

## Narrative Discourse in Sorokin's Prose

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SINCE the early 1990s, various features and subjects of Vladimir Sorokin's literary work have attracted a great deal of comment and analysis: the "aesthetics of the disgusting,"<sup>1</sup> metadiscursivity,<sup>2</sup> turpism and pastiche,<sup>3</sup> self-reflecting poetics,<sup>4</sup> transgression,<sup>5</sup> etc. The first wave of critical reception focused on the œuvre's scandalous extraordinariness; it thus served to familiarize the unfamiliar and to remark on the oddness of Sorokin's works.

The amount of commentary and analysis contributed significantly to the canonization of Sorokin's œuvre, which Dirk Uffelmann stated as early as the year 2000.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Sorokin has now become a widely acknowl-

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- 1 Boris Groys, 1988, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur der Sowjetunion*, Munich, pp. 109–12.
  - 2 Peter Deutschmann, 1998, "Dialog der Texte und Folter: Vladimir Sorokins 'Mesjac v Dachau,'" *Romantik—Moderne—Postmoderne: Beiträge zum ersten Kolloquium des Jungen Forums Slavistische Literaturwissenschaft, Hamburg 1996*, eds. C. Götz, A. Otto & R. Vogt (Slavische Literaturen 15), Frankfurt/M. et al., pp. 324–51, and Dagmar Burkhart, 1999a, *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins*, Munich.
  - 3 Dagmar Burkhart, 1999b, "Ästhetik der Hässlichkeit und Pastiche im Werk von Vladimir Sorokin," *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich., pp. 9–19.
  - 4 I.P. Smirnov, 1994, *Psikhodiakhronologika: psikhoistoriia russkoi literatury ot romantizma do nashikh dnei*, Moscow, pp. 332–37.
  - 5 Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, 1999, "Sorokin's Post-Avant-Garde Prose and Kant's Analytic of the Sublime," *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 21–35.
  - 6 Dirk Uffelmann, 2000, "[Book review of] *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins*, ed. D. Burkhart. Munich, 1999," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 45, pp. 279–82; p. 279.

edged writer whose works no longer provoke outbursts of outraged enmity and misunderstanding, as they did in the 1990s and the beginning of the century, when Sorokin was just beginning to reach a wider audience.

From a current perspective, the efforts undertaken by critics and theorists seem to correspond to the estrangement caused by the texts. Extraordinary texts demand an extraordinary analysis. Nonetheless, one might question whether such a correspondence of object and method is always necessary. There are at least three reasons why it seems worthwhile to turn to alternative, more traditional approaches to Sorokin's extraordinary texts now:

1. First, the postmodern deconstruction of cultural and literary clichés rests upon the very occurrence of these clichéd and ready-made types of (literary) discourse. The focus lay primarily on deconstruction as an operation characteristic of Sorokin. But deconstruction implies construction in a twofold manner: there is, on the one hand, the construction of the pretexts, and, on the other hand, the specific construction of Sorokin's deconstructive writing itself.

2. Deconstruction and metadiscursivity can be regarded as the most obvious traits of Sorokin's work; therefore they have always been foregrounded by the critics. Other features, such as the striking variety of different genres, narrative styles and devices, also characteristic of Sorokin, have not yet undergone scrutiny.

3. After successful canonization, writers no longer need explanation and commentary; moreover, any reception keeps the literary communication alive. After a "hot" phase of discussion and accommodation, it may now be time for "cool" analysis.

This article represents a first proposal for a focused analysis of narrative technique in Sorokin's oeuvre by concentrating on the categories of voice and mode, thus taking up Genette's widely accepted model of narratology. I will give an overview of all narrative texts by Sorokin and try to highlight some peculiarities with respect to established insights into Sorokin's poetics. When analysing the narrator one must perforce omit genres such as theatre plays and film scripts, because—however important these genres may be for Sorokin—the narrative instance is generally not realized there. Furthermore, narrative genres imply such an instance even if a narrator is absent (which amounts to a *minus-priem* [minus-

device] according to Lotman).<sup>7</sup> This limitation to narrator-mediated texts has mainly methodological reasons: should film and theatre also be considered, the conceptual tools for analysis would have to be adapted for cross-generic observation. Such a task, though, would exceed the limits of this contribution.

### *Diversity and dominants*

Even confining myself to analysis of Sorokin's prose works alone, I must cope with an astounding diversity. In order to illustrate this and to provide an overview of narrative devices, I attach a scheme (fig. 1) which indicates the dominant narratological features (in bold type) as well as the manifold other narrative devices present (short descriptions in plain text indicate parts of books or individual stories differing from the dominant features of the book or collection).

In the works featuring several individual stories (*Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83), *Pir* (*The Feast*, 2000), *Sakharnyi Kreml'* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008), and *Monoklon*, 2010), Sorokin significantly varies the technique of narration within these collections of stories. Variations range from heterodiegetic narration without any introspection (the stories "Iu" and "Pepel" ("Ashes") in *The Feast*) to dramatic ("mimetic" in Plato's terminology, see below) narration ("Kaliki" ("Pilgrims") in *Sugar Kremlin*, and both versions of *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983)—the renowned first version and the shorter "remake" in *Sugar Kremlin*) and onto homodiegetic (mostly autodiegetic) narration (epistolary stories such as the letters to Martin Alekseevich in *The Norm*, or "Sakharnoe voskresen'e" ("Sugar Sunday") in *The Feast* and diaries such as "Zerkalo" ("The Mirror"), "Moia trapeza" ("My Repast") in *The Feast*). In some texts such changes occur even within the narrative itself (cf. "Den' russkogo edoka" ("Day of the Russian Eater") in *The Feast*, "Timka" and "Zanos" ("Kickback") in *Monoklon*). The different parts of *23,000* (2005) are presented either through heterodiegetic or homodiegetic narration.

