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IMAGES OF THE “RUSSIAN WINTER” AND “WINTER MOSCOW” IN THE REVELATION OF THE IMAGINATIVE SERIES OF “RUSSIA” IN “MOSCOW DIARY” BY WALTER BENJAMIN

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Abstract

The article discusses the features of the embodiment in “Moscow Diary” Walter Benjamin figurative series of Russia. The article attempts to substantiate the author's position of Walter Benjamin in the perception and image of Russia. The conceptual content of the imaginative series of Russia and the specifics of its creation in the pages of its “Moscow texts” (diary, essay, review and essay) are analyzed with reference to the latest scientific data.

Keywords

Walter Benjamin – “Moscow diary” – Image of Russia- Winter Moscow- Russian winter

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Introduction

First of all, the relevance of the study of the image of Russia, created in the works of Walter Benjamin, is determined with the need to deeply comprehend that particular image. It comes through the prism where “the man of the West” is used to perceiving russian realities. This image, as justified in the Russian philosophy of socio-humanitarian knowledge, may be very far from the original. It obeys its own laws of origin, functioning and development, but it notes the property of the image that makes it especially valuable both for understanding the original and for a wider cultural worldview and practical sense¹.

Fotemost, knowing how Russia is perceived by foreigners extraordinary, creatively gifted representatives of a different cultural environment. It allows us to look at it from the outside. It is viewed from the outside, sometimes unexpected angle, and, therefore, to understand it more deeply.

This will allow us to adjust and purposefully shape the image of Russia in the perception of the West in conditions when the conduct of cultural dialogue has become much more complicated. At the same time, it allows to build this dialogue based on those dominants of Russian culture that seem most understandable and attractive abroad. Such dominants, as well as “problem areas” in the already formed image of the country, nation and culture, allow us to identify the study of outstanding works of foreign literature which are devoted to Russia. Among these works, the so-called “Moscow texts” by Walter Benjamin, a writer who learned to “observe and judge Europe” through “new optics” – “with certain knowledge, what is happening in Russia” require special attention².

Development

The creative heritage of Benjamin – a writer, art critic, philosopher and sociologist – was not in life, but after half a century – by the end of the twentieth century was appreciated. The author from an unknown essayist will turn into one of the most important and, to date, the most quoted theoretician culture of the twentieth century. Nowadays, Benjamin is recognized as the first postmodernist and direct predecessor of the modern theory of culture.

Created Benjamin's works in the genre of artistic documentary (diaries, essays, essays, etc.) are fairly deep studies. The results of which are presented in a highly artistic form. Citing H. Arendt, they seem to “fall out of the headings”, “do not fit in the established order”³, and therefore still remain in the subject field of scientific interest by a number of foreign and domestic researchers.

First of all, among the works of Walter Benjamin, “Moscow texts” are of particular interest, “The Moscow Diary” and the essay “Moscow”, surprisingly capacious in their figurative and semantic potential. So capacious that their scientific comprehension has been carried out in recent decades in a series of works by individual researchers (S. A. Romashko, M. K. Ryklin, M. E. Malikova), as well as during heated discussions at specially

¹ V. F. Shapovalov, *Russia in the Western Perception: General Description and Stages of Evolution*. Access mode: 2015. <http://viperson.ru/articles/viktor-shapovalov-rossiya-v-zapadnom-vospriyatii-obschaya-harakteristika-i-etapy-evolyutsii> (accessed: 12.16.2015): 5

² V. Benjamin, *Moscow diary*. Per. with him. S. A. Chamomile (Moscow, 20129, 1639).

³ H. Arendt, “Walter Benjamin”, *Foreign Literature* num 12 (1997): 48.

organized conferences and seminars (So, a conference on Benjamin’s work was held by the publishing house “Ad Marginem” together with the Laboratory of Postclassical Studies of the Philosophy Institute in the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2000, an international seminar “Walter Benjamin Today: International Teaching Experience” at Moscow State University in 2011).

Despite the steady scientific interest and the high degree of scientific elaboration of Benjamin’s work – in particular, his “Moscow texts”, some aspects remain insufficiently studied.

The story of the creation of "Moscow Diary" by Walter Benjamin

Benjamin’s Moscow diary, dedicated to his two-month stay in Moscow from December 6, 1926 to the end of January 1927, is according to researchers, a unique phenomenon. “Without a doubt, this is the most personal, completely and ruthlessly frank document telling about an important period of his life”⁴. It was the “Moscow Diary” that became the literary document fixing the imagery that allowed Walter Benjamin to create a vivid, deep and, most importantly, both relevant (corresponding to the spirit of the era), and timeless (deep, ontological) image of Russia. It allows to compare and contrast its to Europe. Also in a paradoxical way it helped to find points (more precisely, zones) of contact between two different types of cultures.

