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Quixotic Imagery in Ideological Mythmaking

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Abstract

Each ideology has its own system of symbolic representation, which contributes to establishing hegemonies in the minds of human beings in the struggle with other ideologies. Literary imagery is an important part of ideological mythmaking. It provides creators of ideologies with lists of authors, citations, and characters of famous works of verbal art, which become icons of certain political, religious, esthetical values, beliefs, and principles. However, the semiotic mechanism of converting literary imagery into ideological myths is not clear. To address this question this paper focuses on the case of Don Quixote, as Cervantes' protagonist has become the front man of numerous ideologies that contradict each other.

Key Words: ideology, ideological mythmaking, archetype, word-progenitor, quixotic discourse, Romantic Don Quixote.



Introduction

The interaction of literature and ideology is an extremely complex issue, which has many dimensions: the participation of a work of verbal art in politics, nation-building, and all kinds of social transformation; the reflection of a philosophical, religious, and political ideology of a certain author in his books; the difference between ideology and literature, and many others. In this paper I will focus on literature as a source of symbolic aspects of ideologies. By ideologies I understand different ways of representing “socially shared but competing philosophies of life and how it should be lived (and how society should be governed).”¹ In order to look convincing and to become a winner in the struggle for hegemony, any ideology uses popular imagery, cultural icons that symbolize certain values, principals, and ideas. These imageries come from works of art and, of course, from works of literature, especially from those which are considered to be the core of the canon — texts which are recognizable on national and international levels. However, when becoming ideological myths, the meanings encoded in the literary work are changed and transformed in comparison to the original texts, otherwise they cannot be converted into ideological icons.

However, the semiotic mechanism of converting literary imagery into ideological myths is not clear. To study this question I have decided to focus on quixotic discourse, which includes

1 John T. Jost et al., “Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (2009): 309.

not only literature, but also films, illustrations, commercials, classical and popular music, kitsch, the tourist industry, etc. My choice of Don Quixote and other characters of Cervantes' novel can be explained by the fact that for many centuries they have been used as models for representing numerous ideological doctrines. Other famous literary characters, so-called "eternal images" or cultural myths created by literature, like Don Juan, Faust, or Hamlet, are also involved in an ideological struggle. Another category manipulated by ideology is comprised of the writers themselves. The names, biographies and images of Shevchenko, Pushkin, Ibsen, and other authors are deeply integrated in cultural politics, especially in nationalist ideologies. The *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion* encyclopedia cites Shakespeare as one of the most efficient agents of *Britishness* in the contemporary world:

Patriotic speeches extracted from his plays became favorite morale boosters in both world wars. For all his international resonance, Shakespeare still figures prominently in British cultural propaganda overseas, from the activities of the British Council and such trans-Atlantic cultural groups as the English-Speaking Union to tours by the Royal Shakespeare Company.²

However, I insist on the fact that no other "eternal literary" image or writer can compete in popularity and global dissemination with Cervantes' protagonist. The ideological icons, including Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Dulcinea, the Dukes, and Cervantes himself can be found not only in the Spanish-speaking world but in other cultures of all continents. The best known examples are Turgenev's essay "Hamlet and Don Quixote," and Dostoevsky's imperialist vision of Russia as Don Quixote saving the world. Ukrainian culture is no exception. Such notable Ukrainian intellectuals as Dmytro Dontsov, Viacheslav Lypynskyi, Mykola Khvylovy, Yuri Sherekh-Shevelov, Yevhen Sverstiuk "re-wrote" the adventures of the Knight of Sad Countenance as illustrations of their programs of Ukraine's nation-building. Thus, in many senses quixotic imagery is an ideal subject of study of the symbolic aspect of the relationship between literature and ideology.

