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ONE COULD IGNORE TARZAN [...] BUT IT WOULD BE STUPID

Riccardo Nicolosi; Brigitte Obarmayr (ed.), *Narratives in the Early Soviet Union*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2024, pp. 249

In *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History* (1990) Andrei Sinyavsky (Abram Tertz) compared the October Revolution to an apocalypse that entailed a turbulent and radical transformation of all spheres of Russian life, even of the very mode of thought itself. Such a process was, in and of itself, adventurous, containing nearly all the key elements of the adventure narrative—physical action, boundary-crossing, overcoming obstacles, excitement, exploration, and tension. The volume *Adventure Narratives in the Early Soviet Union*, published by Academic Studies Press (Boston) in 2024 and edited by R. Nicolosi and B. Obermayr, constitutes an exceptionally valuable contribution to the study of adventure in the post-revolutionary 1920s as well as within the socialist realist culture of the 1930s. Anyone engaged in the study of East Slavic—particularly Russian—literature and culture is well acquainted with the longstanding scholarly work of the editors: Brigitte Obermayr, Professor of East Slavic Literatures and Cultures at Potsdam University, and Riccardo Nicolosi, Professor of Slavic Literatures at LMU Munich.

The primary aim of their book, which—besides their own contributions—brings together essays by seven additional authors (Matthias Schwartz, Aage A. Hansen-Löve, Mark Lipovetsky, Christiane Schäfer, Hans Günther, Edward Tyerman, Tatjana Hofmann), is to investigate, explain, and theoretically frame the phenomenon of adventure narratives in the early Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s. In their introductory essay, Obermayr and Nicolosi highlight two essential features of adventure narratives. Although often dismissed as a trivial genre (both in literature and in film), adventure narratives enjoyed unusual popularity in Soviet culture of the 1920s. Yet in order to

attain artistic and political legitimacy, they had to undergo a radical transformation and ultimately lose all resemblance to their Western prototypes: "early Soviet culture left the path of innovation and experimentation in favor of the deeply revisionist and ritualized normative regime of socialist realism" (xiii).

It is precisely this contrast between the polyphonic and relatively free 1920s and the socialist realist, though still transitional (according to E. Dobrenko and M. Turovskaya), 1930s that this highly valuable and, in many respects, pioneering book demonstrates through the case of adventure narratives—both theoretically and in practice. Although the book consists of eleven independent explorations of particular aspects of adventure literature in the early Soviet Union, this does not diminish its methodological coherence and structured approach. On the contrary, the diverse scholarly voices together form a kaleidoscopic picture pointing to: (a) the polyphony and polymorphism of adventure in Russian literary theory, prose, and film of the 1920s; (b) its political role in shaping the new Soviet ideology and its didactic function for children and youth; and (c) the necessary transformation that adventure narratives were required to undergo, i.e., the radical redefinition of "adventure" within the context of socialist realism.

PART I: THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK (CHAPTERS 1–4)

The first part of the book consists of four chapters that provide the theoretical and historical framework of adventure narratives in Soviet literature and film, and therefore require more extensive explanations. The studies of M. Schwartz, A. A. Hansen-Löve, and R. Nicolosi complement one another and form a logical progression. It is within these contributions that one can discern the transformative processes in the understanding and use of "adventure" in Russian (Soviet) adventure literature (M. Schwartz), literary theory (A. A. Hansen-Löve, R. Nicolosi), and film (M. Schwartz). Each author, in their own way, emphasizes the openness of the 1920s—a period marked by an exceptional tendency toward experimentation in theory and art. Most contributions in this volume also show how the 1930s brought that tendency to an end, altering both the understanding of art and of adventure, as well as its role in Soviet culture. It was the "almost endless era of Stalinism" (23), as Hansen-Löve points out, that silenced experimentation in adventure narratives.

The first chapter, "New Adventures for the Soviet Present: Conceptualizations and Debates Surrounding a Contested Popular Literature Genre", offers an extensive literary-historical overview of the development and transformations of adventure narratives from the October Revolution to the Stalin era. Matthias Schwartz demonstrates how the genre of adventure literature traveled from being disreputable and disparaged—known in the most pejorative sense as "Pinkertonism" (a term coined by Kornei Chukovsky in 1908)—to Bukharin's call for the creation of a "communist Pinkerton" in 1922. Yet, like other contributors, Schwartz singles out the mid-1920s, during the height of the New Economic Policy, as the period when adventure literature in Russia became a beloved genre. The literary market then published a large number of translated adventure novels, from which Russian variants also developed. In other words, many Russian adventure narratives published in the mid-to-late 1920s were adaptations and translations of Western authors. Sovietization—an adaptation of foreign models and narratives—was a com-

mon practice inherent in Soviet culture, and it is therefore unsurprising that Soviet writers were called upon to dismantle the "colonial pattern" of Western adventure prose and to expose the "criminal side of colonial rule" (8), as did S. Auslender, S. Bobrov, S. Grigor'ev, and L. Nikulin in their works. The new demand for a rethinking of the adventure genre was enforced during the Stalin era with the institutionalization of socialist realism, which required the genre to be directed toward Soviet reality.

