

THEORETICAL ISSUES

DOI: 10.15838/esc/2014.5.35.2

UDC 316, LBC 60.5

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Metaphor of society (a sociological essay)



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Abstract. The essay by Academician G.V. Osipov, the patriarch of Russian sociology, is dedicated to one of the most cognitive topics of modern sociology – identification of **sociological metaphor** as such and its application in research projects. This topic is avant-garde for the world sociological thought, and in Russia such kind of research is making its first steps. However, its future importance is difficult to overestimate. Sociological metaphor, if a methodology for its application is developed, can provide scientists with qualitatively new synthetic research tools. It can also bring together scientific structures and artifacts on the space of interdisciplinary and inter-subject borderland and give them qualitatively new intellectual and sensuous (system and mental) technological capabilities for learning the surrounding world.

The advantage of the following essay can be found in the fact that it is based on the objective analysis of the real embodiment of social metaphor in the work of art – a pictorial triptych “The Mystery of the 21st Century”. This is the first such experience in domestic sociological and artistic-painting practice. The authors of the final product are a scientist of great scientific and life experience and a young artist, who received in-depth sociological training and defended his Ph.D. in Sociology dissertation. But the main result of their collaboration is a product that combines scientific (sociological) knowledge and insight and intuitive-creative artistic perception in a qualitatively new perception of the world and world outlook.

Key words: metaphor, science, sociality, cognition, artifact, painting, synthetic tools, perception of the world, world outlook, nominative image, maxim, epistemological privileges, literature, knowledge, language, thought, composition, tragedy, text.

I can imagine some of my colleagues asking in bewilderment: why all of a sudden should a mature sociologist describe society with a system of metaphors? Indeed, metaphor is an instrument of a subjective and artistic, rather than objective and scientific, perception and reflection of reality, the so-called “artistically-figurative” trope. The scientific and the artistic perceptions of the world are essentially different.

However, is this statement true in the 21st century, when the boundaries between sciences are being erased, and even the line between science and art is becoming thinner? I have devoted this article to the understanding of this issue that is gaining importance in modern sociology.

I.

The argument concerning a system difference between the scientific and the artistic perception of the world is difficult to refute. O. Spengler in his time pointed out the deep, essential dualism of historical and social phenomena that may look similar on the surface, but actually they belong to different psychological types of human perception according to the degree of fixation and cognition. He consciously opposed the notions of nature and history, causality and fate, what is understood and what is experienced, the *element* in science and the *image* (*emphasis added*. G.O.) in art [Spengler O., 1923].

A scientific maxim and an artistic metaphor, like West and East in the famous ballad by R. Kipling, are parallel lines, which “shall never meet” until the end of time. (Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, // Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat.)

But even parallel lines will eventually intersect, when, in a state of heuristic insight, N.I. Lobachevsky, the great Russian mathematician, founder of non-Euclidean geometry, will suggest to take the interior of a circle as a plane and the arcs of a circle as straight lines!

So Ecclesiastes was wrong in arguing that “...there is nothing new under the sun” [*Ecclesiastes 1:9*]. New knowledge, valuable to mankind, is generated constantly, and it is generated by the creative genius of Man!

And then a prominent Russian mathematician and philosopher V.V. Nalimov has “shifted” the metaphor from its position of purely artistic application that seemed unshakeable and “registered” it, among other things, in philosophy. “Lack of logic in everyday language is filled by using metaphors. Logic and metaphors in a text are two of its complementary manifestations” [Nalimov V., 2000].

The further – the deeper...

If still relatively recently the birth of metaphor assumed *a nominative image* to be its basic element, then now this role is performed more and more often by a *philosophical and social maxim*. Simply put, not only the artistic imagery, but also the scientific logic participate equally in the process of metaphorization, when new phenomena emerge and also when the genesis and actual social value of already existing, exclusively diverse set of metaphors, are constantly revised.

