

Russian Magical Realism and Pelevin as Its Exponent

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### Recommended Citation

Berlina, Alexandra. "Russian Magical Realism and Pelevin as Its Exponent." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.4 (2009): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1561>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1561)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**Volume 11 Issue 4 (December 2009) Article 7**  
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**"Russian Magical Realism and Pelevin as Its Exponent"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss4/7>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.4 (2009)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss4/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Russian Magical Realism and Pelevin as Its Exponent" Alexandra Berlina seeks to enrich magical realism studies as a field of comparative literature and culture by showing that, although largely ignored in scholarship, such a thing as Russian magical realism exists and provides an interesting field for analysis. First, Berlina provides an overview of relevant scholarly works on the genre, tracing mentions (as well as striking omissions) of Russian influence, followed by a discussion of the few publications which deal with Russian magical realism, concentrating on Erika Haber's *The Myth of the Non-Russian*. Berlina then discusses Viktor Pelevin (1962-), the author of dozens of magical realist texts, most of which have been published in English and she discusses also aspects of the translations of Pelevin's work by Andrew Bromfield. Pelevin's popularity has attracted much critical attention in Russia and some outside, but his fiction has never been discussed in terms of magical realism and Western specialists of the genre have not as of yet analyzed his work in the context of magical realism.

## Alexandra BERLINA

### Russian Magical Realism and Pelevin as Its Exponent

Franz Roh, regarded as the creator of the term "magical realism" (here, it is treated as identical to "magic realism") describes not only the introduction of magical elements into realist painting, but also its mirror image: the estrangement of familiar objects, the "making what was formerly accepted as obvious into a 'problem'" (20). This phrasing from 1925 is strikingly reminiscent of an essay written in Russian seven years earlier by Viktor Shklovsky, *Isskustvo kak priem* (Art as a Device; *Theory of Prose*): Shklovsky's *ostranenie* ("estrangement") is a means to experience anew in art what has been merely recognized automatically in life. In his essay, Shklovsky deals mainly with Tolstoy: calling him a precursor of magic realism would mean overstretching the term, but the title character (and part-time narrator) in his *Kholstomer*, a horse who looks with wondrous eyes at human doings, illustrates a crucial aspect of Roh's *magischer Realismus*. The perspective of estrangement plays an important role in Viktor Pelevin's (1962-) work. *Kholstomer* has influenced several of his short stories, most notably *The Ontology of Childhood*, *The Water Tower*, *The Life and Adventures of Shed Number XXII*, and *Ivan Kublakhov*. In all these stories the narrator describes his coming into being, the first impressions and reflections upon the nature of the self, just like Tolstoy's horse. "Birth" would not be an accurate description of these first moments of existence, as one of the narrators is a shed, and another the essence beyond a changing physical form (embryo, man, a new incarnation). The primal experience of these characters is similar to Kholstomer's self-view: before being described (e.g., as "piebald") by others, he does not see himself in terms of such external characteristics: everything is extraordinary and new to him.

Tolstoy, Dostoyevski, Pushkin, and Ivanov are mentioned along the painter Serov, as well as the composers Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov within three pages of Andrew Carpentier's prologue to *The Kingdom of this World* (78-80), where the term *lo real maravilloso* is coined. Carpentier's Russophilia is no surprise: his mother was a Russian professor of languages (however, he seems to have read most or the aforementioned writers in translations). The similarities in Russian and Latin American landscape — "extension, limitlessness, repetition, the endless *taiga* exactly like that in our own jungles" (Carpentier, "On the Marvelous" 78) — may be connected with, but are less important than, the conception of the own country as strange, wondrous, inexplicable (in comparison to the Western Europe and the US) which many Latin Americans share with many Russians. The rhetorical question which closes the preface: "what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvellous real?" (88) echoes a quatrain by Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev known to every Russian schoolchild and quoted endlessly in discussions about the country's "special fate." Here are its first and its last line (unless stated otherwise, all translations from the Russian are mine): "Russia cannot be understood / Russia can only be believed in" ("Umom Rossiui ne poniat' / V Rossiui možno tol'ko verit'"). The final assertion, with "Russia" in the accusative case, is not that one should resort to religion when in Russia, but, rather, that the country itself is an object of belief. Like in English, "to believe" (*verit'*) can signify the expectation of success on the part of the object, but here I take it to mean that Russia is so irrational and wondrous that one believes in it like in something supernatural.