Russian winter in the “Moscow Diary” by Walter Benjamin

First of all, Russia, which meets Benjamin in December 1926, is characterized with its weather. At first, despite the thaw on the day the writer arrived in Moscow, the Russian winter seemed static to him in terms of weather conditions. However, over time, Benjamin begins to understand that this weather is prone to change. Therefore it is precisely these changes that significantly affect the course of life in Russia: “winter life becomes one richer dimension here: space literally changes depending on whether it is warm or cold. Life on the street is like in a frosty mirror room, where every stop and understanding of the situation is incredibly difficult: you need to prepare for half a day to put the letter into the mailbox, and despite the severe cold, it takes effort to come into some store”⁵.

The writer repeatedly mentions that the Moscow streets are covered with ice: “In addition, the ice on the walls of the houses is so tight that part of the sidewalk is not suitable for walking. Incidentally, it is often difficult to distinguish it from the carriageway: snow and ice level different street levels”⁶.

A faithful companion of frost is the snow. It covers the Russian capital, seen by a German writer. “Wide Tverskaya is shining from snow”, it is Benjamin’s very first impression upon arrival⁷. The optical effects of snow (shine and light) he will repeatedly note in his diary, fixing the image of Russia as snowy as Russia light: “Snow reflects the lighting so strongly that almost all the streets are bright”⁸.

⁴ G. Scholem, Walter Benjamin and his angel. Foreign literature num 12 (1997): 68.

⁵ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 39.

⁶ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 45.

⁷ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 14.

⁸ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 62.

The presence of snow becomes for Benjamin a kind of starting point for the poetization of Russia. These are the creation of truly lyrical images, which being few in number, occupy a special place on the pages of the diary: “Unlike Berlin’s bare asphalt, winter passes here like a peasant in a white sheepskin, under thick snow fur”⁹.

So, Russia is portrayed by Benjamin as the abode of cold (frost) and snow. Russia is harsh, and to survive in it. The special efforts are needed – “incredible work”. Only occasionally, Russian winter seems to endow everyone with a thaw, a warm day, and the rare rays of the winter sun.

As Benjamin sees it, the inalienable attributes of winter Russia are sleigh and fur.

The moving by a sleigh from the very beginning seems quite exotic to the writer, because every day he diligently notes in his diary his every trip around Moscow with this type of transport. For example: “We went by a sleigh to the city and went shopping on Petrovka to buy a textile for her on the dress, its uniform”¹⁰. After almost a month in Moscow, Benjamin concludes: “There are no trucks in Moscow, there are any delivery companies, etc. The smallest purchases, as well as the biggest things, have to be transported on tiny sleighs with a cab”¹¹.

Benjamin's sleighs seem to be an attribute of traditional (not modern Russia) Russia before the revolutionary “break”, as well as transport of the Russian “backwoods” – the very Siberia that he will see in Russia only on postcards he bought. That is why the sleigh becomes him, despite the cold, nicer than the tram to the city: “I would like to ride a sleigh, but it was impossible,” Benjamin will write in the last days of his stay in Moscow¹².

Nevertheless, trams that are quite European at first glance, due to the weather, have their own peculiarities in Russia. Benjamin notes: “It was very cold again, the windows of the tram were covered with a thick crust of ice, so that nothing was visible through them. At first I drove in order to stop at which I had to get off. I had to go back”¹³. Cold, icy, people-filled Moscow trams sometimes seem like phantasmagoria.

No less exotic than the sleigh, Benjamin seems to be another attribute of the Russian winter, it is a fur. So, when firstly, he saw Asya Latzis upon arrival in Moscow, a writer in love, paradoxically true to his perception, writes in his diary: “Asya looked ugly, wildly in a Russian fur hat”¹⁴. Later, Benjamin will describe the scene in detail when Asya will ask him to buy a fur suit as a present for him in one of the shops in Moscow (it can be assumed that the coat, because when he saw the outlandish thing similar to the Tunguska craft, the couple did not examine it in detail). However, she will not get this gift due to the constraint of the German guest in money. For Benjamin, Russia is a country in furs (more precisely, culture, since the writer is more likely to study the Russian cultural zone than the country – about Soviet Russia as such will be discussed in only one fragment of the diary), and in the 20th century showing its wild roots.