At the same time, I am fully aware that the prevailing notion of metaphor contains, to a more or less extent of manifestation, a kind of noble *cognitive shamanism*: how can one abandon the tradition of an almost sacred

attitude to the majority of literary tropes and various figurative techniques?.. One should not abandon it, of course, but it is necessary to remember the harmonic balance between research methodologies (artistic and scientific) involved in the process.

Also one should always remember that artistic thinking and artistic perception of the world, which are based on the *image* that synthesizes ideas about an object or process, exert increasing influence on scientific consciousness, on the philosophy and methodology of scientific research, primarily, in the Humanities. Therefore, the role of artistic tropes in this context is gaining importance, since they more often become active components in the tools of the Humanities and even the Natural Sciences when they create a *figurative system* for the denotation of the studied phenomena.

I will refer to the most recent sources, in particular, to the research by the Dutch sociologist D. Pels. He explores the relationship between politics and economics and defines both concepts as “the metaphor of politics” and “the metaphor of economics”. According to D. Pels, both these vocabularies uncharms and deconstruct, since they reveal something similar to a greed for gain or a will to power in the characteristic features of professional search for knowledge.

D. Pels writes: “The intrigue lies in the fact that this radical idea of collusion between cognitive and social elements in science and situatedness and burden with the interests of its products was expressed in two classic variations of lifting the spell: the “Marxist” variation that concerns the economy and capital, and the “Nietzschean” variation that concerns politics and power [Michel Foucault.

1980] <...> Each of them reveals in its own way the inseparable dualism of cognitive and strategic interests, and the consequent “agonistic” structure of a scientific enterprise. (Epistemological coincidence between the truth-oriented cognitive interests (Danish: *belangstelling*) and the strategic interests (Danish: *belang*) is much better rendered by the English word “interest” or the French word “*intérêt/intéressement*” rather than the Danish adjective “*belang-rijk*”.) Thus, *both metaphors* (*emphasis added*. G.O.) are equally useful from the point of view of the destruction of what Nietzsche called “ascetic” ideal of philosophical truth, and of disburdening of science from its traditional epistemological privileges” [Pels D., 2010].

A statement by my French colleague, sociologist P. Bourdieu, about the role of literary devices in social science is a telling example: “The desire to make one feel or to make one understand, aroused by the immediate presence of an attentive listener <...> urges us to search for *metaphors and analogies* (*emphasis added*. G.O.), which, if their limitations at the time of use are specified, can give a first intuitive approach to the most complex models and, thus, lead to a more strict representation” [Bourdieu P., 1994].

Modern science started to use and develop metaphors and became an active partner of art in the process of metaphorization, thus performing another beneficial part that has remained virtually unnoticed so far. Science has significantly reduced, if not removed, an element of sacredness and mysticism in our attitude toward metaphor.

Indeed, what is metaphor, if not the next – higher and more complex – step in the chain-

ladder of cognitive technology: motif – theme – image – metaphor?.. I put dots after the question mark, because I am convinced that the chain-ladder will be extended in the course of a more subtle analysis of the phenomenon under discussion. Moreover, its internal space can expand, enclosing new terminology that expresses the results of new research on the micro level.

No doubt, metaphor is an integral means of artistic reflection of reality and, I would say, the highest by its degree of intellectual and emotional impact on human consciousness and psyche. But the longer humanity follows the path of understanding its surrounding reality, the more expanded the horizons of using the metaphorical method of reflection become.

“Metaphor is immensely practical... It can be used as a tool in the description and explanation of everything from psychotherapeutic interviews to the conversations of airline pilots, from dance rituals to computer program languages, from art education to quantum mechanics. Metaphor, whatever it is, is pointing us to a richer understanding of human action, knowledge and language” [Hoffman R., 1985].

I.D. Arutyunova, one of the leading researchers in this topic, makes the right assumption [Arutyunova I., 1990] that the interest in metaphor facilitated the interaction of various fields of scientific thought, their ideological consolidation, which resulted in the formation of cognitive science that deals with the study of different aspects of human consciousness. “Cognitive science is based on the assumption that human cognitive structures (perception, language, thinking, memory, actions) are inextricably

linked within the framework of a single task – the implementation of processes such as assimilation, processing and transformation of knowledge, the processes that, in fact, define the essence of the human mind” [Petrov V., 1988]...