Despite this diversity of narrative technique and the playful violation of narratological coherence—consider the sudden change from Boris Gloger's homodiegetic narration to heterodiegetic narration in the first part of *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999)—certain preferences for distinct

7 Iu. M. Lotman, 1970, *Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta*, Moscow, pp. 66–67.

narrative possibilities (and, in turn, a certain avoidance of others) can be recognized. I propose to outline three features:

1. The most prominent one is the preference for direct speech, which is not only obvious in *The Queue* and other texts with no narrator present on the surface, but also characteristic of the texts with heterodiegetic narration.

2. The second feature is the striking uniformity and ostentatious simplicity in the representation of the minds of characters. Thought report, introspection into the minds of characters, occurs but this introspection is usually not foregrounded. With respect to the first main feature and with respect to the system theory of the Luhmann school, I would label this feature the dominance of communication over consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

3. The third feature is the embedding of texts into other texts or the framing of texts: sometimes this embedding is fairly trivial, sometimes the hierarchy of embedded fictional worlds is rather complicated and/or explicitly marked in the narratives.

These three main features of Sorokin's narrative style are closely inter-related and make up a very important strain of his poetics.

### *Preference for direct speech*

The observation that the preference for direct and quoted speech<sup>9</sup> is a prominent feature is hardly surprising. It pertains to the *ustanovka*<sup>10</sup> on metadiscursivity in Sorokin's work: discourse is, first of all, uttered discourse in spoken or written form. Spoken utterances render the situative, physical and psychological force of speech almost palpable. In *How to Do Things with Words?* (1962), John Austin's ground-breaking study of the pragmatic side of language (or rather: speech), most examples of performatives are taken from direct oral communication: baptizing, marrying, declaring, promising and the like. Certainly, Austin is aware of the fact that many speech acts can be conducted in written communication

8 Cf. Niklas Luhmann, 2002, *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*, Heidelberg, pp. 120–55.

9 Mikhail Ryklin, 1998, "Medium i avtor," *Vladimir Sorokin: sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, Moscow, pp. 737–51; p. 740.

10 The notion *ustanovka* is very prominent in the writings of Russian Formalism. According to Jurij Striedter, it can designate "both the intention of a work and the organisation of its structure in accordance with this intention." Jurij Striedter, 1989, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered*, Princeton, N.J. 1989, p. 60.

as well or even solely in written communication (declarations, legacies, endorsements). The reason for choosing oral speech acts instead of written ones as prototypical illustrations of illocutions may be seen in the temporal and ephemeral aspects of spoken language; by pronouncing a performative in a situation, the *situation* immediately changes from one moment to the next (consider marrying: by saying “I do” at the appropriate moment of a wedding ceremony, the character of at least two human lives instantly changes). In written communication, this change is temporarily “stretched” between the moment of writing and reading, and it preserves its validity (which is confirmed by the signature of the person doing the uttering<sup>11</sup>) as long as the written document exists and remains in force.

But Sorokin neither signs documents nor does he directly speak to readers.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he represents speech acts and discourse situations, thus laying bare their illocutionary “force” (cf. the dialogues in the story “Padezh” (“Cattle Plague”) in *The Norm*, in some parts of *Led (Ice, 2002)* and in the first part of “Timka” in *Monoklon*). The clear dominance of direct speech over indirect speech can also be explained in due course. Indirect speech does not preserve the illocutionary force of direct speech; consequently it is barely present in Sorokin’s texts. Any illocutionary act loses its original illocutionary function as soon as it is quoted (because it is “overruled” by such illocutionary functions as “reporting,” “referring,” “telling,” since this second illocution is related to the narrator, not to the “original” speaker).

Many texts by Sorokin—those written for theatre and the narratives in the dramatic mode—appear as accurate notations of speech acts, even if they are, of course, not real speech acts, but representations of speech acts, speech acts represented and outlined. One must keep in mind that the peculiarities of literary genres are instructive for laying bare speech acts: thus, *The Queue* is defined as a novel (*roman* in Russian), which implies that the text is designed for reading. When *The Queue* is staged (because of its theatrical potentiality and the accuracy of the mimesis of speech),

11 Cf. John L. Austin, 1962, *How to Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford, New York, pp. 60–61.

12 He also avoids authorization of his texts in his reading performances. Cf. Natascha Drubek-Meyer, 1999, “Sorokins Bauch-Reden als Negativ-performance,” *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins*, ed. D. Burkhardt, Munich, pp. 197–212; p. 205.

the speech acts acquire a contextualization which, at the same time, diminishes the text's potential for mere representation of speech acts.

Sorokin's *ustanovka* on speech acts can also explain his bias towards dramatic genres (drama, film), whereas his endeavours in poetry (parts of *The Norm*, *Blue Lard*, *Den' oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006)) remain within the framework of pastiche and parody. Here we should be even more precise in order to capture Sorokin's originality: in narrative theory, a fair amount has been written on speech representation, beginning with Plato who, in his *Politeia* (*The Republic* [appr. 380 BC]), distinguished between diegesis and mimesis<sup>13</sup> or—in modern terminology—between narration and imitated direct speech.<sup>14</sup> He favoured diegesis and discarded mimesis because of its secondariness: the poet imitates people, he pretends to be another person and does not speak in his own voice. Plato would thus have discarded Sorokin because of the latter's preference for the mimesis of speech.

