Code of woman: transformation of femininity strategies in Russian mass culture. A case study

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a recent cultural-semiotic study. The author makes an attempt to build a meta-model of cultural analysis based on the notion of semiosphere by Lotman, and of interpretive codes by Williams. The model becomes a basis for the following case study of communicative strategies of femininity in Russian mass media. More than 300 samples of Russian and global mass culture were analyzed. The material included popular TV series, movies, TV shows, advertising campaigns of beauty, fashion, technologies, FMCG brands, images of celebrities, images and articles in magazines. By means of narrative, visual, discourse analysis, and the authorial meta-model of analysis, all texts were arranged according to three types of codes (residual, dominant, and emergent) showing relevancy of different communicative strategies of femininity within the current Russian cultural context. The corpus of texts demonstrates transformations in several aspects, namely, treatment of body and appearance, relationships, self-realization attitude, and treatment of children.

Keywords

codes of culture , femininity , semiosphere , mass culture

Introduction

While studying Russian culture of the 18th-19th centuries, Juri Lotman pointed out in his essay "Women's world" that the character of women is one of "the most sensitive barometers of social life", because "woman vividly and directly absorbs peculiarities of her time, to a large extent pulling it ahead. At the same time, woman, mother, wife are particularly connected to the archetypal nature of mankind" (Lotman 1994:46). During the 20th century, life circumstances have evidently provided historically new models of femininity, and they have been evolving constantly. In today's culture, cinema, the Internet, TV, fashion, literature, and social media constitute, an anthology reflecting upon multiple strategies, models of behavior, and inspiring new choices. This research is dedicated to the segment of culture which is related to entertainment and leisure; namely, mass culture. More specifically, this paper focuses on the strategies of femininity that appear in contemporary Russian mass culture.

This paper presents a case study on mass culture samples of the past 10 years. The main research questions of this case study were: *What strategies of femininity does Russian mass culture demonstrate?* and *How have these strategies been changing over the last 20 years?* For this purpose, more than 300 samples of Russian and global mass cultural texts have been analyzed (the ones which are relevant to a Russian context, besides the local ones). Those samples included popular TV series, movies, TV shows, advertising campaigns of beauty, fashion, technology, FMCG brands, images of celebrities, bloggers, images and articles in women magazines, and other similar items.

Methodology

This research demonstrates a result of the combination of the theoretical grounds of cultural semiotics and practical experiments, with different models of analysis that were undertaken by the author during years of practice in applied semiotic research. The theoretical framework of this research is based on developments by the Tartu-Moscow school of cultural semiotics, the notions of *semiosphere* and its attributes, *text of culture* and *translation* (Lotman 1994, 2005 [1992], Ivanov 2007 [1996], Torop 2005, Lotman and Uspensky 1971, and others). Another important grounding basis of the method is French semiotics and *narrative* studies (Barthes 1957, Floch 1990, Greimas 1996). Last but not least, a dialectical model of three types of interpretive codes of the British social critic Raymond Williams (1950) is an important part of the methodological research presented in this paper. However, Williams' model is further discussed as a mere meta-model of representation of the study results, not an algorithm for samples analysis.

Given that culture is not a static entity, and that it constantly transforms, one of the aims of the research was to trace what constitutes the dialectical changes and renewal through revision and classification of cultural patterns. This dialectical change can be

represented by the linear dialectical model of residual, dominant, and emergent codes of culture. Williams (1950) claimed that there are three types of cultural patterns coexisting at the same historical moment. Mainstream culture is based on a dominant interpretive code and includes residual and emerging tendencies at the same time. If, in order to elaborate on his idea and apply it to the semiosphere model of culture expounded by Lotman (2005[1992]), we can say that the dominant ideas constitute the *core* of culture and are the most influential ideas and images within it, the residual ones are the patterns that become obsolete and move from the center to the periphery of the semiosphere. The emergent ones are the new, fresh ideas and images appearing at the periphery of culture and outlining the vectors of cultural dynamics.