⁹ V. A. Benjamin, *Work of art in the era of its technical reproducibility: selected essays*. Transl. with him. S.A. Chamomile (Moscow, 1996), 108.

¹⁰ V. A. Benjamin, *Work of art in the era of its technical...* 136.

¹¹ V. A. Benjamin, *Work of art in the era of its technical...* 108.

¹² V. A. Benjamin, *Work of art in the era of its technical...* 189.

¹³ V. A. Benjamin, *Work of art in the era of its technical...* 174.

¹⁴ V. A. Benjamin, *Work of art in the era of its technical...* 14.

The images of winter Moscow

In the structure of the Russian image, which are created on the pages of the Moscow Diary, a significant place is given by the writer to the image of Moscow – the “capital of the world revolution”, which nevertheless remains the “capital of the world peasantry”¹⁵. This many-faced city is gradually endowed with Benjamin especially significant for his understanding of the characteristics.

First of all, Moscow seems Benjamin sometimes impregnable: “I gathered in the Tretyakov Gallery. I did not find it and wandered in the piercing cold along the left bank of the Moscow river among construction sites, garrisons and churches”¹⁶. Later, in the pages of his diary, the writer will once again recall this impregnability: “It was a cold day, perhaps still not as cold as the time I first wandered here in search of a museum and could not find it, although I was only in two steps”¹⁷.

In addition, Moscow is unexpected and unpredictable: “Nothing happens as it was prescribed and as expected, it is a banal expression of the complexity of life with such inevitability and is so powerfully confirmed here at every step that Russian fatalism very soon becomes clear”¹⁸. Against the background of those who bear this characteristic burden of “complexity of life” characteristic of life in Moscow. Benjamin distinguishes those whom it has not touched: “There are people here who do not care about words and calmly accept things as they really are, for example, children who put on street skates”¹⁹. Children here, as elsewhere (in Berlin, for example, which is emphasized in “Berlin childhood at the turn of the century”) are the wisest people, specially adapted to the environment – which is most significant for the writer, to live on a “break”, capable of complete least live the simple joys of life.

Russia is not only full of surprises; much of it is threatening (dangerous) unpredictable. It is fraught with uncertainty. An example is the typical situation of that time: “Lelevich is being expelled. At first it was ordered to go to Novosibirsk. They told him: “You need,” “not just a city, whose scale is still limited, but an entire region”. He managed to avoid this, and now he is sent “at the disposal of the party” to Saratov, a city within days of driving from Moscow, while he does not even know if he will be there as an editor, a seller of a production cooperative, or anyone else”²⁰.

Moscow is resisting those who try to comprehend its “meanings” from the outside during the visit. Benjamin directly points to this, saying: “six weeks is just the time it takes to at least somehow settle down in any city, besides not knowing the language and feeling its resistance at every step”²¹.

Many doors in Moscow are closed for Benjamin, for example: “15th January”.

¹⁵ M. K. Ryklin, Walter Benjamin. Topos Utopia. Communism as a religion. Intellectuals and the October Revolution (Moscow, 2009, 98).

¹⁶ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 98.

¹⁷ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 185.

¹⁸ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 133.

¹⁹ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 133.

²⁰ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 20.

²¹ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 59.

A vain trip to the Toy Museum. It was closed, although the guide said that on Sundays it is open”²²; “January 21. This is the day of Lenin's death. All entertainment establishments are closed”²³.

The mysterious writer clearly sees that Russia, having opened its true face to the observant, gradually became closer to its departure. It began to seem to be closed from him – behind the locks of Moscow museums, behind the ice crust of small tram windows. Moreover, truly mystical oddities begin to happen to him: “... I was standing for an hour in the lobby. But my expectation was completely in vain. A few days later I found out that Gnedin was in the same room and was waiting for me. I don't know how this could happen. The fact that I was exhausted and with my poor memory on my faces, could not recognize him in a coat and hat, you can imagine, but that the same thing happened to him is incredible”²⁴.

Moreover, Moscow is a city and it is fraught with many dangers, which is why Benjamin repeatedly mentions the necessary caution in his diary: you should carefully walk on ice, carefully read words in a “different” language, and be careful in making judgments. As the study of M.K. Ryklin conducted in recent years has shown, Benjamin's experience in Moscow coincided with his careful reading of Kafka, and therefore the writer's statement that Russia requires special care “here” refers to those areas of irrational, structured according to the texts of Kafka, where the unidentifiable danger comes from²⁵.

Trying to explain the considered facets of the Moscow image in the image of Benjamin, M.K. Ryklin notes that “it was in Moscow that he slowly and painfully realized his incompatibility with the new transcendent that the October Revolution emanates from. It simultaneously fascinates and frightens him”²⁶.