I conclude this introductory and theoretical part of my essay on the metaphor with a wise ironic expression by G.K. Lichtenberg, a famous German scientist and writer, who lived in the 18th century: “The metaphor is far more clever than its author, as are many things. Everything has its depths” [Lichtenberg, 1964].

Perhaps this is the best what can be said in our case.

II.

It is not *all of a sudden* that I became interested in metaphor that seems remote from science. The idea to try and reflect through metaphor my vision of the socio-political situation in my home country and in the world rooted in my head when I got acquainted with the works of Ilya Sergeyevich Glazunov, the outstanding Russian painter, patriot of the Russian land, People’s Artist of the USSR. And first of all, after an inspiration, which I had never experienced before, overwhelmed me when I was looking at Glazunov’s landmark paintings “Eternal Russia” (1988, oil on canvas, 300 x 600) and “The Mystery of the 20th century” (1999, oil on canvas, 300 x 800).

I am not going to dwell upon them; I do not intend to describe them either. I can hardly believe that a true patriot did not bother to behold these outstanding paintings, comparable to the highest achievements of the great masters of the Renaissance in their

power of spirit and artistic impact, in their wide-scale coverage of the main events of the century and the depth of penetration into the soul of the viewer. And if such people still exist, I strongly advise them to visit the Moscow State Art Gallery of Ilya Sergeyevich Glazunov (13, Volkhonka Street) where these creations of our outstanding contemporary have been already exhibited for a decade since the opening of the Gallery in 2004...

Nature has not endowed me with the ability to depict the world authentically and convincingly and to share my own vision and understanding of the world with my contemporaries through the medium of art and harmony of colors. Therefore, the realization of the idea of social metaphor itself was suspended till I met a young gifted artist Svyatoslav Gulyaev.

Svyatoslav's passion for sociology became the main argument in favor of choosing him for implementing my scientific and artistic notions of the social world through the creation of an expanded visual metaphor. That was how S. Gulyaev, initially, the graduate student of ISPR RAS (of which I am Director) and, subsequently, Ph.D in Sociology, became my co-author in the work on the beautiful triptych "The Mystery of the 21st Century".

An algorithm of our joint work was developed empirically. During our meetings I explained to Svyatoslav the concept of the work as a whole and each individual lesson. I told him what historical personalities were to be depicted in the painting and explained what roles they were to "perform" in the context of the composition and message of the work. I explained to him the general composition of the whole painting and its

fragments, those vectors that would make it more interesting for a viewer to trace the development of social phenomena and personalities representing them.

After a while, the young artist would bring a sketch, which we would discuss together with scientific thoroughness, and not a square centimeter of the future painting would be left without proper attention. Sometimes after our discussion we would reject virtually the whole sketch, but it did not bother us; a negative result in science as well as in art, is sometimes no less important for the general idea, than a positive one.

The conceptual goal of our work was to create an artistic and sociological story about the historical and political events from the abolition of serfdom by Alexander II in 1861 and up to the present day. Gradually, the visual style of painting was formed and developed. It is based on parody and humorous attitude to the subject material, and they, in turn, rest upon a solid and reliable foundation of sociological analysis and analytical conclusions. As a result, the ingenious "sociological extravaganza" that can persuade even the skeptics is a combination of imagination and rigorous scientific thought.

The painting is composed of three canvases united by an allegorical image of the "Goddess of Sociology", which is located in the central part of the triptych. The Goddess is flying through all the times and events and with a gesture of her hand she is calling out to humanity in the hope that people will finally begin to think seriously about all the tragic and dramatic events that are happening in the world and will make the right conclusions about how to continue life on Earth.