Don Quixote Becomes an Ideological Myth

When speaking of the ideological use of quixotic imagery, one deals not with a philological study of the novel but with the "quixotic myth." By the phrase "quixotic myth" I understand an independent, autonomous existence of the characters of Cervantes' novel found in other works of art, ideological texts, and mass media. Svetlana Piskunova argues:

In its further life Cervantes' creation continued its existence in two ways: 1) it was extracted (together with what L. Pinski called "the quixotic situation") by writers and representatives of other arts from the novel, from *Don Quixote* as a work of verbal art (H. Hatzfeld) which was produced by Cervantes in collaboration with the implicit

² Nicholas J. Cull, "William Shakespeare," *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion. A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present* (Santa Barbara, California, Denver, Colorado, Oxford, England: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), 370.

“ideal” reader-interlocutor; and 2) it stimulated the development of the genre innovations started by Cervantes the novelist.³

It makes sense to speak about *The Quixote* as two books written in 1605 and 1615, and about Don Quixote and other characters as cultural myths. Like other “eternal cultural images” such as Don Juan, Hamlet, Faust, etc., Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Dulcinea leave the novel and begin their new lives as protagonists of other novels, poems, dramas, films, sculptures, paintings, political discourses, and in everyday life. They become, in the end, an integral part of the collective unconscious of individuals and nations. They are converted into symbols, which are able to represent a wide spectrum of abstract notions and concepts.

Vsevolod Bagno has spent much effort defining the “quixotic myth.” The researcher interprets the concept in several ways. First, he speaks about a new story (or stories) relating the adventures of the character, who is not necessarily named Don Quixote and does not look like the Hidalgo from La Mancha, but behaves like him and is called Don Quixote by others. The most important feature of “the quixotic situation,” (the concept was coined by Leonid Pinski, as mentioned above) is a conflict between Dream and Reality in the human mind. Each new epoch brings its own Don Quixotes. According to Vsevolod Bagno, the mythic Don Quixote is better known to the audience than the character of the novel. The evidence of the popularity of the quixotic myth is the fact that people who have never read the book easily identify a specific type of man as Don Quixote. The many “quixotic stories” (literary, cinematographic, cultural) produce quixotic discourse, or, as Bagno defines it, “an international quixotic tradition.”

Second, Bagno believes that Don Quixote and other characters become myths because they are symbolic reincarnations of archetypes rooted in the collective unconscious. In particular, Bagno explains the popularity of Don Quixote in Russian culture by the fact that Cervantes’ protagonist can be inscribed “in archetypal models which define Russian consciousness, such as the rebel, the impostor, the wanderer, and the *superfluous man*.”⁴ Developing the approach suggested by Bagno, one can find traces of other archetypes (the Hero, the Caregiver, the Explorer, the Lover, the Creator, the Sage, and others) in the character of Don Quixote.

Third, Vsevolod Bagno and Marina Koreneva stress that “Don Quixote” is a name which has come to mean certain types of behavior of individuals, countries, and nations. There are other words or names capable of producing similar phenomena. They are “Machiavelli,” “Wagner,” “de Sade,” “Masoch,” “Don Juan,” “Hamlet,” etc. These references give life to abstract nouns which name cultural trends, or to approaches in creating works of art or life-styles. Among them are “Machiavellianism,” “Wagnerianism,” “Don Juanism,” “Byronism,” and others. From the very beginning such a name is used to describe a certain cultural phenomenon and after a while it transforms into an “independent vital program, a model of life.”⁵ Without any doubt,

3 Piskunova, Svetlana, “Don Kikhot,” *Entsiklopedia literaturnykh proizvedenii* [*Encyclopedia of Literary Works*] (Moscow: Vagrius, 1998), 155.

4 Vsevolod Bagno, *Don Kikhot v Rossii i russkoe donkikhotsvo* [*Don Quixote in Russia and Russian Quixotic Myth*] (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2009), 219.

5 Vsevolod Bagno and Marina Koreneva, *Vozhdi umov i mody. Chuzhoe imia kak nasleduemaia model zhizni* [*Chiefs of Minds and Fashion. The Alien Name as Model of Imitating Life*] (St. Petersburg: Nauka,

Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Dulcinea, and even the author, Cervantes himself, belong to this category of word-progenitors, when used as patterns of social behavior and creativity.