Against this background, the “stabilizers of being” identified by Benjamin are paradoxical, providing confidence. One of them, it is the daily morning shout at the hotel by numbers: “In the mornings, when there are still nine, if they stoke, they always knock on the door and ask if the shutter is closed. This is the only thing you can be sure of here”²⁷. So, in Moscow you can be sure not of tomorrow, but only that every day at the same time someone who is not visible outside the door will burst into the private life of the person, breaking the dream with his cry, which must be answered.

On the whole, impregnable, unpredictable, frightening and, at the same time, attractively dangerous, changeable and deceitful Moscow, gives Benjamin two images that firmly link the associative series: Moscow fortress is a woman who needs to be won at the cost of tremendous efforts.

²² V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 171.

²³ V. Benjamin, Work of art in the era of its technical... 167.

²⁴ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 171.

²⁵ O. S. Fisenko, “New Religious Consciousness” as a Form of Understanding Christian Values. Social and Humanitarian Knowledge: Traditions and Innovations. Collection of scientific and educational articles (Moscow, 2015, 5)

²⁶ M. K. Ryklin, Walter Benjamin. Topos Utopia. Communism as a religion. Intellectuals and the October Revolution (Moscow, 2009, 85).

²⁷ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 91.

“For me, Moscow is a fortress now; severe climate, it is albeit healthy, but very difficult for me, lack of knowledge of the language, Reich’s presence, serious restrictions on Asya’s lifestyle – all this is such a number of bastions...” states Benjamin²⁸. Later, he is more optimistic: “I faced an almost impregnable fortress. Nevertheless, I believe that my appearance in front of this fortress, Moscow means the first success”²⁹. The figurative-associative series outlined in the diary at this stage is sketchy; it will be developed (by crystallizing these images) in Benjamin’s subsequent “Moscow texts”.

As was shown at the first level of the study, Benjamin is particularly interested in contrasts in the “zones of contact” of the past and the present, of different cultures and diverse social phenomena. Therefore, during his journey, the writer carefully studies the contrasting phenomena of Soviet Russia and the native Russia (as the writer calls it as village, peasant).

These contrasts can be seen in the external appearance of Moscow: “... I came to the square where the royal kennel was located before. It is surrounded with low houses; some of them have portals with columns. But on the same side between them are disgusting tall houses, they were newer”³⁰.

The color dominants of two different faces of Russia also contrast. So, in Soviet Russia everything is too bright: “too bright is a carpet, bright Christmas toys decorating the windows”³¹. Another observation: “... There are people whose baskets are full of wooden toys, trolleys and shovels, yellow-red trolleys, yellow or red shovels. Others have with bundles of colorful flags behind their shoulders”³². Particularly expressive image is “paper flowers, in large bundles, on the street. Against the background of snow, they look even brighter than variegated bedspreads or raw meat”³³.

The color schemes of the Soviet capital reach the point of absurdity. Benjamin’s meeting with the “red” funeral procession indicates this: “The coffin, hearse, horse harness was red”³⁴. Summarizing his impressions, the writer exclaims: “It’s amazing how much exotic this city brings down on you!”³⁵.

On the whole, the visual range of the country of the Soviets is estimated by Benjamin as excessively harsh (bright), sugary (this definition is used many times in the diary), tasteless, and absurd.

In the color of rural (peasant) Russia, opposed to Soviet, white colour dominates. The color of snow that Russia is “dressed” in winter (it can be assumed that at other times of the year it would be green). In addition, she plays with “warm home colors over the snow”³⁶.

²⁸ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary...141

²⁹ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 142.

³⁰ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 65.

³¹ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 29.

³² V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 32.

³³ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 79.

³⁴ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary...79.

³⁵ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary...79.

³⁶ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 59.

In generally, on the pages of the Moscow Diary, Russia in the image of Benjamin is decorated with cheap tinsel (paper flowers and crafts), sweetly tattered, but its essence, its soul – in silence, in the pure radiance of snow, as if it is giving a light.

Soviet Russia impresses the German guest with the sharpness and absurdity of not only colors, but also sounds. For example, Benjamin notes: “During this walk along the Yamskaya Tverskaya we met a group of Komsomol members marching to music. This music, like the music of the Soviet army, gives the impression of a combination of whistling and singing”³⁷. New Russia is characterized by the sounds of a crowded human hostel, which Benjamin describes in sufficient detail – including steps on the stairs, and a phone ring in the corridor (up to one or two nights), and loud voices that constantly sound outside the door.

