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**SPECIFICITY OF COMMENTING ON MODERN CLASSICS: V.  
PELEVIN “THE YELLOW ARROW”**

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**Abstract**

The article is devoted to some problems of commenting on the works of one of the major writers in the modern literary process, Victor Pelevin. His work “The Yellow Arrow” (1993) was chosen as an example. Pelevin’s tale is a polycode structure that is built on balancing between aesthetic (sacral, esoteric) and mass (profiled, exoteric) knowledge, resulting in the effect of multilayered text organization focused on the widest possible range of readers. The story, addressed to a mass reader with completely different level of education and culture, age index, is saturated with various realities of the 1980s - 1990s era. For the 1990s reader, most of them did not require their explanation because they constituted one’s daily experience of the time. However, when reprinting Pelevin’s works at present it is necessary to take into account the rapid development of Russian history of the 20th century, especially after 1985. In addition to historical and socio-political realities, Pelevin’s story includes hidden quotes from literary and musical works relevant to characterizing the changes that took place in Russian society in the 1980s and early 1990s. These quotes, allusions, references implement the principle of intertextuality, which blasts a purely linear reading of the text and proposes to take into account the author’s dialogue (or even polylog) with the “someone else’s text”, can be considered implemented only if the reader is able to catch the very presence of the “someone else’s text”.

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## **1. Introduction**

In Russian postmodernism, Victor Pelevin is a cult figure. He is very popular with the generation that grew up in the 1990s. At the same time, Pelevin's prose is considered largely hermetic for a modern young reader, because, firstly, the socio-historical, common, historical, cultural realities reflected in his works have disappeared from modern life; secondly, intensive intertextuality, which is one of the favourite forms of deconstruction that the writer refers to, contributes to this. As a result, nowadays there is the need for commenting on Pelevin's texts (Markova, 2014).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The strategies of postmodernism, chosen by Pelevin, allow him to create "multi-layered" texts. Their polysemantism, on the one hand, raises their intellectual level, and on the other, makes it difficult for some readers to perceive them. The research is devoted to the problem of eliminating such difficulties, which occur in the process of understanding the text, using comments on the works of the modern writer.

## **3. Research Questions**

During the process of commenting on the story of V. Pelevin "The Yellow Arrow", a number of questions, that are necessary to be addressed, arose:

- 3.1. How to keep the texts, which represent the national literary canon of the 20th century, in the circle of actual reading?
- 3.2. How to connect a young reader and the text, whose language and realities disappear from the present?
- 3.3. What types of comments should complement V. Pelevin's story "The Yellow Arrow"?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to consider the work "The Yellow Arrow" by V. Pelevin from the point of specificity of its commenting.

To achieve this purpose it is necessary to solve the following tasks:

- to find the realities that require comments;
- to define, which types of comments correlate with different types of realities;
- to make exemplary comments on the different types of realities.

## **5. Research Methods**

The general methodology of the research is determined by the stated tasks and involves the complex application of historical and literary analysis methods, as well as the consideration of the theory and practice of commenting.

## 6. Findings

The scientific commenting on the living Russian writers' works, which are able to join the fund of Russian classical literature because of their artistic level and social significance, has its own specificity. Modern philologists state: the era of postmodernism comes to an end (Kolesnikov, 2019), so it is time for its study and commenting. A number of scientific problems are associated with this type of literary activity (Karpov et al., 2017; Kibalnik, 2017; Vajngurt, 2018), and one way or another, they should be resolved when referring to the works of "living classics". As for an example, we consider V. Pelevin's story "The Yellow Arrow" (1993), which now turns from the "cult" work of the 1990s to one of the most prominent works of Russian literature of the 20th century.

The plot of the story, written on the crossroads of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, is organized by the motif of the path and represents an extended metaphor: the train "The Yellow Arrow" – Russian society, Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which moves in an unknown direction. In Russian literature the situation, when there is a choice of the historical path is often associated with the means of transport. For example, one can recall N. Gogol's metaphor-images (Chichikov's chaise, "troika"), and tarantas from the novel by V. Sollogub (Sytina, 2018). In the second half of the 19th century, the motif of railway takes place in the imagery (Dmitrenko, 2012). In the post-revolutionary literary tendency, it begins to occupy one of the most important places in the process of symbolizing the rapid movement forward of the Soviet country. Pelevin's "The Yellow Arrow" is not an exception in this imagery, but a natural continuation of the established tradition.