All types of quixotic mythology, including ideological, are products of what Anthony Close defines as “the romantic approach” in interpreting the novel *Don Quixote*. It was suggested by German romantic writers and critics who refused to understand the book as a burlesque work mocking the insane Hidalgo, to make his adventures a philosophical parable that depicts the conflict between Ideal and Reality, Sacred Dream and Materialism.

This I call the Romantic approach to *Don Quixote*. [...] I believe it to be misguided in each of its basic tendencies. These are: a) idealization of the hero and the denial of the novel's satiric purpose; b) the belief that the novel is symbolical and that through this symbolism it expresses the ideas about the human spirit's relations to reality or about the nature of Spain's history; c) the interpretation of its symbolism, and more generally, of its whole spirit and style, in a way which reflects the ideology, aesthetics, and sensibility of the modern era.⁶

The Romantic writers converted Don Quixote into a myth:

Don Quixote, the hero, is a myth-figure; as such he is free to be re-interpreted — i.e. re-created — by posterity; the truth of the myth — like the truth of any historic event or person — is its ideal residue in the minds of those who re-live it.⁷

Vsevolod Bagno developed Anthony Close's theory and defined the quintessence of the quixotic mentality as a utopian worldview.⁸ According to the Russian researcher, these utopias can be both positive and negative (dystopias, or warnings against the consequences of quixotic behavior if they were to be implemented in life). The semiotic features of the quixotic myth, which was constructed by the German romantics and have been studied by Piskunova, Bagno, Koreneva and other scholars, create favorable conditions for using Don Quixote and other characters as symbols for a wide spectrum of ideologies. Javier Blasco describes this practice in Spanish culture of the 19th-20th centuries as something obsessive and even annoying:

in this context, the fin-de-siècle manipulates Don Quixote as a catchall figure to reflect the values with which thinkers wish to identify themselves ideologically. The regeneracionist has converted the book into a Bible of the national revival and opened the way for re-reading Cervantes' text from various ideological perspectives. As a result, we have readings suggested by anarchists, liberals, or followers of the

2003), 6.

6 Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote. Critical History of the Romantic Tradition in "Quixote" Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1.

7 Close, *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote*, 148.

8 Vsevolod Bagno, “El utopismo como base de la metalidad quijotesca, y del quijotismo mundial,” *AIH. Actas* (1995).

Carlist movement, etc. The figure of Don Quixote symbolizes the incompatible points of view of our intellectuals during World War I. All possible political doctrines, which contradict each other, put forward the image of Don Quixote in order to strengthen their ideological interpretation of the present.⁹

In other countries the situation is more or less the same. For example, in Central and Eastern Europe quixotic imagery is also used for the justification of a great variety of political, religious, nationalist, and artistic programs. In the Soviet period the Don Quixotes of bolshevism, described as maniacs by Andrei Platonov in his *Chevenгур*, co-exist with Don Quixotes of the dissident movement (Andrei Sakharov). The Christian Don Quixotes of Alexander Men and Yevhen Sverstiuk show two opposite paths that Orthodox churches should take in order for people to purify themselves spiritually. There are imperialist Don Quixotes and nationalist Don Quixotes, Don Quixotes of resistance and of totalitarianism.

Don Quixote in Soviet Political Propaganda: The Animated Film *Tale of a Puppet*

In this section of the paper I would like to apply the above-exposed theory to an analysis of an unknown page of quixotic ideological mythmaking. It is the use of the image of Cervantes' character as political propaganda in a film by Boris Ablynin, *Tale of a Puppet* (Soiuzmultfilm, 1984).¹⁰ This visual art product is an ideal propaganda text because it is a manipulative interpretation of the literary image, which simplifies values and ideological paradigms. It has a transparent structure of encoding the message, which divides the world into "good guys" and "bad guys" and overwhelms recipients with a flood of emotions that lead to switching off the reasoning capacities of the human mind. The starting point of the plot is the famous image of Don Quixote fighting a windmill that symbolizes Reality. In this case, the insane knight protects humanity from global fascism.