As soon as the semiosphere model of culture was used for the analysis, the first step was to find out what images, words, and strategies of femininity constitute the center: the core of mass culture (dominant codes). This being done, the most charged particles of the periphery of culture were tracked down, those which strive to gravitate towards the center, and substitute central forms in the near future (emergent codes). Finally, the last step was to detect the entities moving to the periphery, or which are not, at least, so central anymore, and are weaker than other ones (residual codes). By taking those three steps, the vectors of cultural dynamics became evident.

The unit of analysis was an image, a description or a role of a woman in some fictional world, a narrative. The two main methods of analysis were: 1) visual and linguistic analysis, and 2) narrative analysis (Greimasian actant scheme (1966)) for extended texts of culture, like movies, TV shows, magazine, and newspaper articles, etc.

The first approach was applied to static units of analysis, like magazine covers or advertising prints (images, websites of brands, etc.). The second approach was useful for analysing the complex texts, where femininity strategies could be interpreted only in correlation with other actants and inner contextual elements of the narrative (movies, TV series, bloggers' live streams).

All commercial samples were organized into three subgroups: a) cheap mass market (mostly FMCG) brands using stereotypical images; b) advertising of the most popular and influential, lifestyle, beauty, fashion brands, constituting a coherent image of a woman; c) luxury fashion brands, youth brands, innovative brands, bringing some provocative, controversial, fresh ideas. A hypothesis was formulated, namely that each group can represent each type of cultural patterns: residual, dominant, and emergent.

The second approach applied in the case of complex texts (movies, TV commercials) provided assistance in detecting particular images of heroines within the narratives. These were separated into three subgroups, where the main subgroup consisted of the protagonists of contemporary movies – women. The first hypothesis was that they are bearers of dominant cultural codes. Another hypothesis was that residual codes can be found within a subgroup containing images of protagonists of older movies (ear-

ly 2000s); funny characters in supporting roles; senior characters in supporting roles; strategies which are blamed upon within the narrative, e.g. a negative main character in a contemporary movie. Finally, there was another subgroup consisting of positive supporting characters within the narrative and contradictory protagonists-women in author movies. The hypothesis was made that images of this subgroup bore emergent codes respectively.

Research and comparative analysis resulted in tracing and describing 32 coherent communicative codes of femininity in four (4) semantic aspects: *body*, *career*, *relationship,* and *children*. After the analysis, conclusions were drawn about the transformation of femininity strategies in Russian mass culture. The next sections will focus on the most important outcomes.

Results

Ideal body vs. Grotesque beauty

There is a famous stereotype that Russian women are always trying to look their best at any occasion: they have perfect make-up, they wear high heels every day, they have ideal haircuts, and they wear tight dresses. It comes close to the strategy of a femme fatale, who looks perfect every day, and tries to impress others. When she takes photos, she shows off her silhouette from an advantageous angle. This strategy is particularly common amongst bloggers. They construct the idea of female beauty as youth, expressive eyes with artificial eyelashes, augmented lips and breasts. This visual strategy of femininity representation is supported by the idea that woman is a piece of property of her society (family, husband), and that she has to be attractive, but only for the locals (a special word which is widely used in Russian mass culture discourse translates as "readily agreeable to sex" in English). It means that sexual relations before marriage, as well as intercultural sexual relations are prohibited. With regard to the latter, a well-known social outrage happened in Russian media after public statements of several deputies and governmental figures in the days of the 2018 World Cup hosted by Russia. That was a reaction to statements that women "should behave well and not embarrass Russia", and that "offspring of foreign football fans would not be welcome". This very case demonstrates a transformation of an idea about property regarding the boundaries of a woman's body, as well as her of psychological boundaries (fig. 1).