Color photograph of the triptych "THE MYSTERY OF THE 21ST CENTURY"



Gulyaev S. "The Mystery of the 21st Century" oil on canvas, 2013, ISPR RAS

The first two pictures reflect the history of the 19th – 21st centuries in brief. At that time, the most important events could be already recorded on the film. That is why the painting shows a film and a scroll with handwritten words representing the key events of that period and the statements of prominent personalities; the film and the scroll are like the witnesses of the history, they are stretching through the whole painting and intersecting crosswise.

Sarcasm is a key artistic device used for depicting a number of especially odious characters. For instance, look at Trotsky, the red (in color as well as political affiliation) demon, who is sitting on the top of the Kremlin wall like a blood-stained gorilla. Or a pronounced caricature of doctor Gebbels, like a sketch by the Kukryniksy [Russian: Кукрыниксы – *the three nationally famous and internationally recognized USSR caricaturists*. Translator’s note.] in front of a microphone screaming his head off in a hysterics of paranoid schizophrenia and broadcasting fascist misanthropic ideas of a radio station. Fascists and those who advocated the idea of a “permanent revolution” must be depicted with no other artistic tool but grotesque sarcasm.

The “dashing trinity” represented by Boris Yeltsin, Stanislav Shushkevich and Leonid Kravchuk, who are having a rest with drink running freely in Belovezhskaya Pushcha (Belarusian SSR), is depicted more leniently; nevertheless, it is a caricature, a paraphrase of the famous painting “The Hunters at Rest” by Vasily Perov, a member of the Peredvizhniki [Russian: Передвижники – *the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions, formed in 1870*. Translator’s note.].

A moral and political condemnation of the destroyers is seen not only in sharp, accusing eyes of Alexander Lukashenko, who is lurking behind their backs, but also in another fragment of the composition situated in the lower left corner of the painting and depicting the triumvirate of the World War II winners: Generalissimo Joseph Stalin, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill. They are still together in front of the cameras of the world’s leading news agencies, the joint victory is ahead; but we can see that each of them is busy with his own thoughts, and all together they are already looking in different directions.

Today they are still allies at the Yalta negotiations, but very soon Churchill will deliver his Speech in Fulton that will mark the onset of the cold war bringing down the “iron curtain” that will shut the USSR off from the rest of the world for decades.

Not a single character in the painting is an isolated notional and conceptual element. All of them are connected (are in cahoots?) with each other, and all together – with the country and its history. They are also bound and tied by the compositional elements representing the most telling mark of the century: the scroll and the film, curving, like waves of the river of time, like tongues of flame.

We see the four leaders from different Soviet periods: Vladimir Lenin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Gorbachev speaking from the platform. Each of them has raised his hand in a typical pointing gesture. They are pointing out the way to the people... Except that they are pointing in different directions! Nevertheless,

there is something in common between them: an outright buffoonery and bragging like that of Ivan Khlestakov, an unforgettable character from Gogol's satirical play "The Inspector General".

But the main performing element in our "opera on canvas" is the duets.

Here is the "gruesome-twosome" Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leaders of two Duma factions. They argue and quarrel on a Duma rostrum and on the sidelines; they unveil and they threaten, but their moves are somehow perceived as a pair entertainment, a low-grade political theater. Such is the manner in which we are playing for years and decades on Russia's political stage, making way for vigorous strong-willed countries and letting off the steam of creation in a meaningless, though loud and shrill, whistle – the steam that Russia desperately needs...

Here is Anatoly Chubais with his voucher, both useless frauds ...

Here is "bad" profiteer Boris Berezovsky, who has escaped from the just punishment to London, a city that does not care about justice in his case; and Roman Abramovich, who has remained in Russia and, therefore, is a good businessman. Nevertheless, a glance at this bad-and-good couple makes us feel somewhat uneasy. As though we fell an urge to take a brush with black paint and draw between them two parallel lines as the sign of identity...

Here are Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama. I have already mentioned them in the text of this article. I just want to add a couple of words: hold on, Vladimir Vladimirovich, the whole progressive mankind is looking at you with hope...