The creators of the film based themselves on real historical fact: prisoners of the Auschwitz concentration camp made a Don Quixote marionette while waiting for their liberation. At

9 Javier Blasco, "La Vida de don Quijote y Sancho o lo que habría ocurrido 'si don Quijote hubiese en tiempo de Miguel de Unamuno vuelto al mundo,'" *Letras hispanas* 1 (2004): 55 ("En este contexto, el fin de siglo instrumentaliza la figura de don Quijote haciendo del personaje cervantino una especie de cajón de sastre, en el que cada uno cree ver aquellos valores con los que ideológicamente se identifica. Los regeneracionistas lo convierten en la Biblia de la regeneración y, con ello, abren la puerta a la instrumentalización del texto cervantino desde las más variadas posiciones ideológicas. Así, nos encontramos con lecturas anarquistas, liberales o carlistas, etc. De la figura de don Quijote se echa mano incluso para avalar las posiciones enfrentadas que adoptan nuestros intelectuales ante la primera Gran Guerra. Toda una serie de lecturas políticas, contradictorias entre sí, esgrimen la imagen de don Quijote, convertida en mito de nuestra modernidad, para afianzar una interpretación ideológica del presente.")

10 *Istoria odnoi kukly* [*Tale of a Puppet*], director Boris Ablynin, Soiuzmultfilm, 1984, accessed May 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6xy7F96gZc>.

the beginning of the film the camera shows a radio set of the 1930s. Someone is searching for a frequency and stops at the name of the Spanish capital — “Madrid.” A voice reads an announcement in Spanish: “El cielos obre España está despejado” (“The sky over Spain is cloudless”). These words served as a signal for General Franco’s rebellion in 1936, which in the USSR was taken as a fascist coup d’état. Then, the camera shows a statuette of Don Quixote under the rain. An explosion sounds and the statuette of the Knight of Sad Countenance is broken into pieces. This scene is followed by episodes from documentaries and newsreels: houses are destroyed by fascist bombs. These tragic events appear on the screen to the sound of light entertaining music.

After the credit titles viewers are shown a map of Europe, pictures of children, and a torchlight procession in the shape of a swastika. The sound of marching boots is heard. The Nazis are burning books, and Cervantes’ immortal novel is one of them. A close-up presents images of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza destroyed by fire. Explosions of bombs are heard again. The pictures of children are torn into pieces and blown away by the wind. Viewers are immersed into the tragic world of the concentration camp: on-screen one can see portraits of prisoners in striped robes. After that documentary images demonstrate a cloudy sky, a crematorium chimney, and dead people hanging on barbed wire. The animated part of the film begins here. A lonely lantern throws light upon a heap of metal scrap wastes. A man holds a piece of wire in his hand, projecting a shadow on a wall. The shadow resembles a knight. The mysterious image ignites the prisoners’ imagination: they make marionettes of Don Quixote and his horse Rocinante out of metal scraps. On-screen, viewers see a well-known citation from Turgenev’s “Hamlet and Don Quixote”: “When there are no Don Quixotes in the world, the book of History will close. There will be nothing to read in it.” The Nazis dogs start barking; coarse voices of jailers are heard. The marionette is ready to act. The knight bows gallantly to the audience. He is about to start a fight but hears the dogs barking and jailers yelling, and hides from his enemies. Don Quixote witnesses a prisoner’s execution: his heart is full of indignation; he gets on his horse and begins his quest looking for adventures. Terrible music makes him stop: instead of a windmill a swastika threatens him. He attacks it and falls down to the ground. His fall draws the jailors’ attention. A sharp and loud noise cuts the air: Achtung! Achtung! Attention! Attention! A heavy door is opened with a terrible rasping sound; bright light blinds the eyes; a shadow of an officer appears — he tries to grab Don Quixote but the prisoners manage to hide the marionette. The jailors begin their search but cannot capture the noble knight because the prisoners pass the puppet on. A shot sounds, and Don Quixote falls out of the hands of the shot prisoner. The rest of the prisoners are also cold bloodedly killed with shots from behind. Don Quixote is the only one to survive. He rises heavily with no human help. A close-up shows his face: a tear runs down his cheek. He takes a sword and destroys the foundation of the windmill-swastika, causing the symbol of fascist might to fall to the ground. The scene of Don Quixote’s duel with the swastika is interrupted with documentary footage showing *Katiushas*¹¹ launching missiles against German troops. Sounds of joy are heard. The word “Victory!” is written on the wall of the Reichstag. Don Quixote has perished in the fight. Someone’s hands carefully take him and