*The Queue* is precisely the kind of work imagined by Plato in *The Republic*:<sup>15</sup> there is no narrative voice discernible between the numerous voices of the speakers. Direct speech, preferred by Sorokin, not only goes hand in hand with an illocutionary function, but in narrative works direct speech also lends the text vivacity and realism. Considering the extreme withdrawal of a narrator figure, such as in *The Queue*, and the large share of direct speech in Sorokin's work in general, it is fully justified to speak of Sorokin as a "medium"<sup>16</sup> giving way to the speech of the Other. Instead of reporting foreign discourse in more or less detail (thus making use of the narrator, i.e. of diegesis in Plato's terms), in this text Sorokin gives us only the direct speech of the characters and their silence. The "speed" of narration is therefore confined to the speed of the character's speech and does not accelerate on its own. This is another indicator for the reduction of the narrator's voice<sup>17</sup>, which will be touched upon in other respects below.

13 Plato, 2006, *The Republic*, transl. R.E. Allen, New Haven, Conn., pp. 392d–394e.

14 Cf. also Gérard Genette, 1980, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Ithaca, N.Y.; pp. 162–63.

15 Cf. Plato, 2006, p. 394b.

16 Ryklin, 1998, pp. 738–39. Cf. also Igor' P. Smirnov, 1995, "Oskorbliaushchaia nevinnost'," *Mesto pechati* 7, pp. 25–47.

17 One might wonder whether the very notion of a narrator is necessary in an analysis of Sorokin's narratives, because many of them apparently lack any dramatized or

In his *Discours du récit* (1972), Gérard Genette has introduced an improvised formula for the relationship between the narrator (diegetic “informer”) and everything else apart from the narrator, which he defines as mimetically conveyed “information”:

[...] *information + informer = C*, which implies that the quantity of information and the presence of the informer are in inverse ratio, mimesis being defined by a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer, diegesis by the opposite relationship.<sup>18</sup>

Genette has also pointed out another aspect of the mimesis of speech: it is the only type of perfect mimesis possible in literary works, because the medium of representation is identical with the represented. Words repeat words, or, as he puts it, “[t]he truth is that mimesis in words can only be mimesis of words.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Sorokin’s predilection for the mimesis of speech is prominent in all of his texts, its accuracy must not be overestimated. His mimicry of idiolects, sociolects and rhetorical idiosyncrasies is not an exact depiction of speech: rather, the mimesis is based on some very distinct features of the quoted discourse while neglecting other features. Monika Fludernik points out the artificiality of speech mimesis in literature and its important “side-effect”: if the quoted speech is linguistically marked, then, by contrast, the discourse of the narrator appears stylistically even more neutral.<sup>20</sup> This effect is especially characteristic of the stories of some parts of *The Norm*, *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny* (*Marina’s Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84), *Pervyi subbotnik* (*The First Saturday Workday*, 1979–84), *Blue Lard* or *Ice*. In these texts sociolects—or futuristic languages

clearly shaped narrator (such covert narrators have been suspended by the “no-narrator-theory,” where some forms of written narratives are held as lacking a “speaking” instance (the most prominent advocates of a “no-narrator-theory” are Käte Hamburger, 1957, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, Stuttgart, and Ann Banfield, 1982, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, London). This approach, however, is not only a terminological problem, but also singles out some narratives into the “no-narrator”-category and thereby hampers comparison on an equal conceptual basis. For a trenchant refutation of the “no-narrator-theory” see Gérard Genette, 1988, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Ithaca, N.Y., pp. 96–102.

18 Genette, 1980, p. 166.

19 Genette, 1980, p. 164.

20 Cf. Monika Fludernik, 1993, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness*, London, pp. 85 and 452.

in *Blue Lard*—are prominent and thus the intermitting phrases of the narrator appear stylistically unmarked by comparison.<sup>21</sup> The same goes for the linguistic style of the stage directions in Sorokin's dramatic texts, which are also remote from the various distortions of language and style for which Sorokin has become notorious.

As an alternative to such a clear-cut linguistic distinction between the narrator's voice and the voices of characters, as we have it in Sorokin's prose, one could also expect a mixture of idioms or heteroglossia, with the effect that the words of the discourse of characters appear in the discourse of the narrator. Such heteroglossia-phenomena have fascinated students of narratology; take, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin's preoccupation with dialogism and polyphony. In Sorokin, however, there is no play with dual or double voices: the discourse of the narrator is not affected by the discourse of the character, it usually remains separate, stylistically neutral and impersonal. One may take *Marina's Thirtieth Love* as an example where there is, in the first part, a clear-cut demarcation of narrator and character speech (although there one can also observe introspection into Marina's consciousness). In the end, however, both voices are lost in the ideological *langue-de-bois* of political Soviet propaganda.

The striking prominence of direct discourse in Sorokin's works should also be viewed in terms of the relationship with devices of embedding: quoted discourse is the most common and most simple way of embedding text into a narrative. The factual absence of indirect speech in most of Sorokin's works relates to the preference given to the demarcation of quoted speech and narrator's discourse, because, in indirect speech, the demarcation is not as clear as in direct speech, which is also typographically clearly segregated.<sup>22</sup>

#### *The dominance of communication over consciousness*

This second prominent feature of narrative discourse in Sorokin's work is, in my opinion, also related to the *ustanovka* on metadiscursivity. In

21 Ryklin calls this *умелое обхождение с нейтральными знаками письма* ("skillful usage of neutral signs of writing"), Ryklin, 1998, p. 738. Translations here and elsewhere are mine.