If this "collective faith" really "produced a miracle" as Carpentier professes to believe it did during Mackandal's execution in Haiti ("On the Marvelous" 87), this would be an example of the "true" marvelous real to his liking. In a later essay he insists on "authenticity," opposing the marvelous real as "encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that [is] Latin American" ("The Baroque" 104) to art which is "premeditated and calculated to produce a sensation of strangeness" (103), such as surrealism. His *lo real maravilloso* must not merely mingle the commonplace with the strange, but transcend naturally the boundary between the two. In this context his statement that Diaghilev and Pavlova "showed Cuba the transcendental techniques of classical dance" (80) can be seen yet another connection between Russian culture and his ideas of magical transcendence. He professes to see his art as original, and "*manufactured mystery*" (emphasis in the original) as a mere substitute; fortunately, ways to differentiate non-abusively between the forms in which magic can manifest itself in literature have been developed by later scholars, e.g., by such as Tzvetan Todorov. Wendy B. Faris writes in her *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, that she "specu-

late[s] about the existence of a tropical lush and a northerly spare variety of this plant," cautiously pointing out that "geographical stylistics are problematic" (165). By the time of writing several decades had passed since the Latin American Boom of the 1960s and 1970s; the genre has long become popular with the wider public and spread to other countries: to judge by the same collection of essays, Salman Rushdie, a British Indian, came to be regarded as a prototypical magical realist. If a genre represents a world-wide phenomenon on its way to become "perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction" (Faris 3) a study of regional varieties seems interesting, indeed. But as Faris confesses, she has "followed [her] own limitations and confined [her]self to texts from Europe, the United States, and Latin America" despite her feeling that the study "could be extended into other literatures, especially in the Near and Far East" (3). The Near East includes several post-Soviet countries such as Georgia (where one could expect "lush" magic to blossom), but Russia (where a "northerly spare variety" might grow) remains unmentioned even as field for further research. Still, Faris's book and her definition of the genre are helpful and productive. While Faris does not mention Russian magical realism, she does name a Russophone writer as a precursor of the genre, Gogol. She does not pursue this topic, but it is striking how Gogol's 1836 story *The Nose* fits her definition of the genre as a combination of "realism and the fantastic [in which] the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 1) and the five defining characteristics she proposes (7): Faris writes about an "irreducible element" of "magic": the nose disappears from a face, pretends to be a human being, and finally returns. Nothing in the text points to a hallucination; the unproductivity of an allegorical reading is convincingly argued in Todorov's *The Fantastic*, which also points out with surprise the combination of the inexplicable with "mundane details," and most scholars now came to regards as a landmark of magical realism: "the world Gogol describes is not at all a world of the marvelous as we might have expected it would be ... strong presence of the phenomenal world is evident in a story which starts with the smell of hot rolls and onions" (72).

Nods of appreciation to Gogol and Bulgakov exhaust the amount of references to Russian literature also in Stephen M. Hart's and Wen-chin Ouyang's *A Companion to Magical Realism* despite its inclusive view of the genre as "vacillation between the ... 'kingdoms' of the real and the marvelous" (3). The volume features a list of non-Hispanic magical realist works (5) and a list of languages in which magical realist text have been written (15), but neither enumeration contains Russian(s). The authors point out that they merely provide some examples, so the omission is by no means an error, but why do no Russian texts come to mind? Russian magical realism is largely ignored in Anglophone scholarship. In 2003, *The Myth of the Non-Russian: Iskander and Aitmatov's Magical Universe* by Erika Haber was published. As the title emphasizes, the author deals with non-Russian authors: Haber analyzes the work of an Abkhaz and a Kyrgyz writer, contrasting their cultures to the Soviet-Russian one. Still, both Iskander and Aitmatov wrote mainly in Russian, and *The Myth* remains, unfortunately, the only existing book-length study (in English, Russian, German, French and Spanish) of Russian magical realism. Apart from it, JSTOR, the MLA, and Google Scholar provide next to no suitable hits for the keywords magic(al) realism and either Russia(n) or (post-)Soviet. There is a chapter entitled *On Soviet Magic Realism* in Fredric Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*; however, it deals not with literature but with cinema and is not quite about the genre the title refers to, but about "sublated Science-Fiction ... abusively called magic realism for lack of a better characterization" (emphasis in the original) as the author self-critically points out (89-90). Apart from an unpublished 1978 M.A. thesis entitled *Russian Magic Realism*, the only essay that deal with magical realism in Russian fiction is Robert Porter's *The City in Russian Literature: Images Past and Present*. Although it does not mention the genre in its title, it features a useful overview of predecessors and exponents (481-84). Apart from Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, it includes *Moscow-Petushki* by Venedikt Erofeev and *Russian Beauty* by his namesake Viktor Erofeev, *The Soul of a Patriot* by Yevgeny Popov, *The Manhole* by Vladimir Makanin and *Forty years in Chanchzhoe* by Dmitrii Lipskerov which "unashamedly owes something to García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*" (483). Several works by women writers such as Tolstaya, Ulitskaya, and Petrushevskaya could be added to the list, although in them elements of magical realism tend to be combined with dystopia, narration of madness, and absurdism, respectively. Porter concludes: "If magic realism came about in South America in the wake of the post-war processes of modernization and relative liberalization, then the appearance of such writing in the post-Soviet era is perfectly un-