11 *Katiusha* is the name used for Soviet missile launchers during World War II, one of the symbols of Soviet military might.

bring him to the museum of the Auschwitz concentration camp where children can see the marionette: their faces and bodies are reflected on a wall which is wet from rain. A close-up focuses on Don Quixote. The film wants to make the statement that fascism has been defeated forever. Flowers bloom; merry melodies sound. The camera shows a radio-set of the 1970s. A voice announces: "Today is the 11th of September, 1973. It is raining in Santiago." The camera returns to the statuette of Don Quixote which was shown at the beginning of the film. It is again broken into pieces by explosions — general Pinochet has taken power in Chile. The last shot of the film shows a fire consuming flowers to the sound of a mourning bell.

The Rhetoric of Ideological Mythmaking in Boris Ablynin's Film

This is not the first time that Don Quixote has appeared in antifascist propaganda products,¹² which can be explained by the fact that Cervantes' character is inscribed into the spectrum of literary images that symbolize the fight against totalitarian regimes. According to the creators of the film, the prisoners who made the marionette of Don Quixote are "insane" heroes because they resist the repressive fascist state machine. Moreover, Ablynin's film appeared just before perestroika, and is an integral part of Soviet cultural propaganda of the Cold War period. The film warns against the threat of global fascism, but its aim is different: it tries to impose on viewers famous ideological clichés about the inseparable continuity of all historical forms of fascism — from Francoism to German national-socialism and Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile. This historical oversimplification was used in the USSR to prove the human nature of socialism, which was presented as the only true antifascist political system.

To achieve their aims the creators of the animated film try to make out of Don Quixote a visual symbol of Soviet ideology. During the USSR's existence, representatives of official Soviet culture did their best to inscribe the Ingenious Hidalgo into the paradigm of socialist realism. Bagno argues that

The interest of Soviet literature in Don Quixote as a character who wants to change the world was so natural, and the manifestation of this interest was so organic that quixotic motifs can be found in many works, even though direct references to Cervantes' novel are completely lost.¹³

According to Bagno, there were three ways of integrating the quixotic myth into the Russian mentality in the context of the global tasks that Russian culture tried to solve: 1) to save humankind (mystical and messianic Don Quixotes), 2) to protect the humiliated (Don Quixotes of Revolution), and 3) to help your neighbor (Don Quixotes of Christianity). The

12 For examples of using the fascist swastika as Don Quixote's windmill see: Don Quixote Original ospaal Cuban poster Anti-Racism, accessed March 2, 2016, http://www.ebay.ie/sch/sis.html?_nk=OSPAAAL%20Cuban%20Political%20SILKSCREEN%20poster%20Swisticka%20Windmill%20Don%20Quixote%20cuba&_itemId=150659085280; Imaginariosde la Resistencia antifascista, accessed March 2, 2016, drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/8149/umi-umd-5327.pdf.