22 The main exceptions are *Roman/A Novel* and *Marina's Thirtieth Love*, where indirect speech and indirect thought occur more frequently, but this is part and parcel of the texts' metadiscursive approach to the Russian realist novel of the nineteenth century, as well as to the genre of erotic stories.



narrative theory, thought representation has often been discussed in close relation to speech representation (in the so-called “speech category approach”)<sup>23</sup> insofar as different degrees of mimesis of thought or speech were postulated: from a very general report of thought or speech by the narrator to a detailed rendering of thoughts and words. Literature, because of its grounding in language as its media base, has a generic bias in linking consciousness with speech and language (whereas other artistic genres dwell on other aspects of consciousness: sound, images, sensations). Thus consciousness appears in literature as primarily comprised of speech. In my view Sorokin’s poetics also comes very close to an approach to consciousness from the side of speech, yet his focus is apparently not on consciousness in itself. This can be proved by the simple fact that indirect speech or thought report is not prominent in his work at all. This point deserves a more detailed explanation:

From the table (cf. figure 1), one may conclude that introspection into the minds of characters is a frequent feature throughout almost all of his narratives, yet this introspection is usually not very detailed: in the table it is called “unmarked introspection,” which pertains to sentences such as: Марина опрокинула рюмку и тут же поняла, что сегодня сможет безболезненно выпить литр этой обжигающей прекрасной жидкости.<sup>24</sup> The introspection here is indicated by a verb of cognition (*poniala*) and the dependent relative clause, its unmarkedness should be regarded with respect to the context of the narrative: in the case of *Marina’s Thirtieth Love*, the predominant mode is external focalization, with insights into Marina’s mind and free indirect thought. A kind of unmarked introspection is rather frequent in Sorokin’s narratives, yet it should be regarded in connection with certain “extreme” narratological choices, e.g. with consequent external focalization, as in *Serdtza chetyrekh* (*Four Stout Hearts*, 1991), where the lack of introspection into the minds of the characters contributes significantly to the opacity<sup>25</sup> of the

23 For a summarizing overview, see Alan Palmer, 2005, “Thought and Consciousness Representation (Literature),” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. D. Herman, M. Jahn, M.-L. Ryan, London, New York, pp. 602–607.

24 “Marina drank the shot and immediately realized that today she could drink an entire litre of this wonderful searing liquid.” Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1, Moscow, p. 696.

25 Cf. N.L. Leiderman & M.N. Lipovetskii, 2003, *Sovremennaia russkaia literatura 1950–1990-e gody*, Moscow; vol. 2, p. 497; M.P. Marusenkov, 2012, *Absurdopediia*

story, or with radical changes between different parts within one and the same narrative,<sup>26</sup> or with the radical absence of any introspection as a consequence of the radical mimesis of speech in *The Queue*.

This frequent combination of heterodiegetic narration and introspection into characters deserves some explanation. As promoted by Käte Hamburger, the depiction of other persons' consciousness is one of the most prominent markers of fictionality,<sup>27</sup> and therefore the use of introspection more or less automatically connotes "literature": introspection is thus characteristic of Sorokin's pastiches of literary genres (*Roman* (A Novel, 1985–89), *Marina's Thirtieth Love*, *Metel' (The Snowstorm*, 2010)), just as it is often typical for fictional or "world-constructing" texts.<sup>28</sup> Introspection indicates that the text belongs to the realm of fiction. Certainly, there are other indicators of fiction as well (pragmatic, semantic),<sup>29</sup> but only introspection allows for the portrayal of consciousness with respect to communication, language and culture.

In Sorokin's stories with introspection, there is no difference between consciousness and external world, in the sense that the character's world-view differs from fictional reality "as it is" or from the perspective of other characters. Heterodiegetic narration with introspection is sometimes difficult to distinguish from heterodiegetic narration without introspection, with the result that determining whether a paragraph is written with or without introspection is problematic.<sup>30</sup> Such a blurring of categories (introspection or not) implies that the narrated world can be taken for granted. In Sorokin's prose, introspection and heterodiegetic narration are mostly not used for deploying the different or odd world-views of

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*russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina: zaum', grotesk i absurd*, St Petersburg, pp. 237–38.

26 For example, in "Timka" the narrative mode shifts from external focalization to a full-fledged introspection of the mind of the dying female character.

27 Cf. "Die epische Fiktion ist der einzige erkenntnistheoretische Ort, wo die Ich-Originalität (oder Subjektivität) einer dritten Person als einer dritten dargestellt werden kann," Käte Hamburger, 1977, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, Stuttgart, p. 73, emphasis in the original.

28 Cf. Lubomír Doležel, 1998, *Heterocosmica: Fictional and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore, Maryl., et al., p. 24.

29 Cf. Irmgard Nickel-Bacon, Norbert Groeben & Margit Schreier, 2000, "Fiktions-signale pragmatisch: Ein medienübergreifendes Modell zur Unterscheidung von Fiktion(en) und Realität(en)," *Poetica* 32, pp. 267–99.

30 For example, when the heterodiegetic narrator describes the surroundings of the fictional world, one might guess that these surroundings are noticed by the character as well.

characters; usually the reader can rely on the narrator, be he homo- or heterodiegetic. In Sorokin's work there is hardly any focus on epistemology, for consciousness seems to be dependent on speech and discourse.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, in Sorokin's work, there are two prominent solutions for the relationship between consciousness and speech: one is radical separation (either speech only, as in *The Queue*, or the clearly marked distinction between narrator's discourse and the speech of characters), the other is heterodiegetic narration with a varying degree of introspection. In the latter case, no significant differences between consciousness and external world are apparent. Leaving aside the pressing idea that introspection into other people's consciousness is an important fictionality-marker, we can assume that the missing distinction between consciousness and external world indicates the secondariness of consciousness: it appears as a function of communication/ discourse/ speech but has no separate mode of being.