Another text of culture, a new Internet-series "Chicks" (2020), sharply demonstrates this problem in a small town in south Russia and tries to challenge this idea by showing an alternative image of women who know their own limits and stay within them. Together with an idea about ideal beauty, an idea that a woman is a piece of property of others is transformed into a residual code.

However, the idea about the natural beauty of a woman has become dominant quite recently. A woman can feel attractive with wild hair when going out, wearing nude make-

Figure 1: Wonderzine article "Bigotry World Cup: Who is shaming Russian women for sex with foreigners?" [1]

Figure 2: *Glamour* magazine cover without retouching, April 2019.

up, oversized apparel, and sneakers instead of high heels. Neither should she be "photoshopped" for a cover of a magazine (fig. 2). It also correlates with the idea of "my body my rules". Hashtags, such as #metoo, #янебоюсьсказать (#notscaredtospeakout), speak of this, as well as new terms in language: "mansplaining", "manspreading", "upskirting". Giving names to these very phenomena demonstrates the need of pointing out the problems which were not considered problematic before. In April 2019, a Russian edition of the *Glamour* magazine presented its first-time in Russia cover without any retouching of the model's face. The claim "without retouching" was located just under the magazine title, which created the meaning of a new norm for a glamorous picture as natural. That is what Barthes (1957) would call a *myth* created by popular media, one educating society about what is glamorous, what is beautiful, and what is conventional today in general.

The emergent code of female attractiveness can be called Grotesque Beauty. It includes aesthetics of diversity and beauty as transformation. We can see women's beauty through some asymmetry of their outfit, make-up, accessories, which distorts the classic proportion of body and face. Moreover, it includes the display of freckles, scars, and burns, which are not considered defects but beauty manifestations. Body positivity is not regarded as political action but as a beauty code. In fact, the beauty industry constructs mythology, translating it through mass culture language. Wolf (1990: 14) notes that "the
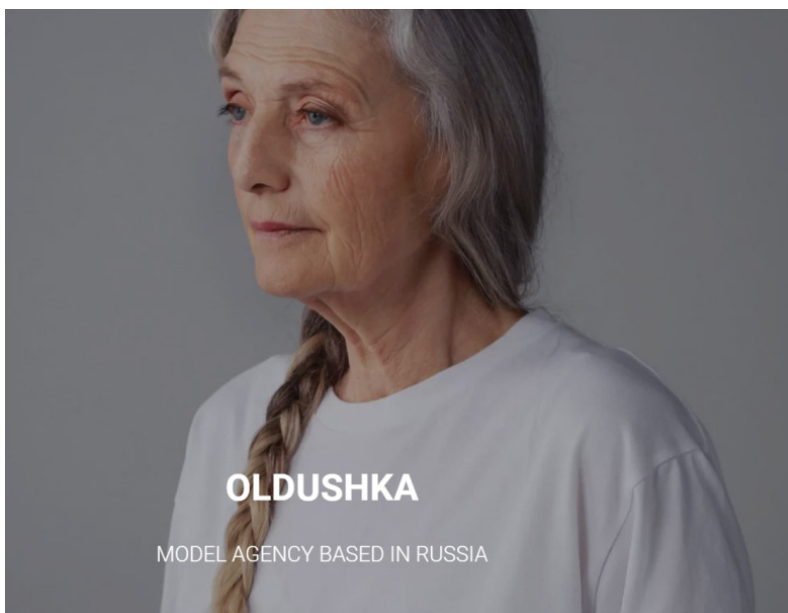
Figure 3: Valentina Yasen, model of the agency "Oldushka".[3]

beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior not appearance". Deconstructing "the beauty myth" within the framework of feminist studies, she claims that the beauty myth in the mass cultural industry consists of unacceptability of "natural" or "raw" codes of women in culture (ibid., 269), so that those codes should be transformed into appropriate "cooked" ones (as Levi-Strauss would say) in diverse aspects. This anthropological observation by Wolf gives an important perspective to the cultural/natural aspect of myth within mass culture (social reality), and to how social expectations have been transforming in that plane.