derstandable" (484). While I doubt that this political background is more significant than cultural influences and intra-literary developments, Porter is surely right about the existence of the phenomenon.

Haber, the author of *The Myth of the Non-Russian*, however, manages to ignore it: "Russian magical realism did not continue into the 1990s" as owing to the new liberty of publishing when "pulp fiction, mysteries, romances and pornography flooded the market" (149) and she laments with dismay reminiscent of complaints about cultural decline in the Soviet press of the early perestroika period. This attitude fits her uncritical descriptions of "Soviet readers and critics, who has been searching for a means of ... celebrating the multinational Soviet state" (21) and of "conservative literary critics" taking offence at critical literature as a reason for the fact that "the regime clamped down again" as if the critics controlled the government and not the other way around (24). Most texts listed by Porter were written in the 1990s and they are known to the general reader of Russian literature. Why, then, does Haber believe that Russian magical realism is no more? The most plausible explanation would be that she means only a narrow definition of the genre, roughly corresponding to *lo real maravilloso* (although I suspect that folkloristic magical realism has not entirely disappeared from the Russian literary scene, either). While stating that Iskander and Aitmatov correspond to the folkloristic type (15) she recognizes the "European version" as another valid form. It remains to conclude that Haber was either not familiar with any recent magical realist works or suppressed her knowledge, because the intellectually playful, non-folkloristic texts by post-Soviet Russias (and not one of the small "colonized" Soviet countries) did not fit her thesis that "most importantly, Russian magical realism promoted the myths, legends, traditions and customs of traditional cultures" (32). Further, *The Myth of the Non-Russian* is an astonishing collection of typing mistakes. Only about one in twenty Russian quotations does not display obvious errors on first sight. Misquoting goes hand in hand with mistranslation, which is so densely planted that two impressive bloomers can be found on neighboring pages. One is a list of artists — Hofmann, Dostoyevsky, Goya, and Chagall ending in "Mayakovski — the most Socialist Realist of them all" (50) and she writes: "even the social realist Mayakovski" ("samogo sotsialisticheskogo realista Maiakovskogo"). In the accusative case *sámogo* can be translated as *the most*, while *samogó* means *even*; stress is not marked in the text — this must be difficult for a non-native speaker. But how can one assume that Hoffmann, Dostoyevsky, Goya, and Chagall are being called socialist realists? And on the next page Haber mistranslates Shkolovsky's *The Art as a Device*, a crucial text in literary studies, whose special importance for magical realism I have mentioned and whose published translations could have easily been consulted. Shklovsky wrote that "art is a way to live through the making of a thing, that which is made does not matter in art" ("iskusstvo est' sposob perezhit' delan'e veshchi, a sdelannoe v iskusstve ne vazhno": I have rendered Shklovsky's style which is in itself defamiliarizing rather literally: he could have used terms more typical for literary and academic discourse which would correspond to "experience the creation of an object"). In Haber's translation art is "a means to experience the creation of things which have been made insignificant in art" (51). This howler probably was not deliberately introduced in order to support the argument, but is based on genuine misunderstanding. Many typing mistakes in *The Myth* are so obvious not only to a native speaker, but even to a beginning student of Russian, that — despite her holding a certificate of advanced study in translating and interpreting, being a teacher of Russian literature and language, and an author of several Russian textbooks and dictionaries — Haber's knowledge of Russian is questionable to me.

