

Urban Semiotics in Retro-Detective Prose: a Tour of the 19th Century Moscow

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Abstract—The paper discusses the importance of retro-detective prose in gaining cultural knowledge, and focuses on the problem of the nature of the retro component which may be represented by various realities, like gourmet dishes, elements of clothing, personal names, place names, holidays, etc. Structurally, the article falls into three main parts, each of which focuses on a certain aspect of the problem in the question, namely: 1) brings to the surface the importance of cross-genre studies, and reveals the specificity of the detective genre; 2) describes the retro component as an element that penetrates the whole kind of semiotic spaces, and is conspicuous for being multidimensional and capable of uniting different genres; 3) considers examples of how the urban code of 19th century Moscow serves to create the retro component. All in all, the article thoroughly considers the advantages of retro-detective prose as a special kind of writing that not only gives pleasure, excites intellect and provides cultural information but links different semiotic.

Keywords—urban semiotics; retro-detective prose; cross-genre studies; cultural knowledge; 19th century Moscow

I. INTRODUCTION

Today retro is getting more and more important in different spheres of people's life, especially in their cultural life. Retro penetrates all kind of semiotic spaces, like music, art, fashion, architecture, gastronomy, literature, and even the field of technologies making people decide in favour of dated gadgets instead of the latest ones. One of the reasons for fascination with retro must be people's nostalgia for the past that bears a tinge of romance and seems attractive to modern people who are losing touch with the so-called true values as they have to live in the world of faked events. Another reason is that today people crave qualitative information, but for many reasons are unable to get enough of it, thus, instead of referring to reliable historical sources they choose to read a book with a thrilling plot, and while enjoying the storyline learn a thing or two about the ways people used to have or get introduced to some historical facts.

This ability of the retro component to connect different spheres of social life and different issues of human interest gives reasons to regard it as a multidimensional phenomenon, which means that retro is created by a whole variety of means, both linguistic and non-linguistic. For instance, in a retro-detective novel retro component is gradually created while the author describes the looks of the characters, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the books and papers they read, the furniture they are surrounded by, the names they bear, the jokes they tell, the events they discuss and so on and on. The crucial point is that even the smallest detail should fall into its proper place, otherwise the air of authenticity will be dispelled and the charm of history each reader is willing to find in retro-detective prose will be ruined.

Being the focal point of this research, urban life is an issue of special interest to all retro lovers, as city life has changed a lot in the past hundred years, and such realities as horse-drawn carriages, narrow pavements, slowly walking people, etc. attract a lot of readers. The point is that a lot of words that go to describe city life are now obsolete and sometimes not recognized by native speakers, let alone foreigners. With this in view the article attempts to reveal and describe the variety of linguistic (primarily lexical) means that serve to code cultural information in retro-detective prose and establish the boundaries of the genre.

II. CROSS-GENRE WRITING IN A MULTIMODAL WORLD AND STRUCTURAL PROPERTIES OF RETRO-DETECTIVE NOVELS

Let apart from transformations in the system of values that have taken place in the recent years, there is an evident difference in ways people exchange information, as they now use a much wider variety of means and styles than they used to. The tendency for mixing different codes is rapidly increasing, and today hardly any message is written in a single style. The important thing is that the age of information technologies and multimodal texts makes modern people think differently from the way their predecessors thought. New thinking – as it seems – manifests itself in many different ways – from multitasking to a new type of literature – novels that combine features of a

detective story, a romance, a thriller, a comedy, a historical narrative and a cookery book. In most cases there is a certain focus that helps book agents to put a book on the right shelf and helps readers make their choice, however, even writers often find difficulty in saying whether their book is a phantasy or a political thriller. This explains the growing interest in cross-genre research. We here tend to believe that despite the tendency for hybridization certain genre features prevail in each book, which serves to relate each book to a certain genre.

Our special interest is a retro-detective novel which is regarded here as a piece of writing that possesses distinctive genre features. Consumers' interest in this literary genre has a number of reasons. First of all, it is the attractiveness of the historical past to our contemporaries, the readers' desire to feel the atmosphere of the previous ages and to learn more about the ways and habits of those who lived centuries ago. Now that people generally live on their own or with their immediate families and show little interest in genealogy, they tend to suffer from being out of touch with their ancestors, making up for it – at least partially – by reading retro novels. Besides, it is the mystery each detective story offers and an opportunity for the reader to solve this mystery that account for the retro-detective boom.