Another emergent code reconsidering previous strategies is the one challenging an idea of ageism toward seniors. In the recent past, we can find examples of 60+ women that keep an active lifestyle beyond the household, which is still dominantly considered to be the only space for senior women. For example, the model agency *Oldushka*[2] provides opportunities for senior women to participate in activities within professional spheres previously available only to women of young age (the modeling business, cinema) (fig. 3). A very important point is that women should not have done any plastic surgery or colored their hair. They should keep their authentic natural look, which is revolutionary for Russian contemporary media culture. In late 2018, the *Glamour* magazine made a 64-year-old model, Valentina Yasen, a model of the year 2018.

Workaholic, perfect hostess or successful blogger?

In late 1990s to early 2000s, there were several strong images of heroines of popular series on Russian TV. Those female characters struggled against criminals, and injustice and evil, they were super heroines, such as detective Anastasiya Kamenskaya ("Kamenskaya" TV Series), and prosecutor officer Maria Shekhovtseva ("Tajnysledstvija" TV Series). The uniting feature of those women was a sacrifice of their private life for the sake of society and law, in principle, for the sake of some high ideals. Self-realization at work was their main goal. They worked in male professions and helped people by resolving the problems of others. Their mind was stronger than their emotions, and their professional expertise was higher than that of men at the same profession. They were women-soldiers in uniform, even though they looked attractive (Ideal Beauty residual code). The usual context of such women was an office environment, not a household or family.

Alongside a workaholic, there existed and still exists another image, that of a Perfect Hostess demonstrating self-realization of a woman as focusing only on family and the desire to please her husband and household. She doesn't have any hobbies and other interests besides family, she doesn't build a career (at least we don't know of it). Her context consists of a kitchen and a living room, where she serves dinner for the whole family. She is always beautifully dressed, and in a good mood. She has a traditional family, in which the man works, and they have an adorable kid/kids (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Danone yoghurt TV commercial.[4]

Both of those abovementioned codes, that of the Workaholic and the Perfect Hostess, are residual images for Russian mass culture. A Cinderella code is the same: a narrative

about a girl moving from a village to a city and enhancing her social status by way of her virtues and a miracle. In this code, there is always a figure of a "prince" to whom she is married in the end.

What are, then, the dominant codes regarding self-realization? One of them is a code of Hostess-Superhero. It consists of an image of a contemporary Russian woman, who "would enter a burning house and would stop a stampeding horse" in the words of a famous Russian poet Alexey Nekrasov. The same goes for the Perfect Hostess, because for this very woman her husband and her family are the most important things in life.

But, unlike the previous Hostess-Superhero, she does not hide behind her husband's back. Indeed, it is her husband who feels safe behind her back. She does not look perfect, rather more realistic and, again, she has no regard for herself, she does not have her own wishes or interests. This code is aptly demonstrated in the song "Not a Paris" by Russian band "Leningrad".[5] This image can be found in a TV-series which became very popular in Russia with the ironic title "An ordinary woman" (2018), starring Anna Mikhalkova. This series portrays the life of a 39-year-old married Russian woman, who is pregnant with her third child. While her husband serves high ideals as a doctor, and, at the same time, cheats on her, Anna starts an illegal and dangerous business, in order to protect her husband from the mafia, and earn money for the whole family (fig. 5).

Figure 5: "An ordinary Woman" Series (2018).

A variety of this image is another dominant code of Mother-Freelancer, which opens the perspective on an image of a young mother trying to strike a balance between work and family. She runs her own startup, is a blogger/vlogger, or just works remotely. And her main goal is a continuous search for balance between being a perfect mother and a perfect worker at the same time.

What are the emergent codes of femininity regarding self-realization? One of them expresses the topic of self-realization of women in the most unpredictable professions, which were not prohibited by law, but were culturally tabooed for Russian women. After Xenia Sobchak had announced her decision to run for president in 2018, she released an official candidate's video filmed in her kitchen, which emphasized a symbolic gulf between a traditional role of a woman in Russian culture, and her courageous attempt to win the presidency, which is stereotypically considered to be "only for men" (fig. 6).