In this respect, a reference to Niklas Luhmann's theory of systems might be of some clarifying relevance: Luhmann distinguishes between three relevant types of systems for the functioning of human societies: biological, psychical and social. Biological systems are a necessary precondition for the emergence of psychical systems (mind/consciousness) and psychical systems are necessary for social systems because only consciousness chooses what shall gain admission into communication, which is the most elementary social system. Social systems and psychical systems are closely interrelated by "structural coupling" but each system functions in its own mode so that they can neither reach nor encompass each other. Language and sense are the preferred media for this coupling of the two different systems, for both language and sense are present in consciousness and in communication.<sup>32</sup>

Each type of system has its own mode of functioning and autopoietic evolution, but it is simultaneously open to influences stemming from the system's "environment." Leaving aside biological systems, which are

31 In his famous study, Brian McHale has drawn a very pungent distinction between modernist and postmodern fiction, namely that the latter foregrounds the ontology of different worlds, while the former is occupied with epistemology, i.e. with the possibility of matching states of mind with the external world. Brian McHale, 1987, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London, New York, p. 10.

32 Cf. Niklas Luhmann, 1987, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt/M., pp. 367-72.

a *conditio sine qua non* for psychical and social systems, and focusing instead on the latter two types of systems, one can say that these two systems are mutually interrelated in a system-environment relationship: psychical systems are an environment for social systems and vice versa. Thus thoughts, as elements of the psychical system, only contribute to communication but are not elements of communication; reception, which must be understood as the realization that some information is being conveyed to an addressee, is essential for any social system (the addressee then distinguishes both simple sensual perception and a “message”).

As shown above, Luhmann’s analysis of systems distinguishes between psychical and social systems. This very idea is of great importance to understanding the peculiarities of Sorokin’s literature. One must be fully aware of his focus on communication in combination with psychical systems: in Sorokin’s most radical texts, psychical systems are completely removed from communication, only social systems are given. As mentioned before, this is the case with *The Queue*, some parts of *The Norm* and in *Four Stout Hearts*. These texts should be regarded as social novels (*Gesellschaftsromane*) in the Luhmannian sense. In other texts where introspection into consciousness is given, this introspection usually “fits” the communication, it does not stand out in any sense. The characters’ state of mind is often ostentatiously related to biography, history and discourse, so one could say that Sorokin does not portray consciousness itself but rather the immersion of consciousness into speech, speech acts and culture.

When reading these more “literary” texts, the reader does not usually sense the same estrangement as when reading the radical texts, where s/he is constantly being prompted to add the corresponding psychical system, which would provide the missing “environment” for the functioning of the social system. The reader tries to make sense of the utterances in *The Queue*; s/he asks himself what the people in the queue are waiting for and what the particular speech acts may be aiming at. The same goes for *Four Stout Hearts*: most interpretations stress that it remains unclear what the four characters are striving for, but, nonetheless, the reader literally tries to make sense of the text s/he is reading.<sup>33</sup> When

33 “He [the reader of *Four Stout Hearts*] is thus placed in the position of eavesdropping or peeping on a scene where a private and secret ritual is taking place.” Vladiv-Glover, 1999, pp. 31–32; Christine Engel, 1999, “Sorokins allesverschlingendes Unbewusstes:

introspection into consciousness is given in ordinary “realistic” fiction, the reader is usually able to coordinate the represented psychical system with the social system. Sorokin, however, has become notorious for deconstructing the schemata of literary genres. From the point of view of systems theory, this can be described as dissecting the established structural coupling of represented psychical and social systems.

One should take a look at scheme # 2 for systematization. The scheme is a modification of a widely accepted model of narrative communication, which conceptualizes narrative communication in analogy to “ordinary” communication. It was first configured by Wolf Schmid<sup>34</sup> and then visualized for propaedeutic purposes.<sup>35</sup> The different levels of narrative communication are labelled N1, N2 (these are fictitious communications) and N4, which is a real communication between author and reader, whereas the level N3 is a function/a product of this real communication.

real author	soc. syst.	real reader	N4	(real historical persons)
implied author	soc. syst.	implied reader	N3	(functions of reception)
Narrator	narrated text	narratee	N2	(fictitious persons)
ps. syst.1	soc. syst.	ps.syst.2	N1	(fictitious persons)

My modification consists of introducing Luhmann’s notion of social systems into the model. As mentioned above, there are real (on N4) and fictitious communications or social systems (N1-N3) in the second column of the table. Considering that the narrated text links the fictitious narrator and the narratee, it is a fictitious social system as well, but because it at the same time makes up the communication between author and reader, it is identified as narrated text here.

In *The Queue* and *Four Stout Hearts*, for example, no introspection into the psychical systems is provided. As a consequence, the reader is inclined to either add some psychical states/intentions to level N1 or to

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Inkorporation als kannibalistischer Akt,” *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum post-modernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins*, ed. D. Burkhardt, Munich, pp. 139–49; pp. 140–41.