A dualistic duo in our mystery is represented not only by historical characters, but also by meaningful objects. The Nazi storm troopers forming the line for an attack and the formation of victorious Soviet soldiers in the Victory Parade with Abwehr banners and standards pointed downward to the cobblestones of Red Square.

The Golem (Mammon), for whom money is the only meaning of life, is playing with the world as if it were a puppet. He gets money from Uncle Sam, the symbol of the USA, the dominant world power. The Golem is sitting in front of a computer and browsing social networks to watch over paid sabotage. He is content with his doings.

The image of the Golem has acquired a fundamental social significance in the "Mystery". He is versatile and therefore hard to recognize in our hectic daily routine. One of the embodiments of this metaphor is a symbol of administrative machine that often pursues its own and corporate goals, significantly different from the goals of the state.

Perhaps, this pair is the most consistent in its criminal aspiration: the bald and fat Golem-Mammon who has sold himself for gold, and Uncle Sam standing behind his back and leaning over his head representing not only a symbol of capitalist America merciless to working people, but also a master of the omnipotent Masonic Lodge, an underground world community, the so-called *backstage*, with a six-pointed star on a *moire ribbon of his cylinder*.

The events important for global development are pulled up to one another through the eras and centuries according to the principle of epistemological identity. More often – it is a seeming identity.

Color photograph of a fragment of the painting



The French Revolution and Yeltsin's liberal demarche in front of the White House in Moscow. At that time, those homegrown liberals thought they were making history like the Gauls who had revolted against feudal backwardness; but it turned out that they delayed the progressive motion of long-suffering Mother Russia for the years of Yeltsin's groggy rule.

Even the texts in the painting tend to make pairs. The decree of Emperor Alexander II that abolished serfdom in Russia, and Vladimir Putin's assurance that we are ready for fair competition. The good initiatives echoing through the ages.

I would like to highlight a fragment in the painting, which is the most important for me personally, and its message to the future. The fragment is located in the top right corner of the composition, as though to fulfill this purpose.

From there opens a way outside our vanity fair, a nervous, troubled, unpredictable mystery of a century that is only emerging and simmering with constructive and destructive energies.

Everything is dear to my memory and everything pleases my soul in this final fragment of sociological metaphor reflected on the canvas.

In Russian folk tales a fork in the road always implies a choice of one's fate. If you go to the right, if you go to the left... And a tempting prospect of success and happy ownership is always opposed by the tragic outcome: "you will lose your life", as a sobering alternative.

And here, of my own accord, I have outlined such a symbolic crossroads, from which both roads lead to the territory of Hope. That is why the names of the leading

Russian research centers "Skolkovo" and "RAS" sound like bravura music in my ear.

I know: the Innovation Research Center, and the Science Park in Skolkovo, as well as the Russian Academy of Sciences are now going through hard times. But hope is the last thing to die...

That is why the RAS headquarters with a distinctive anodized structure of aerial systems on the roof commonly known as "golden brains" (an apt expression), seems to me in the context of the mystery a kind of stylized launch vehicle that will bring humanity to unknown scientific horizons. I have also picked up a crew for the vehicle; the crew, which I consider the most suitable one, is presented as the three portraits on the last piece of the film concluding the chronicle of events.

I shall introduce these people to those, who do not know them: from left bottom to right top: Andrey Grigoryevich Zdravomyslov, Vladimir Aleksandrovich Yadov and Gennadii Vasil'evich Osipov, your humble servant. Back in the 1960s we embarked on the endeavor of the revival of Russian sociology – a challenging task, sometimes tragic, after decades of prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the partocratic regime. Each of us went his own way, and, eventually, the roads we have traveled along resulted in the three distinct and intrinsically valuable directions. There were no others. Take my word for it.

The dream crew... And it does not matter that Vladimir Alexandrovich and myself have entered our nineties and Andrey Grigoryevich is already gone. Metaphor – it is able to stop time, to freeze it. At least on the canvas covered with oil paints and called "mystery" – an enigmatic and intriguing word.

At least I want to believe it...

July 2014

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