

Conference Paper

Representation of the Consumer Society in V. O. Pelevin`s Novels of the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the study of consumer society reflection in V.O. Pelevin's works published in the twenty-first century. There is an attempt to determine the main features of the consumer society to which the characters belong: dominance of focus toward to the satisfaction of private needs, the acquisition of material wealth as a means of achieving prosperity and happiness, the quality of consumed products (goods, services, etc.) determines the status of the consumer in society. V.O. Pelevin defines and ridicules capitalist culture using sarcasm and grotesque, demonstrating the image of consumer society exclusively in negative connotations. V.O. Pelevin reconstructs modern society, endowing it with the features of the world we are accustomed to, but absurdly creating his world of sellers and consumers included in a repeating cycle and changing roles depending on status within the framework of artistic reality. Aimed at revealing the author's attitude to the consumer society and the novel characters' attitudes to the object of study, selective analysis of a work fragments demonstrates the gradual inclusion of characters in the consumption culture and a deeper study of the phenomenon by the author. The article considers the consumer society reconstruction in the art world of the following works by V.O. Pelevin: novels *Generation P*, *The Werewolf's Holy Book*, *Svyashennaya kniga oborotnya*, *Empire V*, *Secret Views of the Fuji Mount*, [*Sekretnye vidi na goru Fuji*], and a story *Wind search record* [*Zapis' o poiske vetra*]. Such a selective analysis reflects the transformation (which, depending on the point of view, can be called both evolution and degradation) of the consumer culture image and the position of the author may be determined.

Keywords: consumer society, postmodernism, V.O. Pelevin, novels

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1. Introduction

The aim of the work is to compare the features of a modern consumer society defined by researchers with the features that are endowed with the consumer society created in the space of fiction in particular postmodern literature, also determine the general model of consumption culture, which is created by Victor Pelevin in the framework of fiction.

Researchers (for example, Ilyin V.I., Zombrat V., Campbell K., etc.) note that the change in social development is due to establishment of capitalism. The formation of such a

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system is accompanied by the active development of economy (in particular, an increase in income), abundance of products with similar commodity qualities and the need to choose [11]. Different scholars and disciplines, taking into account different aspects, address the issue of determining the key features of reality and drawing up a portrait of modernity.

2. Methodology and Methods

The key research method is to compare the characteristics of a consumer society with the characteristic that is given by an artistic model of this type of society created as part of the works of Victor Pelevin a famous Russian author.

Dwell on the theoretical basis of the research.

Capitalism, being the leading type of economic system in a number of countries, affects all spheres of society, as noted by Erich Fromm, the philosopher of the 20th century. Considering capitalism as a controller of interpersonal interaction, the author notes the following key features of capitalist society in the treatise "The Art of Loving":

1. formation of the conveyor organization of labor activity;
2. standardization of tastes, desires, preferences of every member of society: a standardized way of life, a worldview system formed through cultural and social codes provided by advertising, feature films, the media, etc. leads to the frame;
3. creating a relationship with people and with yourself as a product [2].

Thus, let us formulate the characteristic features of a consumer society. They are as follows:

1. material goods consumption (in the broad sense — the acquisition of goods, the purchase of services, goods, etc.);
2. overproduction of commodities [3];
3. items are not treated as goods with certain qualities, but as a symbol of belonging: the higher the quality of the consumed goods suggests the higher the status of the consumer, items are used as a "social marker": possession of a certain product signals society about a certain status;
4. purchase of goods becomes a way to achieve happiness;
5. consumer relationship extends to interpersonal contacts and interactions with other consumers;

6. personal desires and satisfaction of individual needs are more significant [4].

H. Foster in his monograph "Postmodern Culture" notes the steady connection between postmodernism and capitalism. In particular, the author notes, since the 80s of the XX century, blurring of the boundaries between high and mass culture has been observed [1].

3. Results and Discussion

Consumer society should be interpreted more broadly than just a group of adepts of culture, which is based on the consumption of things as a fundamental value. This attitude applies to all spheres of human life. In this regard, the reflection of the consumer society can be found in modern art culture, for example, in V. Pelevin's novels. There is a representation of the consumer society, the image of which is created on the basis of modern realities in the artistic world of the author.

V. Pelevin gives an unambiguously negative assessment and describes such a culture exclusively in negative connotations. The creation of such characters in a work only as an accentuation of the problem situation (and such an assessment of the consumer society is obvious) is not enough for the author. The assessment basis can only be assumed: consumption is negatively interpreted by Pelevin in comparison with the authors of the 20th century.