34 Wolf Schmid, 1973, *Der Textaufbau in den Erzählungen Dostoevskijs* (Beihefte zu Poetica 10), Amsterdam, pp. 20–30.

35 Cordula Kahrman, Gunter Reiß, Manfred Schluchter, 1986, *Erzähltextanalyse: Eine Einführung. Mit Studien- und Übungstexten*, Bodenheim, p. 46.

make sense of this “absence” of introspection (which happens on N<sub>4</sub> and results in a projection of N<sub>3</sub>), or, most likely, s/he will do both. When introspection into the minds of characters is provided, then the reader can coordinate the represented psychical and social systems: in this case s/he is able to make sense of the represented systems.<sup>36</sup>

In Sorokin’s texts, however, such a coordination of represented psychical and social systems is usually flawed: one may think of such distortions as in *The First Saturday Workday*, where the characters’ (linguistic) behaviour is not at all appropriate to the situation.<sup>37</sup> Further examples include the design of futuristic communication as in *Blue Lard*, or the text “Конкретные” (“The Concrete Ones”) in *The Feast*, where the reader has difficulties in coordinating the “quoted” communication with the situation and the reactions of the characters. Inside of Sorokin’s narrated worlds (N<sub>1</sub>), the fictitious structural coupling of communication and psychical systems seems to work, but, from the outside, from the reader’s point of view, the link between the two systems appears erratic: the fictitious characters are able to make sense of the communication, whereas the reader remains stupefied so that s/he is inclined to qualify the texts as nonsense (which, according to Luhmann, is just another version of sense).<sup>38</sup>

The structural coupling of the social and the psychical system is based on “sense,” which Luhmann calls the universal medium of psychical and social systems.<sup>39</sup> Both psychical and social systems are sense-based operations, which means that the systems integrate only those elements that are of relevance to the system and that fit each other “in the sense” of the system. In Sorokin’s narrated worlds, however, communication permeates consciousness on the basis of sense as a medium, but when the reader looks at these worlds, s/he is often not able to establish a connection be-

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36 One has to keep in mind that psychical systems cannot be represented in any way other than through communication, because there is no direct access to psychical systems. Cf. Peter Fuchs, 1998, *Das Unbewusste in Psychoanalyse und Systemtheorie: Die Herrschaft der Verlautbarung und die Erreichbarkeit des Bewußtseins*, Frankfurt/M., p. 22.

37 Cf. the story “Zasedanie zavkoma” (“The Factory Committee Meeting”), where “ordinary” dialogue gradually turns into *glossolalia*—Sorokin, 1998, pp. 440–43.

38 Cf. Luhmann, 1987, p. 494.

39 Cf. Luhmann, 1987, pp. 92–98; p. 97.

tween the social (communication) and psychical (of the characters or of his/her own) systems.

Further evidence for the relevance of Luhmann's basic distinction between communication and consciousness to making sense of Sorokin's poetics can be found in *Trilogiia* (*Ice Trilogy*, 2002-2005): the idea of "direct communication" between humans seems to be affirmed in parts one and two of the trilogy, but it finally becomes apparent that the idea of direct, unmediated communication between "hearts" is lethal to the people striving for it. *Ice Trilogy*, especially *Ice* which was published first, provides the reader with a seductive idea of direct communication: the detection of the "real" names of the chosen few by beating with the ice-hammer, as well as the narrated state of ecstasy when the chosen few start talking heart to heart. Typically, this exalted state cannot be conveyed by words, it is only indicated in an almost apophatic manner. The utopian vision of pureness, undisturbed by language or representation (the sect of the chosen 23,000 rejects photography and pictorial representation as well) implies sincerity: speaking from the heart, one may conclude, overcomes any doubts about sincerity and honesty. The end of the *Trilogy's* fabula, though, defeats "direct communication." As soon as all members unite for this ultimate communion/ communication, they lose their lives.

Luhmann's design of communication implies the impossibility of communicating sincerity. Communication (the basic element of any social system) is configured as a process of three "selections": the Other qua sender decides that s/he does not keep the information (1) s/he has for him/herself but makes a message of it (2), the receiver realizes that the Other conveys a message to him/her and understands it (3) in his/her own terms. Thus, not only is understanding independent from the sender's intention, but the sender can also never fully convince the receiver of his/her sincerity, for the latter is well aware of the difference between the two "selections" of the Other and that the message cannot be identical with the "information." Consequently, communication cannot eschew mistrust, the claim of sincerity can never dissolve the doubts inherent in communication: "[...] Kommunikation [setzt] einen alles untergreifenden, universellen, unbeheblichen Verdacht frei."<sup>40</sup>

40 Luhmann, 1987, p. 207. For an illustrative and acute explanation of communication in systems theory see Margot Berghaus, 2004, *Luhmann leicht gemacht*, Cologne et al, pp. 61-96. From a theoretical point of view any attempt at sincerity cannot but

*The embedding of texts*

As has been stated before, the pre-eminence of direct discourse is the simplest way of embedding, insofar as the cited text is encompassed by another one. But in Sorokin's works—especially in *The Norm*, *Blue Lard*, *The Feast*—one can find much more complicated and spectacular ways of embedding, for example Chinese Boxes (stories within stories within stories). These complicated structures of embedding form a sharp contrast to *The Queue*; where there is no embedding at all (one must note that an indication of the speakers' names would already make up a slender frame around the particular utterance). The general function of framed narrative is defamiliarization. A frame signals to the reader that the embedded narrative should also be interpreted with regard to the frame and not be taken at face value alone. The embedding structure generates an overview of the embedded text. Apart from this general function of embedding, the frame structure in Sorokin's work has two implications: on the one hand, the frame constitutes a sort of context of the embedded text but, very often, the context does not really fit the text. So, on the other hand, frames also indicate that texts have a diachronic dimension. Texts are preserved and transmitted in time; when they are read later on, they often do not fit into the new context anymore, generating contrast between the frame and the framed texts.

The diachronic aspect of quoting and embedding can be related to Luhmann's model of communication as well. Any social system, although maintained by communication only, has a "history," i.e. a sequence of communicative elements: information—message—reception—information—message—reception and so on. By literally quoting the Other, the preceding communication remains present in the social system. As one can see from the structure of many texts—and from a wide range of metaphors or "symbols"—Sorokin seems to be fascinated by this diachronic dimension of communication. Yet this diachronic dimension often appears in a veiled or chronically distorted form.<sup>41</sup> Some of the stories in *Monoklon*, for example, more or less explicitly deal with cultural memory, especially "Gubernator" ("The Governor"), "Putem krysy" ("The

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fail. Nonetheless, it is significant that sincerity becomes an issue in literary communication as the sincerity problem is inherent in any communication.