Aage A. Hansen-Löve, in the second chapter—"'We Are Incapable of Creating the Simplest Criminal Plot...': The Formalist Theory of Prose and Russian Experimental Adventure Literature of the 1920s"—argues that the most significant experimenters in both literary theory and the adventure genre of the 1920s were the Russian Formalists led by V. Shklovsky, B. Eikhenbaum, and Yu. Tynianov. Although the Formalists were not admirers of adventure literature, Hansen-Löve stresses that they recognized its hidden potential and thus initiated "a comprehensive reform of the adventure novel and its stereotypical characteristics" (21). Their theoretical achievements were most significant in the study of suspenseful short forms (B. Eikhenbaum) and narratology (V. Shklovsky's distinction between *fabula* and *siuzhet*). The most interesting (though not entirely successful) experiment of the young Formalist movement was the attempt to apply theoretical principles practically, which resulted in the novel *Iprit* (1925), co-written by Vsevolod Ivanov and Viktor Shklovsky himself. Shklovsky openly described the novel as a literary exercise that plays with traditional motifs and techniques of suspense—a subject revisited in Chapter 7 of the book. That the 1920s, which Vladimir Paperny (in his concept of "Culture One") characterized as pluralistic, dynamic, horizontal, and internationally connected, were indeed receptive to foreign influences is demonstrated by all four chapters of the first part. Perhaps the clearest example is Lev Lunts (a member of the Serapion Brothers collective) who, as Hansen-Löve notes, was convinced that Russian writers could not devise intrigue or construct a detective plot, and thus in 1922 proclaimed that avant-garde prose must *Go West!*—that is, learn from American and English light fiction.

Riccardo Nicolosi further deepens the question of the theoretical framework of adventure literature in the third chapter, "Poetics of Adventure in the 1920s (from Shklovsky to Bakhtin)", emphasizing the lack of a modern, solid, and systematic scientific theory of adventure narratives. Critical of Western scholarship for neglecting valuable Russian contributions—such as early Formalist works as well as other early Soviet writings—Nicolosi offers a systematic and useful overview of the most important theoretical works in the early Soviet Union during the 1920s, noting that a veritable "adventure fever" took hold in the mid-decade. His chapter shows how both the function of specific narrative elements and the conception of the adventure hero evolved, from early Formalist texts to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*—the only globally recognized and widely cited theoretical work relevant to the theory of adventure literature. Like many other contributors, Nicolosi regards the 1930s as a period of fundamental shifts in the understanding of the adventure genre. It was at this time that a distinction was established between *aventura* (the "adventure novel"), which acquired pejorative (bourgeois-Western) connotations, and *prikliuchenie* (*prikliuchencheskii roman*), which "could still have a certain function in children's and youth literature [...] without exoticism and elements of Western colonialism" (62–63).

Nicolosi also touches on film (specifically the significance of adventure in film theory for Russian Formalism), without which the understanding of adventure narratives would be incomplete. It is therefore fitting that the last (fourth) chapter of the first part of the book is devoted to cinema. In "The Magic of Cinema: Vladimir Vainshtok and a Socialist Film Poetics of Adventure", Matthias Schwartz, in his second contribution, again emphasizes openness to the new and the Western as one of the key features of 1920s adventure films. Soviet cinemas during the NEP era screened "hundreds of foreign films each year, many of which ran for years on end" (68). The Russian market was then flooded with American, German, and French adventure films, which attracted much larger audiences than the works of the first Soviet cinematic innovators (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, etc.), whose productions demanded educated and sophisticated viewers. Soviet adventure cinema developed at lightning speed between 1924 and 1929, Schwartz asserts, until the genre was "completely halted from 1930 to 1933" (75). Nevertheless, Soviet adventure film experienced a revival in the late 1930s thanks to adaptations of Jules Verne's *Les enfants du capitaine Grant* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* by Vladimir Vainshtok. Although the 1930s are remembered as the decade when Soviet culture closed its borders and terminated its dialogue with the West, Schwartz emphasizes that returning to classical models (in this case, adaptations of nineteenth-century novels), which were thoroughly reworked to fit Soviet ideology and everyday life, was a common practice.