Based on such shaky ground, can Haber's argumentation be sound? Stating that "Latin American magical realism arrived in the Soviet Union at a time when Village Prose was enjoying its greatest popularity" (27) and that these genres share an interest in folklore, she proposes to view Russian magical realism as a hybrid of the two. Coincidences in time and theme do not necessary point to a causal relation; whether they do in this case, can be best judged by the examples provided. Haber claims that *Sandro of Chegem* by Iskander is a magical realist novel. However, nothing supernatural happens in this ironic, picaresque, and somewhat grotesque text. Its protagonists foster irrational beliefs (e.g., that a black goat's urine is the best medicine), boast of supernatural achievements (e.g., to have unsaddled a rider with a shout), and tell fairy tales (e.g., about the month of March taking offence at the words of a shepherd), but the reader never sees such miracles happen. Characters live to be 103 and 106 years old, but this is a believable number (especially as Abkhazia is famed for its centenarians). A chapter is told from the perspective of a mule, but this is a narrative device (very much

like in Tolstoy's *Kholstomer*) rather than an animal gaining the gift of speech. Haber seems unsure herself as to why she considers this novel to belong to the genre. She cites Iskander's admiration for Faulkner as an argument, but she is aware that Faulkner was at most a precursor and that Iskander professed not to be interested in magical realism (72). She writes that Iskander has been called the García Márquez of Abkhazia by Carl Proffer on the back cover of *Sandro* (73), but even if a blurb counts as an argument, is "Márquez = magical realism" a valid equation? *Sandro* does share some features with *Cien años de soledad* (both novels deal with several generations in a remote town), but magic is not among these features. Haber cites an article by Boris Briker and Per Dalgor which discusses *Sandro* in terms of magical realism (73), but this article is based on a definition which Haber herself recognizes to be unhelpful. She claims that Iskander shows "the magic ... of Abkhazian culture" (74), but he merely portrays the belief in it and never inviting the reader to share it.

As regards Aitmatov, I agree with a reviewer of *The Myth* who cites his didacticism and the use of science-fiction as counter-arguments (Peterson 643). Peterson is as polite as to call *The Myth* "a convenient and concise compendium" (642), but she disagrees with the main thesis. Peterson's argument, however, is not always convincing: she criticizes "the attempt to fit [Iskander and Aitmatov] into the Procrustean bed of a trend associated largely with a writer significantly different from them" (642). The writer she means is García Márquez and she seems to ignore the long-established internationality of the genre. She concludes: "if we agree with Haber that 'magical realists' use elements of magic that 'cannot be explained away rationally or dismissed as a dream or hallucination' ... then almost everybody in Russian literature, from Aleksandr Pushkin to Viktor Pelevin, could be considered a 'magical realist' at one time or another" (643). Peterson makes this suggestion ironically, but I am convinced that the latter — Pelevin — has indeed written magical realist texts.

Importantly, Pelevin is discussed widely by Slavists, but not in terms of magical realism. A sample of fifty Russian articles published at <<http://pelevin.nov.ru/stati>> does not yield any mention of the genre. One of the reasons might be the fact that although the genre is called "magicheskii realism" in Russian, single instances of the magical in Pelevin's fiction are more often described as mystical ("misticheskii") rather than as "magicheskii." As regards Western response, Andrew Meier in the magazine *Time* hails Pelevin "the brightest star of the post-Soviet generation ... [the] psychedelic Nabokov for the cyber age" (13) and in my view he comes closest to a reference to magical realism when quoting Viktor Erofeev who compared Pelevin to Bulgakov, a precursor of the genre. Pelevin's inventive and philosophical short stories and novelettes collected in *The Blue Lantern* and in *A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia and Other Stories* are varied in genre: from parable to parody with many shades in between. Magical realist texts, at least those of the intellectual European variety (as Pelevin's are), are a form of the postmodern and thus blurred and constantly shifting boundaries not only between the realistic and the supernatural, but also between this genre and others, are part of the game. Most short stories by Pelevin have elements of both the marvelous and the real (often in misbalance) and at least seven out of the sixteen which are published in the two English collections fit the designation of "magical realism" (see *Rasskazy* [Short Stories]): <<http://pelevin.nov.ru/texts>>. These seven are *Vera Pavlovna's Ninth Dream* (although within a dream, its events are still experienced as magical, as the dreaming nineteenth-century heroine predicts exact details of Soviet and post-Soviet reality), *Mid-Game* (here, boundaries between genders and social roles are as blurred as those between "reality" and chess), *Sleep, Prince of Gosplan*, *News from Nepal*, *The Tambourine of the Upper World*, and *A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia*.

