertextually combines the motif of John the Baptist from the New Testament to the prophecy from the Book of Isaiah (35: 1) in the Old Testament, which becomes part of John the Baptist's speech. According to the Gospel of John (1: 23), John the Baptist speaks in the words of Isaiah, and Wilde only explicates this by putting these words into one sentence, since the key phrase for us ("расцветет, как лилия") is to be found in Isaiah only. "On the lilies of your hands" refers, therefore, not only to the way Salomé is holding the head of John the Baptist, but also to the flower which arises from John the Baptist's blood in the picture. And this flower symbolizes revolutionary Christ appearing after the prophet, and his purity as the Son of God.

Mariengof underlines the conflict of purity and impurity in his metaphoric language, as well as his own conflict, his disconnection from the surrounding reality, his orphanage and being rootless. Mariengof's repetitive motives in the works of the second half of the 1910s include the alienation of the lyrical hero in the revolutionary city; he becomes juxtaposed even with an aborted embryo deserted by the city itself. In their poems of the 1920s the Imaginists Mariengof and Esenin play with the idea of being a foreigner (alien) in their own country. During the years 1922–1924 this motif is often repeated in their poetic dialogue. Their *épatage* included wearing top-hats in the streets of Moscow and Petrograd, while the people were suffering from the hard times of military communism. Through this kind of theatre they ensured the attention of both the audience and the soviet officials. The conscious disconnection from the surrounding reality was supposed to confuse the minds of their viewers, since the fear of being left un-

noticed became a rule for Mariengof. For him, typical was alienation from the immediate surroundings, society or family (which produced a social catachresis), from the city (spatial catachresis), from the nationality or language (ethno-linguistic catachresis), from his own literary work (textual catachresis), and even from himself (existential catachresis). Sexual alienation, revolt against the dominating tendencies, superficial homoerotic simulation – all these aspects of alienation were of importance in Mariengof's Imaginist theatre of life, which strived for a catachrestic explosion in the context of Russian avant-garde poetry.

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