13 Bagno, *Don Kikhot*, 175.

animated film develops the second motif of the quixotic struggle for humiliated peoples — in *The Tale of a Puppet* the knight fights global fascism, which symbolizes imperialism, injustice, and totalitarianism. The concept of “fascism” is taken in a very broad way and does not correspond to an understanding of the phenomenon in historical studies. First of all, it concerns Francoism, which for Soviet historical propaganda, was “the Spanish fascism.” As is widely known, the ideology of the Falange, which was fascist, was only one of the constituents of Franco’s traditionalist repressive doctrine. German National Socialism, also presented in the film, was not identical to Spanish fascism. The film ends with Pinochet’s fascism, which came to power due to US support, and in the Soviet mass consciousness became a synonym for American imperialism. As a result of ideological manipulation, the Soviet Don Quixote of the animated film is a lonely fighter against global fascism. He is an impeccable soldier of the army of light. The issue of the criminal nature of the communist regime is not discussed. “To switch off” any critical thinking by viewers the creators of the film use a rather sophisticated technique of montage, which combines documentary footage, narrative footage, and stop-motion fragments. Much attention is given to the images of children, which expresses the idea of the innocence of victims protected by Don Quixote. The images of enemies are ugly and one-dimensional. Thus, Cervantes’ character, a marionette made by the prisoners clearly expresses the ideological message of Soviet propaganda.

By presenting Don Quixote as a Hero the filmmakers return to the model of the approach towards interpreting the book and its character suggested by the Romantics. This is proved by the citation from Turgenev’s essay “Hamlet and Don Quixote.” The director and his puppeteers look to the noble knight and re-structure the archetypal level of the quixotic myth. They see the protagonist as the rebel and the superman but not as the impostor or the superfluous man. In order to make the Soviet propaganda clichés more impressive, the creators of the animated film make use of features of the other two models of quixotic behavior described above. Soviet ideology viewed the mystical, and especially the Christian Don Quixotes, with suspicion. However, *The Tale of a Puppet* changes this approach. The visual image of the marionette is striking in its tragic aspect and resembles Jiří Trnka’s puppet made for a film that was never produced. The marionette’s black hollow pits instead of eyes suggest the face of a man who has been cruelly tortured, alluding to Christ.

A Christological reading of Don Quixote’s image in *The Tale of a Puppet* converts the character into an icon of resistance to totalitarianism. The creators of the film re-actualize the meanings encoded in Cervantes’ novel. However, in this case the model is not Don Quixote but another character — an Algerian captive in one of the intercalated novellas. Don Quixote, the protagonist of the novel, is too ambivalent to be an impeccable hero: he combines both positive and negative features, he represents free and authoritarian, or even totalitarian modes of thinking. The Algerian captive, whose prototype was Cervantes himself, and the Don Quixote from the animated film are incarnations of the fight against violence. They are stoics who are capable of withstanding superhuman suffering. The prisoners of the concentration camp follow their examples by making the Don Quixote marionette. When playing the puppet theatre they take the challenge of death. The marionette helps them to survive and win.

In order to make the Don Quixote of Revolution be more human, the creators of the animated film combine in the character the features of all three types of quixotic behavior. As a result, the Soviet quixotic ideological myth works more efficiently and looks more convincing.

Conclusions

An analysis of the quixotic myth and, in particular, of the animated film *The Tale of a Puppet* reveals the semiotic mechanism of converting literary imagery into a symbolic representation of an ideology. Those who look for cultural icons for their doctrines should follow several rules. 1) They should look for an image which is not only well-known but is open to an extremely wide spectrum of interpretations, first of all, political, philosophical, and religious. 2) They should extract this image from the primary text and find ways of transforming the archetypal layers of its meanings so that it can become a signifier of the values, ideas, and principals with which the ideologies identify themselves. 3) They should apply rhetoric strategies to make the chosen image look noble and attractive. 4) In order to achieve hegemony in the struggle with other images that incarnate competitive ideologies, the literary image should be integrated as deeply as possible into other media — films, animated films, advertisements, radio texts, popular songs, etc. The symbolic war is won when the literary image, which has been re-interpreted in an ideological way, becomes part of the cultural unconscious of the masses.

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