TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE FETISHISM AS THE SOURCE FOR CREATIVITY IN THE URBAN SPACE

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The paper analyzes trauma as the source for creativity in the urban space. There are two strategies to find a way to live with traumatic experience. The first way, according to Sigmund Freud, is “the work of mourning”, which by constant remembering and repeating trauma in the language of tropes and figures allows to integrate discontinuous traumatic experience thus partly expunging trauma. Another strategy for dealing with trauma was described by Eric L. Santner’s term “narrative fetishism”. This strategy supposes a refusal or inability to admit trauma substituting mourning for narratives, which seemingly do not have any connection to trauma itself. I can find outcomes of this traumatic creative strategy in urban spaces of contemporary megalopolises. The paper analyzes art objects in Yekaterinburg city, namely, the gangsters’ tombstones and the cathedral that has been used for political and ideological purposes, the street art activity of painter Radya.

Keywords: creativity, narrative fetishism, street art, trauma, urban space.

Introduction: theoretical grounds

Trauma is one of the central problems of the contemporary thought. Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra and other scholars have transformed the trauma studies from a narrow psychological field to a wider social cultural subject since 1990s of the 20th century.

One can say that the reality that trauma creates either in life of an individual or in the whole society resembles a mythological reality. Caruth describes this reality as a gap. As she says, an individual who experienced trauma lives in two parallel worlds, that is, one of trauma (the past) and one of the ordinary life (present). The realm of trauma is an eternal reality, because traumatic experience constantly repeats and reproduces itself. That is why the realm of trauma is also a solitary world: it is focused on itself and it nourishes on itself. The reality of the ordinary world and one of trauma are absolutely incompatible with each other (Caruth 1996).

In this situation, an individual does not express trauma in a coherent way, as he or she usually perceives his or her life. A story of his or her trauma can be rather described as a complex of disruptive narratives, memories, images, utterances, words and so on.
There are two strategies to find a way to live with traumatic experience. The first way, according to Freud, is “the work of mourning”, which by constant remembering and repeating trauma in the language of tropes and figures allows integrating discontinuous traumatic experience thus partly expunging trauma (Freud 1957).

Another strategy for dealing with trauma is described by Santner’s term “narrative fetishism”, which is one of the crucial terms for my paper. This strategy supposes a refusal or inability to admit trauma substituting mourning for narratives which seemingly do not have any connection to trauma itself (Santner 1990).

As one might have noticed, trauma can be considered as a specific source for creativity either verbal or non-verbal. Traumatic experience might be considered not only as a results of people’s sufferings after wars, violence, loss of relatives etc., but also in a broader social cultural context as life in the contemporary urban “alienated” reality.

As Mikhail Epstein notices that individual’s physical and psychological abilities do not match to the world he or she lives in. Enormous information flows along with social and technical innovations provoke trauma. An individual loses a sense of reality and lives in the world of simulacra. An individual has only superficial connections to this world. One can compare the world of simulacra, of games and visual forms, quotations and traces to the narrative fetishism.

Thus, an individual loses an immediate reaction to external events, which stop being significant for him or her in constant information flow; a person loses an ability to react to the world emotionally (Эпштейн 1998). In my presentation I intend to apply the term “narrative fetishism” to the visual forms and objects in my hometown Yekaterinburg.

Application of the theory

“Narrative fetishism”

Yekaterinburg is a big industrial city located in the Ural Mountains on the geographic boarder of Europe and Asia. As any other big city it is constructed by several narratives, which reflect various layers of the historical experience. Moreover, Yekaterinburg has rich traumatic experience due to its Soviet and post-Soviet histories. This factor influences citizens’ daily lives and their identities. A variety of this experience is reflected on various visual levels and forms. In the city like Yekaterinburg, one can find as a strategy of “the work of mourning” as one of “the narrative fetishism”.

The Church of All Saints (in Russian Храм Спаса на Крови, Fig. 1) was erected in 2003 on the place where Ipatiev House was located (destroyed in 1977). It is also known as a place where Romanov’s family was killed, which is one of the traumatic events in the history of Russia.

The Church of All Saints can be considered as a sort of symbol of Yekaterinburg. Soon after it was built, it has become one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city appearing on postcards, key-rings, mugs and other souvenirs. The city space is overfilled with the image of the Church. The Church of All Saints has become one of the central components, which the official and religious power has used as a means to
constitute a city identity. The role in constructing a city identity was also supported by the Byzantine Imperial style of the Church (Янков, Пискунова 2003).

In fact, the execution of Romanov’s family substitutes the whole complexity of the history of the city. The Church has become a sort of metonymy of the history of Yekaterinburg, that is why the Church is a kind of the narrative fetishism.