Structurally, a retro-detective novel is different both from other kinds of retro literature and from classical detective writing. In a retro-detective novel the plot unfolds in some historical context that is described in great detail. Each retro-detective novel possesses a number of essential elements that appeal to the reader's emotional and intellectual needs. Among these elements are:

The emotional component

Each retro-detective novel follows the lines of a classical detective novel and with regard to the emotional aspect it appeals to the readers' basic emotions causing fear and anxiety within him. Simultaneously it stirs the reader's curiosity arousing his natural desire to solve the riddle. By regarding this wish as natural we mean to stress that a riddle is an archaic mythologem, that is, a basic and recurrent theme of myths (see <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mythologem>). It is also an archetype, which is 'an unfiltered psychic experience <...> linked to instinctual behavioural patterns <...> there are as many archetypes as there are recurring situations in life' [1, pp. 42-72].

Paradoxically, another emotion retro detectives arouse is pleasure that each reader gets from the familiar. This phenomenon has been described by the Italian semiotician U. Eco who pointed out that a detective story gives the reader a feeling of psychological extension which lies in the fact that, plopped in an easy chair or in the seat of a train compartment, the reader continuously recovers, point by point, what he already knows, what he wants to know again [2, pp. 14-22]. An example is some recognizable habit that each detective involved in the investigation possesses either a phrase regularly pronounced, or a situation that repeatedly occurs.

It should be admitted that the pleasure from what is familiar and is recurrent is no less than the pleasure people get from

solving a riddle – a process that appeals to human intellect, or from the knowledge that despite all the suspense they are in for a happy end. Let us provide an example from a series of books by the Russian writer B. Akunin about a detective of the 19th century E. Fandorin who had a habit of accompanying his logical thinking by counting the arguments.

“Don't be surprised,” the strange peasant said in a dull voice. “The fact that you are a g-girl is immediately obvious – a strand of your hair has crept out from under your cap on the side. That is one. <...> The fact that you are Russian is also obvious <...>. That is two. <...>. As for your fiancé, that is equally simple <...>. That makes three. Now for number f-four <...>” [3].

The intellectual component. Wish to solve the riddle

As mentioned above, a riddle to solve is another element of a detective novel, the element that gives the reader pleasure comparable with the feeling of joy one feels if one manages to do a cross-word puzzle, but much more intense due to the atmosphere of suspense and thrill.

Superhero

Superhero is another essential element of each retro-detective novel. Just like the riddle, the hero is an archaic mythologem, with the motive of a hero being an important theme of folklore, fiction, cinema, etc. This motive has been actual since archaic times, though related myths are quite variable and reflect the distinctive features of each concrete epoch, thus interpreting the mythologem (for more information read G. Campbell who considers different transformations of the hero, like the ancient hero, the war hero, hero-lover [4]).

Retro

The last essential component of a retro-detective novel is the retro component, that translates social and cultural values. The reader's interest in retro is conditioned by a number of reasons, like one's wish to get familiar with the historical past, to plunge into a different atmosphere, the opportunity to make judgments about past events and to learn more about habits our ancestors, the way they looked, lived, dressed, etc.

Let us consider another example from a series of novels by B. Akunin about E. Fandorin – a true aristocrat, honourable, educated, well-bred, courteous, in other words a man who belongs to the past but stays in the cultural memory as a paragon of manliness and perfection:

The initial impression made by Erast Fandorin was that he was taciturn, reserved and polite. But he was a bit too spruce and trim for Gauche's taste: that starched collar sticking up like alabaster, that jeweled pin in the necktie, that red carnation (oh, very suave!) in the buttonhole, that perfectly smooth parting with not a single hair out of place, those carefully manicured nails, that narrow black moustache that seemed to be drawn on with charcoal. It was possible to tell a great deal about a man from his moustache. <...> when it was like M. Fandorine's, it meant he entertained romantic notions about himself [5].

The detailed description of an educated, well-mannered and elegantly dressed man is attractive to the reader who belongs to the age with very little style, thus, provoking his subconscious desire to plunge into the atmosphere of the past and making him buy another novel.

Another effective means of creating an atmosphere of the past is reference to newspapers published at the time. Besides adding a touch of authenticity, this device may serve as a setting to the whole story. The following abstract is arranged as a piece of news coming from St. Petersburg, Russia's capital at the time, and contains the name of a famous street:

EXPLOSION IN LIGOVKA

Our St. Petersburg correspondent informs us that yesterday at six-thirty in the morning a thunderous explosion occurred at the rental apartment house of Commercial Counselor Vartanov on Znamenskaya Street, completely devastating the apartment on the fourth floor [6].