The main character of the story Andrei, as well as the others, is a passenger of "The Yellow Arrow". The concept of "being a passenger" in Pelevin's novel reflects an automatic, inertial, thoughtless perception of life: "... When a man stops hearing the sound of the wheels and just wants to keep on moving, he becomes a passenger" (Pelevin, 2018, p. 59). In this capacity, Andrei forcibly, not of his own free will, moves to the "ruined bridge" – an important symbol in Russian literature (Kladova, 2018).

Meanwhile, the main character goes through his individual path – the path of discipleship and dedication. Though at the beginning of the story he is an ordinary "passenger", who lives by the inertia in accordance with narrow-minded stereotypes and don't know other forms of existence rather than thoughtless movement in a train car, then by the end of the story he becomes a student of Khan and makes his choice consciously. First, the "teacher" sets the task for Andrei: "There is still the most difficult part. To ride in the train and not to be a passenger" (Pelevin, 2018, p. 59). Then he gives to the "student" even more complex task: "get off the train". The motif of choosing one's *own* path is directly related to one of the key ideas of not only "The Yellow Arrow", but also many others works by Pelevin – the idea of freedom, which is presented by the writer as philosophical and even metaphysical state. In the story "The Yellow Arrow" Andrei "gets off the train" not only in order to free himself from those forms of existence that passengers consider to be the only possible ones, but also in order to make his journey to the "other worlds".

When commenting on "The Yellow Arrow", it is necessary, first, to take into account the rapid development of Russian history in the 20th century, which became even more rapid in the period after 1985. V. Pelevin was born in 1962, so for him the realities of the USSR, the collapse of which he observed in the

late 1980s – early 1990s, were the facts of his biography. As the result, the range of signs, which are common for the time require comments for the Russian readers of next generations.

Creating images of his story, Pelevin uses the device of double and even triple coding. On the one hand, the signs of time and everyday life of the 1990s are generously scattered in the story (machinations of tumbler-gamblers, theft and further sale by Russian citizens of “non-ferrous metals” – aluminum spoons, cup holders, door locks). At the same time, these realities go along with the elements of the author’s worldview with noticeable philosophy of Zen Buddhism (Badmacyrenov & Ayushieva, 2017). According to it, the movement of “The Yellow Arrow” is considered as samsara, and the expression “to get off the train” means to leave the “circle of karma”. Two levels of content has passed through the prism of the post-modern “game code” (Ishimbaeva, 2001), in which tragic and philosophical things easily turn into farce. The principle of the “game” in Pelevin’s novel is based on a semantic field related to the motifs and images of the train and the railway (the newspaper “Route” (Put’), the heading “Rail and ties” (Rel’sy i shpaly), vodka “Railway Special” (Zheleznodorozhnaya osobaya), cognac “Lazo” (reference to Sergey Lazo) and so on). Such a “game” includes many common, social, political, economic, ideological, cultural realities of Soviet and post-Soviet country. In relation to this principle of “composite vision,” the comments on the title of the story should combine all the named aspects of the author’s vision.

For a significant part of modern readers, commenting on the realities of the collapse of the USSR and the start of the construction of the new, post-Soviet Russia is already necessary. Here are some examples:

*Otherwise, Petr Sergeievich would go on reminiscing about the way things were before the reforms* ... – The author narrates about the period of the existence of the Soviet state in the 1970s – 1985. In 1985 – 1991 in the USSR, there was a course for implementing economic reforms.

*Voucher* – a security paper, which certifies the right of its owner to a share in state property. Based on a voucher privatization program, it was a check issued to the public, which could be exchanged for the assets of privatized enterprises in 1992 – 1994.

*...we need to break spoons to pieces, because they won’t release the whole ones outside the frontier vestibule.* – There is an allusion to the illegal business of exporting scrap non-ferrous metal, unfolded in the 1990s.

*They came and said there was conversion. From compartment to reserved.* – An ironic allusion to the Russian reality in 1990s: the transfer of enterprises of the military-industrial complex to the production of consumer goods.

*...from the beginning of Peretsepka (hitching).* – An allusion to the concept of “Perestroika”, which names large-scale changes in the ideology, economic and political life of the USSR in the second half of the 1980s. The goal of the reforms was to democratize the socio-political and economic system that had developed in the USSR.

In addition to historical and socio-political realities, Pelevin’s novel contains hidden quotes from literary and musical works that are relevant for characterizing the changes, which took place in Russian society in the 1980s and early 1990s. Of particular importance are the “quotes” from musical works. It is interesting that the Pelevin’s “game” with such quotes clearly marks the border between the song background of the Brezhnev era, which went to an end, and the songs of the new time – the era of

“Perestroika”. The late Soviet musical “hits” appear in the novel as something forgotten or hardly remembered:

... *from ~ the speakers ~ I had to think about a Nadezhda, whom one will come to after the release.*

– Probably, it is an allusion to the famous Soviet song “Nadezhda” (Hope) (1971, mus. by A. Pahmutova, lyrics by N. Dobronravov): “Hope – my compass on Earth...”