Another phenomenon of the narrative fetishism, which, to the contrary, has not been supported by the city government, is the sepulchral complexes of the members of Russian mafia killed in the 1990s of the last century. The cemetery with the gangsters’ tombs has become one of the informal sights of Yekaterinburg. Gangsters’ clans erecting such impressive sepulchral complexes were trying to compensate the early deaths of their members for acknowledgement of their lifestyles and achievements.

On the one hand, this is the narrative fetishism of the gangsters themselves – they substituted their relatives’ lives for these impressive gravestones (Figs. 2, 3, 4).

Moreover, this is a narrative fetishism of the contemporary city government, which took its roots in the gangsters’ “wars”. The official power does not want to acknowledge its gangster past; it rejects its past, and this is one of the reasons why its attitude towards such popularity of these sepulchral complexes is rather negative (Матич 1998; Янков, Пискунова 2003).

Thus, the Church of All Saints and the Gangsters’ Cemetery can be considered as the examples of one strategy of dealing with traumatic experience within the city environment, namely, the narrative fetishism.
The examples that I shall discuss now can be interpreted as the first way of dealing with trauma which I, following Freud’s definition, have described as “the work of mourning” – a way to play back and re-act traumatic experience. This strategy implies many forms of its implementation. I consider street art as one of these forms. I will present several works by an artist who deals with the street objects (Fig. 5). His nickname is Radya, a young man in his early twenties who lost one of the closest relatives several years ago. I assume that this traumatic experience can be regarded as one of the sources for his artistic work. In the interview he said that the theme of disappearance is one of the most important topics for him.

1 See <http://t-radya.com/>.
Along with the fact that his creativity is motivated by his personal experience; it also coincides with a social problematic of the city environment. Consciously or unconsciously he tries to revive the sensitivity of the city environment.

There is a red rectangular spot on the snow; the newly built skyscrapers surround it. On this place there was located an old house, a historic landmark, which was demolished in one night one year ago. Nobody knows who destroyed this house. It just disappeared. This event immediately provoked public outrage. And as one can interpret this art work, the red paint symbolizes the blood of the demolished house.

A man was killed in the courtyard of this house several days ago before the picture was taken. During that time, Radya was close to the place, though he did not witness the murder. As he described later, he was struck by the fact that the people standing next to the place of the murder were absolutely indifferent to this tragic event; they did not notice the death. Radya together with the group of his companions tried to revive people’s sensibility. They painted the word VERA (faith) and LOZH (lie) on the roofs of the opposite houses (Figs. 6, 7).
One of Radya’s works is the bridge in the center of Yekaterinburg, which was painted by as a domino (Fig. 8). It can be interpreted as a symbol of changeability and unpredictability of the city life.

A table with papers on it is standing in the middle of the Iset River. This is supposed to be a table of Brodsky (Figs. 9, 10). This action has many connotations. I consider it as an interplay between eternal element of life, that is, the poetry and creativity, and always disappearing and changing one, namely, the water.

Radya and his group works not only in Yekaterinburg, but also in the neighboring city Perm. A cemetery in the middle of the Perm city has also been a subject of their artistic work (Figs. 11, 12). The cemetery is abandoned. There is no trace of a person except his name on the tomb: the dates of his birth and death are unknown. The artists are wrapping the memorial into the adhesive tape and then carefully taking it off and removing next to the memorial, thus making its duplicate. Here it can be seen this transparent and shiny duplicate of the stone grave. I interpret this action as a game with instability and fragility of human memory and life.
Thus, street art is a complex of actions that remind fragments of traumatic narratives; they are momentary, fleeting and disrupted; they also express trauma and they can be considered as a way to re-act traumatic experience.

Fig. 9. Joseph Brodsky’s table

Fig. 10. Joseph Brodsky’s table

Fig. 11. Perm Cemetery
Conclusions

There are various forms of re-acting of trauma in the city environment. They stimulate various strategies of creativity. One of them is the narrative fetishism aimed, in Freud’s terms, to repress trauma. I have been trying to show you the work of this strategy on the examples of the Church of All Saints and Gangsters’ cemetery.

Another strategy of dealing with traumatic experience is an attempt to re-play, re-act trauma and to revive sensitivity within the city community by the means of the street art.

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TRAUMA IR NARATYVINIS FETIŠIZMAS KAIP KŪRYBINGUMO ŠALTINIS MIESTO ERDVĖJE

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Santrauka


Reikšminiai žodžiai: kūrybingumas, naratyvinis fetišizmas, gatvės menas, trauma, miesto erdvė.

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