41 Cf. Peter Deutschmann, 2003, *Intersubjektivität und Narration: Gogol, Erofeev, Sorokin, Mamleev* (Slavische Literaturen 32), Frankfurt/M. et al., pp. 313–29.



Way af a Rat”), “Smirnov,” “Kukhnia” (“The Kitchen”), and “Kickback.” In the title-story “Monoklon,” the main character, a retired State Security officer, is haunted and put to death by a former State Security victim. This “shadow of the past,” however, appears in the form of a monoklon, i.e. as a phenomenon of natural history, not of the Soviet past.

In my analysis of *The Norm*, I drew a scheme of the embedding structure.<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, this structure is quite complicated, but, on the other, not consistently implemented (the playing with frames could have been worked out much more strictly). *Blue Lard* appears as a loose conglomerate of texts, some of them with a distinct hierarchy of frames (e.g. the story “Siniaia Tabletk” (“Blue Pill”)),<sup>43</sup> but the general (onto-)logical design of the novel is apparently not consistent. There are metalepses and strange narrative twists not only in this novel, but in other texts as well. In *23,000*, for example, on several occasions the diegetic narration turns out to be a dream, but the demarcation line between the ontological levels “fictional reality” and “fictional dream” is well hidden.<sup>44</sup>

Metalepsis may be regarded as a very artificial literary operation which lacks correspondence with real-world phenomena (since it dwells upon the relations between different ontological levels, preferably between the levels of “reality” and “representation”). But if one considers the diachronic (intertextual) dimensions of any social system, even metalepsis—which blurs ontological boundaries—acquires referentiality (albeit metaphorically): communication as a social system is established between interacting psychical systems. *The Queue* may serve as a perfect example of a simple social system evolving as communication: any utterance, any “message” conveyed in the process of this communication is at least partly determined by its preceding utterance, and, at the same time, it provides the conditions for subsequent utterances. The visual illustration of such an evolving social system would be a spiral. With regard to a spiral, one can easily realize that it is hard to determine one’s position:

42 Peter Deutschmann, 1999, “Der Begriff der Norm bei Sorokin,” *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins*, ed. D. Burkhardt, Munich, pp. 37–52; p. 52.

43 Vladimir Sorokin, 1999, *Goluboe Salo: roman*, Moscow, pp. 160–67.

44 Cf. Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Trilogiia (Put’ Bro, Led, 23,000)*, Moscow, pp. 480 and 492 or pp. 600 and 609. In accordance with this narratological device, a character declares Я теряю границу между мирами, [...] (“I am losing the boundary between the worlds.”) Sorokin, 2006, p. 493.

a spiral appears to have different levels while, at the same time, there is a continuous (i.e. non-discrete) connection to any other position on the spiral. With regard to a spiral, one could indeed say that one loses the boundaries between the levels.<sup>45</sup> Therefore it is important to notice that *The Queue*, although it contains no metalepsis at all, can be structurally related with other texts of Sorokin—with e.g. *Blue Lard*, *The Feast* (“The Concrete Ones”), 23,000—which do have tangled hierarchies or “strange loops.”<sup>46</sup> Luhmann’s abstract modelling of communication may serve here as *tertium comparationis*. The diachronic intertextual structure of communication is either displayed in nuce (as in *The Queue*) or by means of a variety of visual and structural analogies.

### *Preliminary conclusion*

Prompted by the general focus of this monograph on “Vladimir Sorokin’s languages,” the general idea of this contribution has been to examine narrative devices in Sorokin’s work. Narrative phenomena have often been described from a linguistic point of view, which tends to underline regularities, abstraction and formalization. A more general perspective on the peculiarities of Sorokin as a designer of narratives brings recurrences and narrative variations to the fore. All three main features discussed here—mimesis of speech, the dominance of communication over consciousness and the framing/embedding structures—recur in Sorokin’s oeuvre. My aim was not only to outline these features but also to examine their various intrinsic interrelations. Since these interrelations rest upon Sorokin’s fascination with communication and culture, Luhmann’s theory of social systems—although highly abstract—has proven helpful for delineating recurring narrative structures and motifs.

In my opinion, Sorokin’s narratives are built on a double structure similar to that of allegory. One can read them on a literal level, but one can also wonder whether other meanings—metaphorical ones—could be justified: the very frequent motif of consumption and eating and its physiological opposite (defecation)<sup>47</sup> and the notorious depiction of sex

45 One may wonder whether recurrent spatial motifs in Sorokin’s texts such as staircases, tunnels and toboggans are chronotopical visualizations of the concept of social/cultural diachrony.

46 McHale, 1987, p. 120.

47 Cf. Engel, 1999, pp. 142–43.

and violence can be related to speech acts, because speech acts and discourse are the physical or bodily sides of language use. Communication ultimately comes out of bodies and penetrates them (“biological systems” in Luhmann’s terms). Furthermore, the relationship of text and consciousness, with the foregrounding of text and communication over consciousness, has its metaphorical counterpart in drug use.<sup>48</sup> Finally, framing structures are symbolically represented in the text worlds by the frequent occurrence of vessels, boxes, containers, cupboards, bags, suitcases and the like.<sup>49</sup>

The approach presented in this contribution combines analysis of a more formal level of narrative texts with reference to recurring details in the narrated world. Thus it corresponds to Jan Mukařovský’s idea of “sémantické gesto” (“semantic gesture”),<sup>50</sup> which means that certain semantic elements occur on several levels of a literary text or the work of an author. Predominant motifs and themes are, in a modified way, also manifest in other levels of literary text, in our case even in such a “formal” one as narrative discourse. Sorokin’s semantic gesture is based on a very broad concept of communication. Communication is *more than language*; it interacts most intensively with consciousness on the one hand, and bodies on the other.