The name 'Ligovka' is recognizable and is in fact a nickname of Ligovski Prospect that runs through the historical centre of St. Petersburg. Another recognizable place is Znamenskaya Street that was given the name Vosstaniya Street after the 1917 October Revolution. This street, as well as Ligovski Prospect, is known for a number of rental apartment houses, however, no building named after Counselor Vartanov ever existed. Despite being invented by the writer the name does not ruin the retro component as the number of rental houses both in Moscow and St. Petersburg used to be great and almost all of them are now city sights and tourist attractions.

Thus, the basic components of any retro-detective novel we here identify are the emotional component, a superhero, a riddle, a retro component.

III. URBAN SEMIOTICS AND RETRO PROSE

Problems of life in a big city attract the attention of scientists both in Russia and abroad. It should be specified, though, that works on the many issues of spatial semiotics highlight investigations in the fields of architecture and design with the vast majority of research papers being in the field of urban geography (see i. g. T. Shortell, T. Wu, J. Kruse, J. Caivano, J. de Morentin [7; 8; 9; 10]). Another important point is that the latest works on the problem that have found the way in the Russian library fund are for the most part translations of popular writing; whereas scientific works on the issue belong to the 20th century and are of interest for specialists in certain fields.

With all this in view it seems to be high time a linguistic approach to semiotics of space was developed. Analysis of western scientific literature on the subject gives reasons to believe that the key issue developed in most works on the problem is digitalization of active social spaces. This aspect of the problem in question is considered in works by S. Bauriedel and A. Strüver, who discuss space structuring in terms of digitalization and bring to the surface three aspects of city life that are most affected, namely the perception of space by city-dwellers, the way space is used in all kind of social activities,

the time it takes for digital solutions to be introduced in city-dwellers' lives [11, p. 11]. According to these scientists, digitalization of life space breeds two tendencies that determine people's existence. The first tendency manifests itself in total control of people on the part of companies that promote digital solutions, the other one is reflected in the growing living standards of city-dwellers, who make practical use of different gadgets, for instance for finding way, locating things and people, or entertainment [Ibid., p. 12]. It seems reasonable to agree with the idea of German philosophers who argued that digit changes both cities and city-dwellers [Ibid., p. 12].

It is now clear that this kind of change has given rise to the opposite trend, which is a quest for preserving cultural and historical heritage as well as traditions and ways of the previous periods that have deeper historical roots. It is obvious that previous generations were surrounded by different values, which is why the older generation of today regard digital solutions as instruments of support whereas for the younger generation digitalization is an essential part of life that makes them feel comfortable and safe. Conversely, it is the need for comfort and protection from the intrusiveness of digitalization that urges people to show more and more interest in cultural and historical heritage constructed in fictional spaces. From this perspective modern Russian retro-detective prose serves to form a person's private space inside digital space; the effect is achieved by means of reconstructing the past instead of constructing the future.

It is a well-known fact that the toponymic changes that took place in Moscow in the 1990s triggered a number of other changes and served the creation of a totally different historical context of the Russian capital that boosted people's interest in the past. That was a perfect background for retro-detective prose that describes the 17th century Moscow to grow in popularity.

We here argue that the retro component is a complicated phenomenon as it comprises many different elements, each of which serves to describe different fields of social life. Names of locations and institutions, as well as descriptions of typical manners and styles of behaviour, are essential means of constructing the retro component in retro-detective prose.

IV. THE URBAN CODE OF 19TH CENTURY MOSCOW

For analysis we have chosen one book by B. Akunin that contains descriptions of Moscow – 'The Winter Queen' [6], and will now comment on the major means of creating the Urban code in the Moscow of the late 19th century.

City scenes

The quotation below contains vivid descriptions of city life in 19th century Moscow in late spring. The names in bold type refer to the most popular and world-wide known places.

On Monday the thirteenth of May in the year 1876, between the hours of two and three in the afternoon on a day that combined the freshness of spring with the warmth of summer, numerous individuals in Moscow's Alexander Gardens unexpectedly found themselves eyewitnesses to the perpetration

of an outrage that flagrantly transgressed the bounds of common decency. The public strolling the alleyways between blossoming lilac bushes and flower beds ablaze with the flaming scarlet blooms of tulips was smartly decked out: ladies holding aloft lacework parasols (to avert the threat of freckles), nannies minding children in neat little sailor suits, and young men affecting an air of boredom in fashionable cheviot frock coats or jackets cut in the short English fashion. <...> Seated on one of these benches located not far from the Grotto and facing the railings so as to afford a view of the beginning of Neglinnaya Street and the yellow wall of the Manège were two ladies.