I use Pelevin's translator Andrew Bromfield's English titles for better readability and easier reference, but *A Werewolf Problem* is misleading. The original title is *Problema vervolka v srednei polose* (all quotations from Pelevin's original texts refer to <<http://pelevin.nov.ru/texts>>). *Problema* is the main problem — Russian has no definite articles and so an indefinite one seems misplaced: the original title sounds like that of a conference paper; within it, *the vervolk problem* is an acknowledged phenomenon. On the other hand, Bromfield's version preserves the ambiguity of the original: is the werewolf a problem, or does he have a problem? The second word is a neologism stressing the Russian specificity of the phenomenon: it is based on the Germanic *wer-* and the Russian *volk*. As this word for *Wolf* is so closely related to the English one, *werevolk* could have easily been used in the title. A possible argument against reading these seven stories as magical realist is the fact that — like almost all fiction by Pelevin — they are heavy with symbolism, sometimes unambiguously articulated

by characters. Sure, almost any magical realist work can be read allegorically (e.g., Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as representing events in India, or aspects of memory and the bi-cultural self), and when excluding texts which allow allegorical reading, Todorov was defining not magical realism, but its close relatives. Still, to me the point seems valid, but in a weaker form: a magical realist text should not resist a coherent non-allegorical reading. Pelevin's fiction fulfils this criterion. *Sleep* and *News from Nepal*, for instance, allude to the illusion of reality and, less prominently, to Russian society and politics. Both ontological doubts and political criticism are typical of magical realism.

Pelevin tends to introduce magical elements gradually, increasing from the merely unusual to the inexplicable: the development is so skillfully arranged that Todorov might have called these stories "fantastic-marvelous" despite their allegorical properties. The protagonist of *Sleep*, Sonechkin ("son" means "sleep" or "dream" and *sonetchka* is an affectionate term for a dormouse/sleepy person; rather unusually for current translation practice, Bromfield changes the name to Dozakin), notices that most other students sleep in lectures. Those are, appropriately enough, in seminars on Marxist-Leninist philosophy: unmentioned in the short story, but remembered by Russian readers who had to sit through "M-L-phil," Lenin's ideology is based on "the objective reality given us in our sensations." Sonechkin follows his classmates' example, and it becomes increasingly difficult for him to realize for example "that Comrade Lunacharsky's visit to their institute on a carriage with three black horses ... was not part of the programme ... devoted to the 300th anniversary of the Russian balalaika" (*A Werewolf Problem* 61), but a dream. The absurdity of being blurs boundaries between waking and sleeping and a specific aspect of this notion is criticism of state propaganda. Sonechkin goes on to discover that others are able to take notes and tell jokes while asleep and learns this art himself. When he realizes that no one is ever awake, the reader (even if aware of the metaphorical implications) sees it as an uncanny expansion of the reality given Sonechkin in his sensations. Having forgotten that he ever had been awake (while going on with his "outward" life: working, marrying, having a child), he boards a train and reads the word ДА on the other side of the window. I have just quoted "da" in the Cyrillic of the original text to show that, both letters being symmetrical, on Sonechkin's side the word must have read АД ("ad"): hell. Bromfield simply translates "da" as yes (75) something along the lines of a Shell station with a missing letter could have been attempted instead. Not as elegantly as in the original, this would at least denote the destination Sonechkin shares with the protagonists of *News from Nepal*.