PART II: CASE STUDIES (CHAPTERS 5–11)

The second part of the book consists of seven chapters, presented as case studies, which I will briefly outline. Mark Lipovetsky—well known for his studies on the role and transformation of the trickster in Soviet and post-Soviet culture—analyzes the connection between the trickster and the adventurer, offering an engaging interpretation of the Munchhausen figure in early Soviet literature and culture ("Munchausen's Adventures in Early Soviet Fiction"). Particularly interesting is the transformation of Munchausen in the works of Sigismund Krzhizhanovsky and Stepan Pisakhov, which introduces a secondary theme: the problem of Soviet adaptations, or the transformation of Western narratives. One of the most popular and beloved Soviet tricksters was Ostap Bender, protagonist of the novels *The Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Little Golden Calf* (1931) by Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov. In his second contribution, "Ostap Bender: From an Adventurer to a Bureaucrat. Transformations of the Early Soviet Rogue Narrative in *The Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Little Golden Calf* (1931)", Riccardo Nicolosi explores the transformation of this witty, adventurous rogue and individualist, who eventually exhibits something like a "behavioral disorder" (137). Accordingly, in the sequel to *The Twelve Chairs*, Bender loses his charming, gambling nature and ceases to be an adventurer-hero.

One of the boldest literary experiments, already mentioned in Part I, is certainly the novel *Iprit* (1925), written at the height of the adventure fever by the acclaimed author Vsevolod Ivanov and the Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky. In Chapter 7, "Meta-Adventures: Vsevolod Ivanov's and Viktor Shklovsky's Novel *Iprit* in the Context of the Early Soviet Boom of Adventure Literature", Brigitte Obermayr offers a detailed and profound analysis of a work conceived with a very deliberate aim: to test how "pulp" literature might serve as a

catalyst for adventure. Obermayr emphasizes the metafictional nature of the novel, but also stresses that the Formalists theoretical interest in popular taste was no accident; rather, it reflected a pragmatic awareness of the literary market. Appropriately, she opens her analysis with Shklovsky's 1924 essay: *"One could ignore Tarzan [...] but it would be stupid"* (146).

Chapters 8 and 9 move somewhat away from adventure literature in the classical sense. In "Leaping over Death: Adventurous Agency in Fyodor Gladkov's *Cement*" (1925), Christiane Schäfer identifies adventure-like features in this first Soviet *production novel*. Considering that Gladkov's work marks a transition from wartime turbulence to stability, the protagonist's adventurous quality is primarily tied to everyday life and real labor. Indeed, the hero's central undertaking consists of overcoming danger and death. Hans Günther, in "Andrei Platonov's Novel *Chevengur* as a Journey of Adventure", argues that Platonov's novel about the quest for the utopian-fantastic city of Chevengur (which bears elements of a teleological journey) may be read as a kind of adventure novel. He also demonstrates how the adventurous journeys of the novel's two protagonists—Dvanov and Kopënkin—are inextricably connected.

Edward Tyerman devotes Chapter 10 to an especially intriguing topic: the adventure travelogues of the 1920s and 1930s recounting Soviet journeys to China. In "Revolutionary Adventures in China: Internationalism and Early Soviet Adventure Fiction", Tyerman focuses on so-called engaged journalism and adventure novels, offering a geopoetic analysis that intersects with the geopolitical project of Comintern internationalism. Although he briefly mentions the case of Soviet journalist Zinaida Rikhter, this is the subject of Tatjana Hofmann's final essay. In "Zinaida Rikhter's Flight Adventure: An 'Adventure Travel Sketch'", Hofmann examines Rikhter's fascinating travel sketches of the 1920s and 1930s in the context of avant-garde obsessions with speed, transport technologies, and motorized vehicles—especially airplanes and aviation.

CONCLUSION

All these aspects fit within what Vladimir Paperny has termed "Culture One": the open, dynamic, international, and ever-mobile culture of the 1920s. The volume *Adventure Narratives in the Early Soviet Union* not only underscores experimentation as one of the defining features of Russian literary-theoretical thought and artistic practice in the 1920s when it came to the concept of adventure, but also highlights the process of gradual Sovietization—that is, the radical redefinition of adventure narratives in the 1930s in accordance with socialist realism and the new Soviet reality.

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