What the quoted text translates is that May used to be – and still remains – an enjoyable time of year in Moscow, perfect for walks and idleness (public strolling, an air of boredom). Moscow central streets used to be decorated with flowers and crowded with well-dressed people. The atmosphere of style (bounds of common decency) is created with the help of detailed descriptions of a street scene (lacework parasols, neat little sailor suits, fashionable cheviot frock coats or jackets cut in the short English fashion). The most attractive part of it must be the leisure and sophistication that have long disappeared from Moscow but remain desirable, thus explaining people's growing interest in retro prose.

The following elaborate description of city life is different from the previous description as the episode takes place in a not that fashionable location, with moderately dressed hurrying people:

Chewing as he walked along on a fish-gristle pie bought at the corner of Gussyatnikov Lane (let us not forget that in the flurry of investigative excitement Erast Fandorin had been left without any lunch), he stepped out along Chistoprudny Boulevard, where antediluvian old women in ancient coats and caps were scattering crumbs for the fat, impudent pigeons. Horse-drawn cabs and phaetons dashed by along the cobbled roadway at a pace Erast Fandorin could not so possibly match.

The episode describes streets with horse-drawn cabs and phaetons and crowded with so-called 'simple' people who did not mind chewing in the street, bought a fish-gristle pie at a corner shop, wore ancient coats and caps and fed impudent pigeons. Thus, it is quite clear that at the end of the 19th century the now fashionable Chistoprudny Boulevard was a place of busy people.

City Routes

Resorting to city routes is another device that is based on an exact description of city locations, the way it is done in the following episode:

All the same, it's a curious business. The Alexander Gardens. That'll be the City Precinct, second station. I'll tell you what, young Mr. Fandorin, as a personal favor to me, get yourself smartly across there to Mokhovaya Street.

The effect of authenticity can be achieved by describing the character's way:

From Miasnitskaya street, where the criminal investigation Division had its office, to the Boyar Hotel, where, according to the report, the landowner's wife Spitsyna had her "temporary residence," was a walk of only twenty minutes, and despite the impatience that was consuming him, Fandorin decided to stroll there on foot.

Another device used to indicate city routes and thus reproduce the retro component is referring to a map of a city, the way it happens in the following paragraph:

He got up and strode quickly over to the map hanging on the wall beside the door. "Here's the Malaya Yauza Bridge. From there he went along Yauza Street, idled away the time for an hour or so until he ended up on Podkolokolny Lane beside the insurance company, gave landowner's wife Spitsyna a good fright, and then carried on toward the Kremlin. Some time after two he reached the Alexander Gardens, and there, as we know only too well, his journey came to an end."

Besides creating local colouring, the chosen episodes serve at least two other purposes. Firstly, they create the feeling of continuity – the effect achieved due to the fact that certain names still exist in Moscow (Mokhovaya Street, Miasnitskaya street, the Kremlin, the Alexander Gardens). Secondly, they translate historical information (Yauza Street, Podkolokolny Lane).

City Style

Moscow style was quite conspicuous for its wealth, which is very well seen from the following description of the interior of a mansion in the centre of Moscow that contains a reference to the so-called 'fashionable Russian Style' – a distinctive feature of Moscow life at the end of the 19th century:

Erast Fandorin was not greatly impressed by the decor of the deceased Pyotr Kokorin's residence (the piano nobile of a rich apartment building beside the Prechistenskie Gates) since he himself had lived in mansions that were its equal during the period of his father's precipitately acquired wealth. The collegiate registrar did not, therefore, linger in the marble entrance hall with the Venetian mirror three arshins in height and the gilded molding on the ceiling, but strode straight through into the drawing room, a lavish interior with a row of six windows, decorated in the highly fashionable Russian Style, with brightly painted wooden trunks, carved oak on the walls, and a smart tiled stove.

The details of this paragraph also stress the two seemingly controversial process – continuity and change as Moscow's centre remains a luxurious part of the city with mansions, marble entrance halls and Venetian mirrors, despite the fact that brightly painted wooden trunks, carved oak on the walls, and a smart tiled stove are now generally a matter of the past.

Entertainments

This episode describes a group of people playing a game of forfeit, that requires that one player should randomly draw an item from a number of items hidden in a container and then ask the host what the owner of the item should do. Without really

knowing who the owner is the host tells him to sing, or dance, or quote, or kiss someone, and the instruction is to be followed.

Plump Anton Ivanovich was entrusted with making the draw.

First he drew out of the cap the cigar that he himself had placed there and asked ingratiatingly, "What am I bid for this fine thing?"

