

‘Alternative Knowledge’ in Latvian Culture: Roots and Contexts

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Abstract. The aim of the current research is to establish how alternative knowledge is represented in the latest Latvian cultural texts, how this representation compares with the texts written in previous cultural eras, and what structure of reality is characteristic of the texts. The research explores popular cultural texts in which distributors of ‘alternative knowledge’ operate (wizards, witches, servants of the devil, etc.), and the historical texts are compared with the latest yield of Latvian culture – director Uģis Olte’s film “*Upurga*” (2021) and Linda Nemiera’s novel “*Rīgas Raganas*” (2021). The research methodology is based on Richard Schechner’s understanding of social and aesthetic drama, as well as post-structural text analysis, analysing texts according to pairs of dichotomies. The research found that in the oldest texts, the alternative reality is not considered real, but represented metaphorically. The individual who is given the imagined supernatural status aspires to fit into the group. The ‘supernatural’ is most frequently associated with knowledge that an individual gradually imparts to a group. Recent texts affirm the belief in parallel realities as real, physically existing. Criticism of contemporary culture (‘reality’) is pronounced, the alternative reality gives it what it lacks (the opposition of nature vs civilization, the basis for social processes in the real world, etc.). The contrast between the individual and the group can be clearly observed, besides, the individual does not fit into the group after all, remaining isolated.

Keywords: alternative knowledge, cultural text, aesthetic performance

Introduction

The research exploring alternative knowledge in Latvian culture outlines the tradition of cultural texts, examining the representation of alternative sources of knowledge (witches, wizards, healers), comparing and particularly focusing on the latest cultural texts. The purpose of the study is to establish how alternative knowledge is represented in the latest Latvian cultural texts, how this

representation compares with the texts created in previous cultural eras, what structure of reality is characteristic of the texts. Research questions: how are the carriers of alternative knowledge depicted and evaluated in Latvian cultural texts; what structure of social reality underlies the texts.

Methodology

The research methodology is based on Richard Schechner's understanding of social and aesthetic drama, as well as post-structural analysis of texts. Schechner describes the concepts of social drama and aesthetic performance, characterizing their mutual relations as reciprocally effectual (feedback loop) – the structure of social drama is aesthetic, but its functions are social, while aesthetic performances on a virtual plane are based in social and political reality, primarily implementing aesthetic functions (Schechner 2002, 77) This model enables the researcher to analyse aesthetic performances by drawing conclusions about the social structure to which the aesthetic performance corresponds, since the model of social reality can be deduced from the elements of the aesthetic performance. The analysis has been carried out by detecting the pairs of dichotomies – 'good – bad', 'individual – group', 'insider – stranger', 'freedom – restrictions of power', 'nature – civilization', 'religion – science', 'a single reality – multiple realities'.

Results

Historically, the most famous examples among the distributors of 'alternative knowledge' in Latvian culture are represented in the works of Rainis ("*Uguns un nakts*" ("Fire and Night"), "*Indulis un Ārija*" ("Indulis and Ārija")), Aspazija ("*Ragana*" ("The Witch"), "*Sidraba šķidrums*" ("The Silver Veil"), Rutku Tēvs ("*Vēlā kalpi*" ("Devil's Servants")), Ilona Leimane ("*Vilkaču mantinieci*" ("The Heiress of Werewolves")), as well as in the oeuvre of Māris Čaklais and Māra Zālīte. For this research, popular works have been deliberately selected, compiled with a purpose to record features that can be considered traditional to Latvian text culture until the 21st century and thus serve as a basis for comparison with the latest cultural texts. The contrast between the individual and the group is highlighted in all the works, besides, the individual is evaluated positively, while the group is coded negatively or neutrally. Witches, sorcerers, healers are strangers, newcomers, but they are the title characters –it is with them that the reader is supposed to identify. In realistic works, there is a pronounced opposition of knowledge – ignorance, using the names of alternative knowledge bearers as a demeaning designation for those who know, due to community prejudices or ideological reasons. The designations wizards, witches, servants of devil, etc. are affixed to the most skilled and successful, as well as those who base

their activity on the principles of science, are European-oriented, as opposed to the community mired in prejudices. Pointedly, as the characters finally integrate into the community and lose their outsider status, the projected connection to the supernatural also disappears. In symbolic works, the designation functions as a metaphor, the characters' abilities are treated ambivalently, but they make a moral choice to become positive characters. In the works in which the heroines are women, emerges a distinctive theme – the breaking of the traditional female role, female sexuality as a problem. In general, traditionally, one of the central themes is the conflict between the individual and power (interpreting it in the broadest sense – from political power to the structure and rules of society), in which the individual who rebels is marked from the outside as a sorcerer, witch, etc., but this identity is assumed only as a metaphorical sign of his or her otherness. With the exception of symbolic works, reality is traditionally treated as unified, that is, the supernatural is imagined, not real.