Completely different sounds of primordial Russia: they are subtle and unobtrusive. A very vivid sound image arises when reading the following lines of the writer’s diary: “On the Kuznetsk bridge, a boy sells clay plates, tiny plates and small plates, hits them against each other to prove that they are durable”³⁸. Thin sound of clay plates (for Benjamin it is almost fabulous), this is the “music” of peasant Russia. In addition, Benjamin repeatedly emphasizes the silence of Moscow’s primordial (peasant): “Moscow is the quietest of the giant cities, and it is doubly silent in the snow”³⁹.

In general, by the end of Benjamin’s stay in Moscow, he feels that it (it should be understood from the context - the original, rural Russia) has become “much closer” to him⁴⁰. He feels nostalgia to Moscow, not yet leaving it: “The morning passed for coffee in a pretty little pastry shop, which I probably will often remember”⁴¹. Trips past the places, I love in the city begin to cause melancholy: “Just before that, I sadly drove past the market on Arbat Square, where I first met the charming Christmas rows of Moscow”⁴². “I have noticed something else in recent days: not only snow will make me yearn for Moscow, but also the sky. None of the other giant cities has such a wide sky. This is due to the fact that there are many low houses. In this city you constantly feel the openness of the Russian plain”⁴³. Against the background of this yearning for Russia, the extra (unplanned) days of stay in Moscow are perceived by Benjamin as a real “gift”.

The writer records his last observations of the life in the Russian capital, as his diary testifies, already in Berlin, and it is there that another bright image is born: “I am adding something about Moscow from what has become clear to me only in Berlin (where I from February 5, I finish these notes, from January 29 and on). Berlin is a dead city for people coming from Moscow”⁴⁴. Consequently, Moscow is a city of boiling life unlike Berlin.

The life of the Russian city is in many ways a mystery to a foreigner who does not speak the language, but you can try to solve it with attention, patience and lively interest. The following remark of Benjamin is indicative: “In the morning, in order to get to know the city better, I took a long walk along the inner boulevard ring to the main post office and

³⁷ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 86.

³⁸ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 119.

³⁹ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 130.

⁴⁰ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 191.

⁴¹ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 192.

⁴² V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 192.

⁴³ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 191.

⁴⁴ V. Benjamin, Moscow diary... 193.

back through Lubyanka Square to Herzen’s house. I solved the riddle of a man with an alphabet board: he traded letters that were marked with galoshes so as not to confuse”⁴⁵.

In general, as Benjamin notes in his diary, “you really know a place only when you pass it in as many directions as possible ... The same goes for houses. What is hidden in them, you will only know when you find among others any particular. A life full of silent bitterness and struggle jumps out of you at the doorposts, sometimes in different sizes of black, blue, yellow and red letters, then with an arrow-pointer, then with the image of boots or freshly ironed linen, then with a trodden step or a solid porch. You also need to drive along the streets on a tram to see how this struggle climbs up the floors in order to finally reach a decisive stage on the roofs. Thus, a new image is born on the pages of Benjamin’s diary: Russia is a country that does not open to the casual-looking one; it requires a close look and repeated, long peering into the full struggle of the life of its cities, streets and squares – from their gates to the roofs. Realizing this, Benjamin feels the need to return here and even master the Russian language.

Conclusions

Thus, the “Moscow Diary” has become a literary document, primarily fixing the figurative series of “Russia”. The images of the “Russian winter” and “Moscow winter” allowed Walter Benjamin to create a vivid, deep and, most importantly, multifaceted image of Russia.

Moreover, Russia as a special cultural world – a “thing in itself” – is constantly described by Benjamin in the smallest details and details captured by this guest from Europe.

In the structure of the image of Russia presented in Benjamin’s diary, the “joints of the incoherent” are especially important – the grotesque pictures of Russian reality created by the absence of a border between the old and the new. In the image of Benjamin, Russia is decorated with cheap tinsel (paper flowers and crafts), sweetly tattered, but its essence, its soul is in silence, in the pure radiance of snow, as if giving light.

The diary sketched outlined individual images that will be conceptualized at the next stage of the writer’s work upon returning from Russia (Moscow is an impregnable fortress; Moscow is a woman who needs to be won at the cost of tremendous effort; Moscow is a Christmas tree, Christmas miracle, etc.).

In addition, Russia is depicted on the pages of the writer's diary; it is still implicitly opposed to Europe. The writer only marked the main aspects of the future antithesis.

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⁴⁵ V. A. Benjamin, Work of art in the era of its technical... 36.

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