In *News from Nepal*, elements which are more absurd than magical start appearing in a post-Soviet setting; gradually, an (under-)world is construed which makes readers suspend their disbelief even when events become supernatural. Interestingly, to a reader unfamiliar with the reality of late-Soviet Russia some perfectly realistic aspects like "the rack of photographs of employees who had spent time in the sobering-up station" (*The Blue Lantern* 7) might seem absurd. I am inclined to see this as a positive side effect: the borders between "reality" and "magic" are even more blurred for a non-Russian reader. Amid those detailed realistic descriptions curious things happen: 1) A factory displays a sign rendered as "Abandon Robes" by Bromfield. Curiously, in the original the sign is devoid of associations with Dante; however, substituting "abandon hope" (*ostav' nadezhdu*) with "abandon clothing" (*ostav' odezhdu*) is a well-known Russian pun. In all probability, it was present in an earlier version which Bromfield translated, and later was purged by Pelevin who is known to re-work his texts); 2) The factory director crosses himself looking at a picture of a trolleybus. This is believable: he might be distracted, myopic or insane; moreover, during the perestroika many cults filled the void created by obligatory atheism: why should a trolleybus not be an icon?; 3) Two men in long nightgowns discuss death, one claims that the other merely dreams this dialogue. Still, the reader can explain them away as runaways from a madhouse; 4) Workers use cups made from human skulls in their midday vodka-pause. Such vessels are known to exist, but the workers' matter-of-factly use of them is astonishing; and 5) Flying animals the size of dogs (presumably bats), economists wearing grey sacks and holding candles in the cafeteria queue and clerks talking in verse and discussing questions of afterlife as an everyday matter are highly unusual, but not impossible. Only as a divine or demonic creature (to judge from the title, Hindu or Buddhist — but Pelevin tends to mix mythologies) explains these mysterious happenings on the radio, stating that everyone has been dead by the beginning of the day (just like everybody is asleep in *Sleep*), truly magical events happen: all discover and try to repair the marks of death upon themselves — wounds, bullet holes, smashed bones. This casts a new light not only upon earlier instances of the uncanny but also upon elements which might

have seemed inconspicuous realistic details on first reading: the "invisible force" (*The Blue Lantern* 3) pressing the heroine against the trolleybus door denotes more than other passenger, a female guard whose "thumbs are circling around each other as though she was winding some invisible thread" (4) becomes a Moira. This afterworld consists of one day endlessly repeated and the last paragraph of the story repeats the first one, inviting re-reading: "invisible" elements are made visible and magical.

The illusion of reality, manifested in the equation of life with sleep or death, is Pelevin's main theme. Some sleep-centered stories are variations on earlier death-centered ones and vice versa; the two ways to manifest ontological doubts are closely connected and sometimes, it seems, interchangeable. However, sleep figures only rarely as a conventional metaphor for death and "Awakening" can equal "dying" as in *The Tarzan Swing* a sleep-walker almost falls into the abyss as he awakes, and his dialogue with a *Doppelgänger*-vision leaves no doubt of the metaphorical implications. "Falling asleep" can mean "being born" as it does in *Ivan Kublakhanov*. *Ivan Kublakhanov* is as of yet not translated yet and Anglophone readers would appreciate the allusion to Coleridge's opium dream, less obvious in Russian. The narrator describes his (or rather its — there is no gender) initial state of absolute waking as the absence of outside impressions, a sense of essence. Ivan — in the narrator's view, his dream, in a conventional perspective his "physical self" — is an embryo at this stage. When Ivan is "born," the narrator fears to fall asleep forever, but unlike Sonechkin he does not: he merely requires calm to awake; agitation is a property of sleep. When Ivan "dies" the narrator begins dreaming about another "self." These two stories have less affinity with magical realism (as I read it, in *The Tarzan Swing*, there is not enough magic and in *Ivan Kublakhanov* not enough realism), but the difference is a matter of degree, and Pelevin's treatment of his key theme spans genres from interview and essay to thought experiment and allegory to realism with or without magic. Estrangement is his favorite device.