Orientation to the consumer society at different semantic levels can be traced in the prose of V. Pelevin of both the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, the cult novel "Generation «P»" begins with a description of the advertising video clip of Pepsi-Cola (which implicitly explains the name of the work): a monkey in a jeep is the symbol of consumption, which is shown in the video. It simultaneously becomes a symbol of the era.

Let us dwell on the advertising components of the novel. In the second half of the work the main character notes a change in the typical plot of the advertisement. Advertising does not rely on the useful qualities of a product or ways of using. Advertising clips showcase lifestyle: "In front of a large fireplace, burning in a strange mirror wall, a family was sitting — a father, a mother, a daughter with a pussy and a grandmother with an untied stocking. They were looking into the fire burning behind bars, making quick and slightly caricatured movements — the grandmother was knitting, the mother was eating a slice of pizza on the sides, the girl was stroking her pussy, and the father was sipping beer" [5].

Thus, the consumption of certain goods is associated with the achievement of individual well-being, happiness, which is further explained in the text by other characters. Through advertising, media, movies, etc. a media space is being formed, filled with images — simulacra (in the terminology of the philosopher J. Baudrillard) — values and goods that can be achieved and realized through tangible goods.

Such commercials are aimed at the mass audience, everyone can achieve happiness: “From the point of view of Buddhism, the meaning of advertising is extremely simple. It seeks to convince that the consumption of the advertised product leads to a high and favorable rebirth, and not after death, but immediately after the act of consumption” [5]. Comparing with modern realities, we note that there is a wide and active use of consumer loans, credit cards, which allows you to purchase goods as soon as a desire arises [4].

It should be noted that not only the fact of achieving happiness becomes important to the consumer, but also the formation of a favorable image in the environment and the achievement of status through the use of a material object [11]. Consumption becomes socially oriented and ceases to satisfy basic needs, passing over to higher levels of the pyramid of needs proposed by A. Maslow, such as the need for respect. However, satisfaction of artificial needs often takes place. They are formed by the culture of consumption and leading to the acquisition of products that are not utility, but enhancing the consumer status [8]. This idea can be traced in other V. Pelevin’s works, transforming and deepening over time.

Thus, one can see discourses of the protagonist’s sister in the novel “The Werewolf’s Holy Book”, which was published in 2004: «When you buy a blouse, or a car, or something else, you have in your mind an image inspired by advertising of the place where you go in this blouse or go by this car. But there is no such place anywhere except in the advertising clip, and this serious black hole in reality is mourned by all serious philosophers of the West. An unbearable understanding shines through the joy of shopping that our whole world is a huge ski store in the middle of the Sahara: you need to buy not only skis, but also a snow simulator» [7]. The heroine talks about simulacra of reality: a product image is formed in the media space that contributes to the achievement of a specific good, which, however, does not exist and cannot be realized.

A material object is taxed with social elements, such as status and subjective feelings of wealth, satisfaction and happiness, because status is realized in the framework of interaction with other people. Thus, wealth and a good standard of living are associated with consumption, possibly even rationally redundant [13].

The main character type of employment also refers the reader to consumption and simulacra. The werewolf fox makes a mess, and creates an illusion. But at the same time, she should not understand or approve the created simulacrum: it is important that the person who wishes something has a clear understanding of his \ her desire.

But it should be noted that here the werewolf fox talks about consumption, being within the framework of culture, but not sharing the values of society. In other novels Pelevin creates characters who are completely immersed in the culture of consumption. Consumption reaches the level of not only interpersonal interaction, but also becomes the platform of life at various levels.

A female image, similar in terms of consumption to that of the fox, appears in the novel "Secret Views of the Fuji Mount": Tatyana the beloved of the protagonist Fedor Semenovich is perceived by others as a commodity. Let us recall Larisa Ogudalova, the heroine of N. Ostrovsky's drama "Dowry", who at the end of composition defines herself as a thing, an object.

In the novel "Secret Views of the Fuji Mount" such an interpretation is brought to the grotesque — a main characteristic for Pelevin's work. Just as people relate to her, she embeds a market system in interpersonal interactions: «People — it was clear to Tanya since kindergarten — had a commodity value and they seemed to mutually rent each other even in the most disinterested at first glance friendly relations» [8]. A werewolf fox creates a simulacrum, an image attractive to the consumer. Tanya merges with the external image created for consumption.