... *as if to invite to the peak of the years, lived through by an abstract Vakhtang Kikabidze... – Vakhtang Konstantinovich Kikabidze (b. 1938) is a Georgian and Soviet singer, composer, actor, screenwriter. It says about a song “My years are my wealth”, which V. Kikabidze sang (music by G. Movsesyan, lyrics by R. Rozhdestvenskiy): “Well, even if my head is grey, / No point to be afraid of winter, / It’s not just burden, my old age, / My years are my wealth...”*

On the contrary, quotes from Russian and American rock songs characterize the new era. It is important to note that special attention in the “musical mode” of the story is given to the songs of B. Grebenshchikov, who according to Pelevin reflected the era of transition in his work as much as possible. For example:

“*Bridge over troubled waters*” – the name of the song of the American duo “Simon and Garfunkel” that became the name of their fifth studio album (1970) with six Grammy awards. In 1971, the song “Bridge over troubled waters” was recognized as the best contemporary pop song of the year. The name of the song corresponds to the image of the “ruined bridge”, to which, according to the plot of the story, “The Yellow Arrow” goes.

... *Grebenschikov’s “This Train’s on Fire”... – the song of the group “Akvarium” (1987, music and lyrics by B. Grebenshchikov). In the early 1990s, many public organizations and political parties tried to make their hymn out of this song.*

... *“there is no place to run to”... – the quote from B. Grebenshchikov’s song “This Train’s on Fire”: “Our train is on fire / there is no place to run to. / Long ago this land was ours, / before we got trapped in this war. / And it will die if it is nobody’s, / it’s time for it to be returned”.*

The principle of intertextuality, which destroys a purely linear structure of the text and suggests taking into account the author’s dialogue (or even a polylogue) with “someone else’s text” (Suhanov, 2019), can be considered implemented only if the reader is able to catch the presence of “someone else’s text”. This task should be fulfilled through comments.

In the novel “The Yellow Arrow”, intertextuality is presented through literary quotes, which are mainly taken from the classic “range” of works of the Silver Age poets that became “fashionable” in the mid-1980s, and especially from the poetry of N. Gumilyov, who was banned under the Soviet regime. The introduction of these quotes is also subordinate to the author’s task to characterize the transitional era of Russian history:

“*On Early Trains*” – B. Pasternak’s poem (1941).

“*The Petrograd sky grew dim with rain ~ filling wagon after wagon...*” – the quote from the poem “The Petrograd Sky Grew Dim with Rain” (1914) by A. Blok.

... *all look alike with faces like an udder – it was ~ underlined quote of Gumilev...* – It can be compared with N. Gumilev’s poem “The Streetcar That Lost Its Way” (1919): “And then the executioner, / In red short, with face like an udder, / Chopped of my head...”

“The Yellow Arrow” is a work of a postmodern writer. The author constantly “plays” with his reader. The text of the story is full of “false” moves, “tricks” and puzzles that require decoding, guessing and understanding. The interpretation of these “puzzles” should add some irony to the text, with the help of which, according to the author, it is possible to overcome the tragic perception of the sharp turns of Russian history at the end of the 20th century. Here are some examples:

*...popular Estonian singer Guna Tamas ...* – Literary “game” of V. Pelevin. “Tamas” (Sanskrit) or “tama guna” is one of three gunas of material nature in Hinduism. Tamas is the quality of inertia, dullness and roughness. In the cycle of birth and death, the result of the effect of tamas on an individual is degradation into lower forms of life.

*...about the work of Japanese film-director Akira Kurosawa “Dodesukaden” ~ made in 1970 based on the novel of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa “The Sound of Invisible Wheels” ...* – Literary “game”, mystification of V. Pelevin. “Dodesukaden” (“The Sound of Streetcar Wheels”) – the film of Japanese film-director Akira Kurosawa (1970), based on the book of Japanese writer Satomu Shimizu “The Street without Sun”. There is another film of Kurosawa based on Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s story “In a Grove” – “*Rashōmon*” (1950).

*“Budweiser of our Lord” ~ why do you all compare everything that I create with “Budweiser?”* – literary “game” of V. Pelevin. It is an allusion to the song “Silver of our Lord” (1986, music and lyrics by B. Grebenshikov). Budweiser (Dudweiser) – is a trademark of Czech beer. Perhaps it is also an ironic allusion to the picture of American artist Andy Warhol “Coca-Cola” (1962), which is considered as the birth of pop-art.