"The hole from a doughnut," replied Cleopatra, with her face, turned toward the wall, and everyone except the plump gentleman laughed in malicious delight.

"And for this?" Anton Ivanovich indifferently drew out the captain's silver pencil.

Last year's snow.

Then came a medallion watch ("a fish's ears"), a playing card (mescondoléances), some phosphorous matches ("Napoleon's right eye"), an amber cigarette holder ("much ado about nothing"), a hundred-ruble banknote ("three times nothing"), a tortoise shell comb ("four times nothing"), a grape ("Orest Kirillovich's thick locks" – prolonged laughter at the expense of an absolutely bald gentleman wearing the order of St. Vladimir in his buttonhole), a carnation ("to that one – never, not for anything"). Only two forfeits remained in the cap: Erast Fandorin's handkerchief and Akhtyrsev's gold ring. When the ring gleamed and sparkled in the caller's fingers, the student leaned forward urgently, and Fandorin saw beads of sweat stand out on the pimply forehead.

Forfeit is still occasionally played by Russians and has now become a kind of tradition which has not been completely replaced by more trendy games. However, today different items are used, like pieces of paper with wishes written on them.

Fashion

Details of clothing are extremely important as well, and the writer does his best to reproduce this part of the past as accurately as possible. Let us consider a number of quotations.

Her much older companion, wearing a good-quality dark blue woolen dress and sensible lace-up ankle boots.

He was wearing a frock coat and a hat, and no one in the Alexander Gardens identified him as a student.

A man of about forty wearing a red shirt, a black woolen-weave waistcoat, velveteen trousers, and bottle-shaped boots peeped around the door with an intrigued expression.

And then in the morning Pierre turned up dressed like a dandy, in a white waistcoat, terribly cheerful.

She was a warm-hearted and considerate but extremely prim and proper old maid, who was nonetheless supposed to be addressed not as "miss" but as "missus," out of respect for her venerable profession.

and Ivan Brillings was standing there beside him, dressed as a petit bourgeois in a cap with a cloth peak, a pleated caftan, and mud-stained, concertina-creased boots.

The interesting thing is that the author not only provides a detailed description of dresses, suits and boots but points out what kind of clothes were worn by what class of people. Thus, the reader learns what elderly ladies, middle-aged men (with forty being the middle age), dandies, maids and policemen wore, or hardly ever wore (the example of a student).

V. CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that the means used to translate the atmosphere of city life fall into the following groups: street scenes, place names, lifestyle and fashion, entertainments

The prominent French philosopher J. Baudrillard believed that the history of human values has passed several phases, like use-values, exchange-values, sign-values, diffused values. The contemporary stage of diffused values is noticeable for a general diffusion and contamination of values, among which are 'consumption, information communication, culture, affluence' – things that are discovered and organized by the system itself [12, p. 57]. That is, modern society is totally indifferent to everything but prestige, success, comfort, distinction, self-presentation with desire for pleasure and enjoyment being the primary necessities. The new mentality results from the postmodern way of thinking and the pervasive principles of Dadaism, Antiform, Play, Chance, Anarchy, Exhaustion, Happening, Participation, Deconstruction, Intertext, Surface... Misreading, Irony, etc. [13, p. 6], that have their impact on all spheres of modern life.

The previously moderate way of life, awareness of what is right and what is wrong attract modern people who have grown used to living in the world of fake events that do not simply happen but are usually constructed, which is why modern society abounds with unreliable and unlikely events. The changing values are reflected in the increasing influence of mass culture, the growing consumer demands, americanization and westernization, rule of an image, blurred family values [14]. The growing role of information, a wide variety of professions, overpopulated megalopolises, the pervasive internet connection hardly contribute to man's and woman's well-being urging him/her to look for peace elsewhere.

Thus, the growing interest in retro is – to a great degree – the result of modern people's desire to reject the new values and to plunge – at least for some time – into the world of different attitudes and the so-called true values, like honesty, generosity, style and some others people often lack today [15]. Urgent need to fill in spiritual gaps makes contemporary writers spend days in libraries collecting information about the past in order to use it in their narratives, plots of which develop in previous centuries. It is now clear that their efforts are not wasted for there is a sort of 'retro boom' that is rooted in nostalgia for the past that people evidently miss.

Scientific investigation into the retro component as an important element of urban life contributes to preserving accumulated knowledge, to promoting retro among cultured people and to its general popularization. The undertaken research has both scientific and practical relevance as it not only explains people's interest in retro but also proves that a

linguistic study of retro creates opportunities for publishers and tour agents who can attract visitors by offering a different kind of retro tours.

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