Meanwhile, Tanya becomes an adherent of the sect called New Hunters. Esoteric practices described by the author in the usual sarcastic manner can also be interpreted as a part of the consumption cycle. Tanya and other adherents of the sect treat people as objects that allow them to achieve goals and satisfy needs that are not rational, but are imposed by the culture of consumption, which dominates in the society and in the art world of a work. But the desire for a qualitative change and the transition to a different social status encourages the character to develop, which can also be considered as a feature of capitalist society [11].

"The Empire V novel", published in 2006, the same key idea is traced — condemnation of the consumer society, in which there is a decline in the level of culture and the replacement of complex images with simple ones: «When a person is fed with advertising, expertise and events of the day for a long time, he has a desire to be a brand, an expert and news himself» [6]. This quote also confirms the thesis said above: symbols are created in the media space that artificially form the consumers' irrational needs. There is a mixture of journalistic and artistic styles in the dialog "Empire V" and

“Batman Apollo”, which allows the author to embed discussions about the problems of modern society in the plot of a work of art.

According to the publicist D. Bykov, one of the key internal themes of the “Empire V novel” is the inner void, which the characters are trying to fill with the help of the “bablos” absorption, which can be interpreted quite widely. As the author notes, a similar motive can be identified in the novel “The Werewolf’s Holy Book”: a werewolf, the main male character of the novel, “milks” Russia and pump oil. But at the same time, the characters do not produce anything, which, according to D. Bykov, brings them together. Bykov writes that Russia as a whole (meaning the image of Russia in the context of Pelevin’s art world) is occupied only with endless consumption. It should be assumed that all the characters are drawn into the repeating cycle of gratuitous consumption. Using sarcasm, which can be called the key and characteristic method of accentuation for Pelevin’s prose. The author focuses on this feature of modern society and laugh at it.

Building a model of the consumption world as a fundamental criterion is determined by researchers (for example, D. L. Bykov, S. Polotovskiy and R. Kozak and A.B. Seidshalova, R.G. Zhitko, etc.). It is the presence of emptiness in the soul of the main characters, comparison and interchangeability of different levels of being: material and spiritual [9, 11].

The topic of consumption can be called the key theme of the author. An important element of the consumption process for the characters is the pleasure that emerges in the process of acquiring material objects — a value formed in a capitalist society.

When the characters lose their ability to experience pleasure, it destroys their lives. A dichotomous pair “knowledge-consumption” appears in the novel: as a result of using experimental technology, the characters achieved enlightenment, which led to an understanding of the meaninglessness of life. The consequence of esoteric experience and insight was the loss of pleasure from consumption, which plunged the characters into suffering. And the characters make an obvious choice — they give up awareness for the joy of possessing material things.

Pelevin considers the problem of consumer society not only in great prose. The author creates a single artistic universe, populating it with characters that can intersect. Thus, the constant highlighting the negative features of a consumer society and culture takes place in each authors’ work. For example, R. Kozak in his monograph “Pelevin and the generation of the emptiness” writes that the story “Wind search record” is unambiguously called criticism of the consumer society.

The story is written in the form of a letter from the student to the teacher. Despite the small volume, the author succinctly presented the reasoning, touching upon the themes

of illusion and reality, consumption and knowledge. A short form of writing allows the author to concentrate on thoughts presented in the form of a stream of consciousness, bypassing the plot component. The story is genetically related to the “Secret Views of the Fuji Mount” novel: both stories reveal the problem of a consumer society.

4. Conclusions

Thus, having noted the creation of an image of a consumer society and the endowment of characters with key characteristics of such a culture in several Pelevin’s novels, the following thesis can be formulated:

The features of a consumer society are more typical for the characters of novels, published in the XXI century.

Pelevin demonstrates that consumption is the basis of interpersonal interaction; characters are characterized by a desire to satisfy individual rather than collective needs. Those traits that researchers in the field of marketing, sociology and philosophy have noted as relevant to modern society, which can be confidently called consumer, are also reflected in fiction. Pelevin, using the grotesque and sarcasm, ridicules these features on the example of a society reconstructed in the framework of the art world.

The author is characterized by the comprehension of current problems and significant topics of modernity within the framework of his work, creating a model of reality within the artistic world. Undoubtedly, the consumer society is a significant problem for the author, a key idea passes through Pelevin’s early work, and continues in later works.

V. Pelevin pays attention to this type of social relations and to capitalism as the leading social system for society within the framework of the artistic world and considers a society in which consumption is a grotesquely fundamental value. The negative assessment of the characters is obvious: V. Pelevin uses sarcasm to laugh at and express contempt for such a culture.

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