*...a reproduction of Deyneka’s “The Future Railway Men” ...* – It is literary “game” of V. Pelevin. Soviet painter A. Deyneka (1899-1969), who was born in a family of railway man, has the picture “The Future Pilots” (1938), which name is changed for the “game”.

Being organized as a multicode structure, Pelevin’s novel is built on a delicate balance between aesthetic (sacred, esoteric (Pasechnik, 2015)) and mass (profane, exoteric) knowledge that a potential reader possesses or does not possess. The following example shows a passage, which is intended for an intellectual reader:

*A hierarchy of demiurges, an incomplete and monstrous world and so on ~ Gnosticism, in a single word.* – There is a reference to the ideas of the Gnostic philosopher Basilides (II century A.D.). According to his doctrine, being has three types: ideal, material and spiritual. The “subtle” ideal being “rises upward” and joins directly the absolute super-existent deity, and the “rough” material being “settles down” and forms the visible world. However, under the shell of material forms there is still the seed of spiritual life, which needs to be purified. The first lord and head of the world is Archon and the second - Demiurge, whom obey 365 astral angels controlling the same number of star spheres. Both of them did not know anything about this higher spiritual potency until it revealed itself in the incarnation of Christ, <...> who connects the lower world with the higher one. (Solov’ev, 1892, p. 576-577).

Another example shows that, along with refined references to philosophical ideas, Pelevin gives a metaphorical picture of openness and ambiguity of the further development of Russia through the image of mass culture:

*“The Yellow Arrow” is a train travelling toward a ruined bridge. The train we’re riding in.* – There is a reference to an episode from the American science fiction western comedy “Back to the Future 3”

(1990) directed by Robert Zemeckis. The characters, time travelers, overcome a deep gorge on a train that accelerates to maximum speed through the air and without a bridge in order to return from the past to the present.

The end of “The Yellow Arrow” is full of hidden literary connotations in reference with Russian literature of the early 20th century:

*Andrei jumped onto the mound. ~ The train started ~ He turned and walked away. He did not really think about where he was going, but soon an asphalt road crossing a wide field appeared under his feet, and a bright line became visible in the sky near the horizon. ~ Soon, he began to hear clearly what he had never heard before: dry chirping in the grass, the breath of the wind and the quiet sound of his own steps.* – It is an allusion to the text of A. Chekhov’s story “The Bishop” (1902). Its character was dying and felt new-found freedom from the shackles of society: “...he could not utter a word, he could understand nothing, and he imagined he was a simple ordinary man, that he was walking quickly, cheerfully through the fields, tapping with his stick, while above him was the open sky bathed in sunshine, and that he was free now as a bird and could go where he liked!” (Chekhov, 1977, p. 201). It can be also compared with the popular in the beginning of the 20th century novel “Sanine”, written by M. Artzibashef (1907), who was obviously influenced by Chekhov. In the end of the story, his character – a young man, who was free from social dogmas and prejudice – Vladimir Sanine left the provincial town and then jumped off the train: “Sanine did not waste time in reflection, but, leaving his valise behind him, jumped off the foot-board. With a noise like thunder the train rushed past him as he fell on to the soft, wet sand of the embankment. The red lamp on the last carriage was a long way off when he rose, laughing. <...> All around him was so free, so vast. Broad, level fields of grass lay on either side, stretching away to the misty horizon. Sanine drew a deep breath, as with bright eyes he surveyed the spacious landscape. Then he strode forward, facing the jocund, lustrous dawn; and, as the plain, awaking, assumed magic tints of blue and green beneath the wide dome of heaven; as the first eastern beams broke on his dazzled sight, it seemed to Sanine that he was moving onward; onward to meet the sun” (Artzibashef, 1990, p. 309).

Such an abundance of hidden quotes in the text creates an implicit accordance between Pelevin’s work and the previous tradition. This confirms the close connection of the best works of modern literature with Russian classics.

## 7. Conclusion

To summarize the results of this research, we come to the following conclusions:

**7.1.** The social, common, cultural realities of past 1990s demands the special attention, when commenting on the novel “The Yellow Arrow” by V. Pelevin.

**7.2.** The most important are those realities, which are connected with the culture of different times and appears in the story due to the principle of intertextuality, used by the author.

**7.3.** The examples of comments, presented in the article, set the certain model for further detailed commenting on the novel “The Yellow Arrow”.

As a result, there is a conclusion, that scientific commenting on the works of “modern classics” not only allows the reader to reveal the depth of the author’s intention thoroughly, but also shows the internal connection of postmodern, which sometimes is hidden behind shocking forms and techniques, with the previous stages of the development of Russian literature.

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