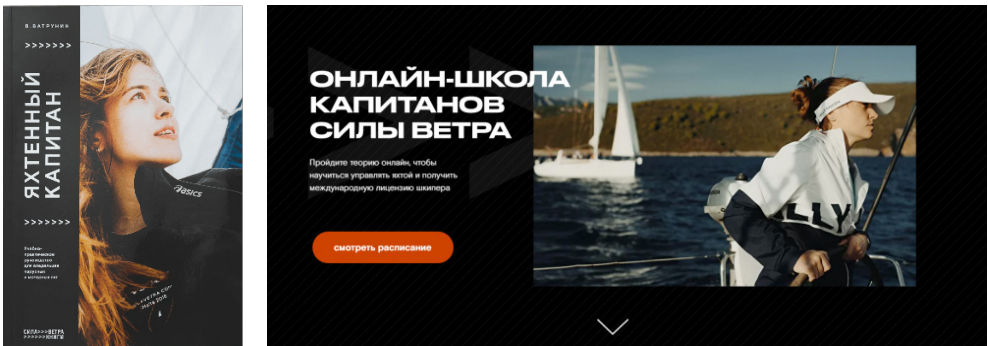**Figure 6:** X. Sobchak's campaign commercial for presidency, 2017-2018.

Figure 7: "Sila Vetra" Bareboat Skippers' manual and sailing school website.[6]

However, besides presidency, there are many other professions that were mostly tabooed for women, as they "do not look sexy in those professions" (e.g. a boxer, a footballer), or because there was the cultural stereotype that one cannot rely upon a a woman in stressful situations, as in the case of a captain of a boat/ship, aircraft (hence a well-known proverb: "a woman on board (a ship) is a recipe for disaster"). Recently, many brands have launched campaigns to support women in their own style of doing things, regardless of the fact that men can do them in another way. For example, "Always" has launched the global campaign "Like a girl", thereby challenging stereotypes that girls do things in a different way than boys. One of the most famous Russian communities of bareboat skippers has started

using images of women at the cover of their manuals and on their skippers' school website, regardless of the fact that the school caters for both men and women. At the book cover, one can see an image of a girl alongside the title "Bareboat skipper", and at the website there is another depiction of a girl at the helm (fig. 7). Those combinations constitute a new meaning of the norm or idea of who can be a skipper.

Moreover, the analysis of texts has showed a wave of application of feminine nouns in Russian media discourse, mostly for professions that initially had masculine noun forms ("author", "director", etc.).

Relationships and children

The prestige of a relationship in which a young and beautiful wife is a trophy (Trophy Wife, as a variation of the Cinderella narrative) for a man who is older, richer, and who has higher social status is eventually being substituted by an image of a woman who challenges patriarchal attitudes in personal relationships. Instead, mass culture offers two different kinds of desired models of relationship for women. The first is equal partnership in the relationship, and common interests of both partners. Another one is the inversion of the traditional female and male attitudes in Russian culture, e.g. legitimization of a woman's betrayal, the possibility for a woman to be permanently single (and not to desire having a family); these were previously considered mostly patterns of male behavior. Dominant codes demonstrate femininity strategies of thinking and acting primarily on a woman's own interest.

Emergent codes of mass culture also show examples of gender identity, and sexual preferences choice as possibilities for a woman to choose the type of relationships she finds the most appropriate for her, regardless of public opinion. That includes polyamorous families, where all members of the family are happy, or the type of family where a woman is much older than her husband, and is not ashamed of this union, and not scared of losing him just because of the age difference.

