
NOTES AND REVIEWS

SEMIOSIS AND THE CULTURE OF RUPTURE

In May, 2010, the 7th Semiosis and Culture conference was organised by the Komi State Pedagogical Institute in Syktyvkar, Republic of Komi, Russia. The conference was dedicated to problems of the philosophy and anthropology of rupture (with a sub-topic concentrating on “the text, consciousness, code”). Organisers of the conference Irina Fadeyeva and Vladimir Sulimov gathered multiple scholars who presented their research on problems relating to the phenomenon of the break in consciousness and culture. Fadeyeva and Sulimov argued in the introduction to the conference that the covering of rupture is one of the most archaic human intellectual efforts. Thinkers of various periods have tried to conceptualise rupture as a catastrophic feeling of cognitive fragmentarity of existence. But rupture is also a concept that aids interpretation of paradoxes of contemporary cultural situations, especially in Russia.

In their joint paper, “Russian semiosis: collapse or deconstruction?”, Fadeyeva and Sulimov defined the object of culture studies as the phenomenological sphere of consciousness that becomes available for research through texts of culture and applied intellectual creativity. Cultural concepts can be approached from a dynamic perspective and it makes the intellectual continuum unstable. Contemporary Russian culture is not fully semiotised. A chaotic and individual consciousness is widening and becomes dispersed. The contemporary phase in Russian history can be interpreted as collapse or deconstruction. However, either way, rupture stands at the centre of people’s worldview.

Moscow philosopher Andrey Shelkovnikov devoted his paper “The Avatar as a

symbol of modern culture” to the study of the Avatar phenomenon and a comparison of the Hindu and Western models of dynamics in culture. Particular attention was paid to analysis of the relationship between mythology, literature and James Cameron’s film. Shelkovnikov argues that contemporary authors incarnate in their different projects and these projects do not constitute any unified creative system. In this way, Avatar (the film) symbolises characteristic processes in contemporary culture.

Professor Yuri Shabayev spoke about contemporary ethnopolitical problems in Russia. Shabayev criticised the methods of Russia’s cultural integration policy. The failure of integration politics is indicated by the success of numerous radical nationalist movements and overall low level of acceptance of multicultural values. Shabayev argued that it is necessary to discuss possibilities for strengthening civil solidarity in Russia.

In his presentation, dedicated to different descriptions of the missionary activities of St. Stephen of Perm, Alexander Kotylev demonstrated the ways in which these texts reflect cultural epochs and specific versions of correlation between history and myth. The first biographer of Stephen, Yepifani Premudryi, created his text in the late 14th or early 15th century based of biblical myths and legends. Russian Orthodox authors of the 15th century started to combine historical facts with legends. From the 17th to 19th century, vernacular historical legends dominated in descriptions of Stephen’s life. Through the centuries, historical knowledge disappears from the sources and mythological images and constructions start to prevail.

Anatoli Panyukov analysed the role of smoke in Komi folklore and worldview. Panyukov concentrates his approach on the Komi traditional vernacular formula “on the other side smoke smokes”. According to Panyukov, the formula is used within the framework of charms and combines two perspectives: geographical opposition of “this” and “that” and simultaneous mythological opposition “me/us” and “stranger/they”. Panyukov argued that the smoke formula refers to the mythological topic of creation, cultural multi-agency and dynamism.

Jaanika Jaanits (Tartu, Estonia) presented results of her fieldwork among the Komi youth. She attempted to map the cultural practices and identities of young people in the Republic of Komi. Jaanits interviewed the employees of Komi Radio and other cultural centres, as well as young Komis. This young scholar argued that a certain gap exists between the intentions of the Komi ethnic cultural institutions and young people’s everyday realities. Jaanits proposed several ways to popularise the Komi

language and culture among the youth by applying the perspective of the young people themselves.

Other papers presented at the conference also concentrated on the issue of rupture from various perspectives. As this short overview indicates, the collection of presentations was somehow eclectic. The problem of rupture was approached through its cognitive, socio-cultural, historical, anthropological and artistic appearances.

The conference indicated clearly that all forms of ruptures can be found everywhere in a society and culture, in diachronic and synchronic perspectives. In this way the conference achieved its goal quite distinctly, indicating that rupture can be considered an important concept for understanding the way one can interpret semiotic and cultural processes at the theoretical, and more practical, levels.

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