Of the latest texts, two have been selected for analysis – the film “*Upurga*” (2021) by director Uģis Olte and the novel “*Rīgas raganas*” (“Witches of Riga”, 2021) by Linda Nemiera.

“*Upurga*” tells the story of a commercial film crew’s boat trip to a remote place, which is seemingly untouched by civilization. The main character, guide Andrejs, whose progress the film basically follows, is already ‘marked by death’ at the very beginning of the plot – the viewer is shown how he was an accomplice in the drowning of a woman before the events actually shown in the film. This gives him a special point of view compared to his friends – he is the only one who identifies the river and the adjacent valley as dangerous. In the dichotomies ‘insider – stranger,’ and ‘individual – group,’ the hero even fits into several schemes, but in one position – he is a stranger and therefore alone both in the film crew and later in the film when he encounters a mysterious group of inhabitants of the valley. The hero does not overcome his being a stranger in the course of the film, although he encounters the supernatural, to which, it must be understood, the other characters of the film belong.

The main dichotomy of the film is ‘nature – civilization.’ At the beginning of the film, the characters literally enter from civilization into nature, arriving in a woodland area where modern technology does not work. At the same time, in the course of the film, nature is awakened in man, as well – violence, gluttony, sexuality arouse in the characters of the film under the influence of natural processes – all functions derived from the body, which completely take over the characters of the film, turning off their consciousness as if in a trance. In this case, nature is equated with absolute freedom, Dionysian liberation from the shackles of civilization. In the film, religion and science are not contrasted, nor is there a clearly expressed dichotomy ‘good – bad,’ but it transforms into

a dichotomy 'safe – threatening,' linking threats to such concepts as the stranger and nature.

The film strongly depicts the physical coexistence of multiple realities. Using a system of images close to Jungian psychoanalysis (water, mirror, double, old man, etc.), Olte marks the parallel reality as the real one. In the film's system of signs, the symbolic hero's death/descent into the underwater world can be interpreted as a meeting with himself and nature within himself. At the same time, the film also shows 'objective' events – other images related to healing practices, shamanism, supernatural resurrection, etc., thus affirming the belief in the existence of an alternative world.

Linda Nemiera's novel "*Rīgas raganas*" also conceptually confirms the belief in the existence of several parallel worlds. The novel begins with a broad, programmatic introduction that describes Riga at the beginning of the 20th century, or Riga in the era of the industrial revolution: "... a new society had also emerged – a manufacturing society. Its idol and object of worship was the factory conveyor belt [...]. Contracts for the production and sale of goods had replaced the Scriptures. [...] What was that force, that energy that breathed life into objects, set them in motion and made them work? Who could be further from God than Satan? There were people who could not come to terms and were looking for a way out of a godless existence [...]. They brought to light the wisdom of the ancestors from the times when craft was valued more than the ability to produce as much as possible" (Nemiera 2021, 11–12).

The novel is created by connecting data about the real Riga – its history, geography, current events – with the author's imagined story about the supernatural world – ghosts, spirits, witches. Events in the real world are explained by the influence of the hidden, supernatural world. The supernatural world is described as the most powerful and threatening, it can only be fought with supernatural means. At the same time, it is interesting that the supernatural world is pronouncedly ethnically coloured – the witches in it are of German and Russian origin, emphasizing the negative influences on Latvian culture from the outside. The dichotomies 'nature – civilization,' 'religion – science' are replaced by the opposition of 'insider – stranger.'

The main character in the novel is between the real and the supernatural world – she is marked (appearance, deformity, abilities), thus, she does not fit into either world, but is able to function in both. In the dichotomy 'individual – group' the separation of the individual from the group clearly appears, the heroine does not blend into any group, but some of the groups portrayed in the novel are threatening. The dichotomy 'freedom – restriction of power' is obvious, demonstrating that only alone can the heroine achieve her goals.

Discussion and conclusions

By using Schechner's model, it is possible to draw conclusions from the aforementioned descriptions about social reality as a construct entered in cultural texts and making them understandable in the cultural context. Summing up the latest texts dedicated to alternative knowledge, we must conclude that they affirm the belief in parallel realities as real, physically existing ones. The nature of these realities may be different, however, in both cases criticism of contemporary culture ('reality') is conspicuous. It is represented as fake, somehow corrupted. Therefore, in the 'good – bad' dichotomy, the alternative reality emerges as a more positive, albeit threatening and initially foreign to the hero. Interestingly, religion or science does not appear as a topic when talking about alternative knowledge. The contrast between the individual and the group is clearly observable, furthermore, the individual ultimately does not become a part of any group, remaining isolated. In comparison with the cultural texts of previous eras, it can be concluded that in them the alternative reality is not considered real, but instead – metaphorical; the individual aspires to fit into the group and to lose his imagined supernatural status; the imagined supernatural status most frequently is associated with knowledge that an individual gradually transfers to a group.

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