Indirectly, what can be noticed is the transformation of a wedding ritual from a traditional wedding, keeping to all canons, into an idea of wedding as a unique event, without regard to social opinion. The main point is to keep wedding unique and interesting for the couple. As long as wedding was always considered to be an event where a bride/woman is a central subject, one can see the turn from the external plane towards the inner needs and desires of a woman.

The most conservative semantic field is children. A child is still considered the greatest achievement for a Russian woman. At the same time, there is a change in the presentation of the pregnancy period from ideal to more realistic. Intensive Motherhood is replaced by Relaxed Motherhood, and a woman is more open to acknowledge her mistakes as a young mother, that is to acknowledge that she cannot be an ideal mother. The corresponding idea is embedded in the representation of a child. There is an emergent

code of public pride of kids with special needs, who, until recently, were not represented in the media so often and remained invisible in media culture (fig. 8).

At the same time, an emergent code of culture is a thoughtful fatherhood code, where a man can become a houseman, raising children, or thoughtfully sharing parenthood duties with a woman. A baby-food brand "Agusha" has released a TV-ad with the song "Dad is around", where famous and successful actors who are young fathers spend the whole day with their babies singing lullabies to them.

Figure 8: Famous actress and blogger Evelina Bļodans often publishes family photos with her son with special needs

Conclusions

This case study demonstrates that there is a remarkable shift in communicative strategies of femininity in Russian mass culture. There is transformation from body shaming to body positivity, a trend towards self-acceptance, and an increase in the aesthetics of diversity of appearance types. Analysis has shown a shift from displaying a universal type of beauty towards more unique, grotesque beauty, and beauty as a process. There are more and more images demonstrating consciousness and defense of one's own boundaries, including psychological boundaries.

The sexual freedom of women is reconsidered. There are more public/media images of women who can freely speak about cheating, sex, and who can leave their partner when relationships do not work, and who do not cling to their partner in order not to be alone because it is "shameful".

The idea of a woman's dignity, and of the possibility to say "no" to any occasion that is not acceptable and does not work for her is growing. There is also a shift of the paradigm regarding the desirability of marriage of convenience, where a young and beautiful woman becomes the trophy of a rich successful man who is old and of higher social status. This model is substituted, eventually, with alternative models in cases when, for example, a woman is in a relationship with a man who is younger and more successful. Other new models of family, like polyamorous families, are increasingly making their appearance in public discourse.

In addition, images of women after 55 emerge, whose life is as fulfilled as it was in their 20s. Such a woman does not necessarily have to become a granny ("babushka"), but can indeed start a career as a model, an actress, a blogger or a singer.

The topic of children in a woman's life is less present in comparison to all other aspects of her life. At the same time, contemporary Russian mass culture vindicates young mothers who do not refrain from self-development, if they do not want to; the same goes

for their sexual life. Furthermore, the idea that children, and especially teenagers, are smarter than their parents, and that the latter should learn from the kids is on the rise.

Last but not least, this research explores a model of applied semiotic analysis for a wide range of contemporary texts focusing on a precise topic. The RDE-model of cultural codes as a model of meta-analysis based on results of primary visual, linguistic, and narrative analysis of cultural texts can indeed help to trace dialectical changes in culture and to detect cultural trends. At the moment, Russian mass culture is manifesting a variety of new emerging strategies of femininity representation, which can be considered an evident signal of social reconsideration of the idea of family, gender roles, and responsibilities in society, personal boundaries, and freedom. There emerges an acute and corresponding question about the range of male heroes represented by contemporary mass culture, which might become an interesting topic for future research.

Endnotes

1. https://bit.ly/2tCfWOu (last access July 15, 2022).
2. The name of the agency is a combination of two words: *old* and *babushka*, meaning *grandmother* in Russian.
3. http://oldushka.tilda.ws/ (last access July 15, 2022).
4. https://bit.ly/3aMzMQ2 (last access July 15, 2022).
5. https://bit.ly/2D9WF9d (last access July 15, 2022).
6. https://bit.ly/3uRgkIR (last access July 15, 2022).

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