The manner in which Pelevin deals with his theme has been influenced by many philosophical and literary sources. To name but two, Buddhism has provided some crucial ideas, Borges some methods for their treatment, and Pelevin has paid tribute to the latter in the novel known in the United Kingdom as *The Clay Machine Gun* and in the U.S. as *Buddha's Little Finger* (a film adaptation of the same name is by Tony Pemberton) whose preface states that *Sad raskhodiashchikhsia Petek* has been considered as an alternative title. This abundance of sibilants refers to *The Garden of Forking Paths* (in Russian *Sad raskhodiashchikhsia tropok*). Pelevin follows the paths of Borges's genre of perfection: the philosophical — and often magical realist — short story. However, for the dream-and-death motive another, folkloristic, source is more important: the so-called *strashilka* (from *strakh*: "fear"). Children telling each other horror stories when they spend the night in one room are not a specifically Soviet phenomenon, but — perhaps owing to the fact that in the late 1930s almost every child knew someone who has disappeared as if by an evil spell — the genre was especially popular in the USSR. Its influence on Pelevin seems important to me as it borders on magical realism more closely than for example the similar gothic story, because its setting is of everyday life. Here, the haunted space is never a castle, but a school, a flat, an office. After perestroika, this oral form has made its way into literature: in 1990, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's *The Black Coat* and in 1991 Pelevin's *The Blue Lantern* were published. The latter is a meta-*strashilka*: in a summer camp, children tell stories of people who discover that they are asleep (see his *Sleep*) or dead (see his *News from Nepal*). A boy nicknamed tellingly Tolstoy is pushing at the boundaries of the genre: his horror stories are as unorthodox and the distinction between life and death as blurred as in Pelevin's own oeuvre. The combination of a color-adjective and an everyday object is a standard *strashilka* title, but unlike Petrushevskaya's coat, Pelevin's title is not obviously magical. Its "blue and lifeless," "ghastly" (*The Blue Lantern* 151) light is only mentioned in the first and the last paragraphs. Does anything uncanny happen in *The Blue Lantern*? On first sight the answer seems negative: the boys finish their story-telling session and go to sleep. A closer look will show more to a reader who speaks Russian than to a reader in English: apart from several cases of mistranslation in this story (ranging from unidiomatic turns of phrase to unrecognized false friends and misunderstood jokes), Bromfield misses many subtle signals showing that in that sleep (of death?) such dreams may come which make the story's ending ominous.

The character Tolstoy, having deconstructed definitions of life and death, provokes one of the other boys into admitting his inability to tell the difference between the two and comments: "Then figure which you turn out to be" ("Nu vot i podumai, kto ty poluchaesh'sia"): the English version reads "Well now, just think for a moment about which you are" (160). In Russian, Tolstoy clearly implies "if you



were alive, you would be able to tell the difference" (the other boy's aggressive reaction to this comment shows his understanding of the implication). In English, this meaning could still be extracted, but a reassuring reading ("you know that you are alive, this must help to differentiate") is also possible. More importantly, a single adverb added to the final sentence diminishes its menacing potential. The last *strashilka* — about children in a summer camp who fall asleep forever (dreaming that they awake and go on with their lives), because a black hare beats its drum — has been told; the children in the summer camp go to sleep while listening to the drumming sounds of the train outside. Bromfield reproduces this parallel, but the very last words in his translation are "didn't even notice when I fell asleep" (162). The original has no equivalent for "even" — and rightly so, otherwise it loses the *strashilka* touch.

In conclusion, although Roh's *magischer Realismus* has features almost identical to Shklovsky's idea of *ostranenie*, although Carpentier was interested in Russian culture (which shares a liking for the marvelous with the Latin American one), and although Gogol was one of the earliest writers to comply fully with Faris's widely accepted definition of magical realism, the Russian influence on the genre failed to interest scholars and critics of literature and Russian magical realist writing is rarely mentioned in Western scholarship. The only book-length study on the topic — Haber's *The Myth of the Non-Russian* — has, as I describe above, serious oversights and mistakes, and political naiveté is combined with a moralistic approach to literature. Haber states that since the 1990s there has been no Russian magic realism, apparently ignoring the existence of, for instance, Pelevin whose short stories and novelettes deal with death, dreams and the illusion of "reality." In *Sleep and News from Nepal*, the treatment of these topics is connected to the oral horror form *strashilka* which I regard as an important precursor genre of Russian magical realism. Pelevin's novel *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* has appeared in English in 2008. Maybe this "strange, frenetic and beguiling account of a Russia plagued by werewolves and vampires ... vertiginously imaginative, anarchic fable" (see Laing), this "sci-fi adventure, love story, literary in-joke and mystico-shamanic treatise on the nature of enlightenment" (see Martin) will come to be discussed in terms of magical realism?

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