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48 Cf. Peter Deutschmann, 2010, “Der Text als Droge: Glosse zu einem metaliterarischen Vergleich,” *Plurale* 8, pp. 145–74; especially pp. 152–63.

49 Cf. Engel, 1999, p. 146.

50 Cf. Mojmír Grygar, 1999, *Terminologický slovník českého strukturalismu: obecné pojmy estetiky a teorie umění*, Brno, pp. 222–29.

Figure 1<sup>51</sup>

<i>Norma (The Norm, 1979–83)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech), frame-structure, heterodiegetic narration with unmarked introspection
	pt. 3 'Anton'	heterodiegetic narration with full-fledged introspection
	pt. 3 'Padezh' ("Cattle Plague")	heterodiegetic narration with unmarked introspection
	pt. 5 'Pis'ma Martinu Alekseevichu' ("Letters to Martin Alekseevich")	homodiegetic narration
<i>Ochered' (The Queue, 1983)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech)
<i>Pervyi subbotnik (The First Saturday Workday, 1979–84)</i>	"Dorozhnoe proisshestvie" ("An Incident on the Road")	direct speech (mimesis of speech), heterodiegetic narration,
	"Kiset" ("The Tobacco Pouch")	heterodiegetic narration with full-fledged introspection
	"San'kina liubov'" ("San'ka's Love"), "Vozvrashchenie" ("The Returning")	frame-structure, extra-diegetic narrator
		heterodiegetic narration with unmarked introspection
<i>Tritsataia liubov' Mariny (Marina's Thirtieth Love, 1982–84)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech), heterodiegetic narration with "varying" introspection, deterioration of speech
<i>Roman (A Novel, 1985–89)</i>	'pt. 1'	direct speech (mimesis of speech), heterodiegetic narration with full-fledged introspection
	'pt. 2'	gradual withdrawal of introspection, deterioration of speech

51 For ease of orientation, titles of stories or separate parts of books are given in double quotation marks while unofficial titles are given in single quotes. Both the article and this scheme reference the following editions of Sorokin's works: For *Norma*, *Ochered'*, *Pervyi subbotnik*, *Tritsataia liubov' Mariny*, *Roman*, *Mesiats v Dakhau* and *Serdtsa chetyrekh*, I refer to: Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Moscow. For later published works I refer to these editions: Vladimir Sorokin, 1999, *Goluboe Salo*, Moscow; Vladimir Sorokin, 2001, *Pir*, Moscow; Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Trilogiia*, Moscow; Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Den' oprichnika*, Moscow; Vladimir Sorokin, 2008, *Sakharnyi krem'l'*, Moscow; Vladimir Sorokin, 2010, *Metel'*, Moscow; Vladimir Sorokin, 2010, *Monoklon*, Moscow.

<i>Mesiats v Dakhau (A Month in Dachau, 1990)</i>		homodiegetic narration (diary), polyphony, deterioration of speech
<i>Serdtza chetyrekh (Four Stout Hearts, 1991)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech), heterodiegetic narration, no introspection
<i>Goluboe salo (Blue Lard, 1999)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech), “marked” shift from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic narration, frame-structure, heterodiegetic narration with unmarked introspection, metalepsis
	in some embedded texts (e.g. “Zaplyv” (“Swimming in”))	full-fledged introspection
<i>Pir (The Feast, 2000)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech), frame-structure,
	“Den’ russkogo edoka” (“Day of the Russian Eater”)	drama-structure and narrative
	“Конкретные” (“The Concrete Ones”), “Mashina” (“The Car”)	drama-structure
	“Iu”, “Pepel” (“Ashes”)	no introspection
	“Loshadinyi sup” (“Horse Soup”)	full-fledged introspection
	“Zerkalo” (“The Mirror”), “Moia trapeza” (“My Repast”)	homodiegetic narration (diary)
	“Sakharnoe voskresen’e” (“Sugar Sunday”)	homodiegetic narration (letter)
<i>Led (Ice, 2002)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech), frame-structure
	pt.1 ‘Dobyvanie serdets’ (“The Gathering of Hearts”)	heterodiegetic narration, change of chapters with introspection and no introspection
	pt.2 ‘Rasskaz Khrama’ (“The Story of Khrama”)	homodiegetic narration (autobiographical)
	pt.3 ‘Instruktsiia po ekspluatatsii’ (“User Manual”)	user-manual embedding homodiegetic narrations

	pt.4 'Mal'chik [Misha/Gorn] probuzhdaetsia' ("The Boy [Misha/Gorn] Is Waking Up")	heterodiegetic narration with unmarked introspection
<i>Put' Bro (Bro, 2004)</i>		homodiegetic narration (autobiographical)
23.000 (2005)		direct speech (mimesis of speech), heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration, varying introspection, frame-structure, metalepsis
<i>Den' oprichnika (Day of the Oprichnik, 2006)</i>	"Kaliki" ("Pilgrims"), "Ochered'" ("The Queue")	homodiegetic narration, embedded texts, skaz, direct speech (mimesis of speech)
<i>Sakharnyi Kreml' (Sugar Kremlin, 2008)</i>	"Son" ("A Dream")	direct speech (mimesis of speech), skaz, heterodiegetic narration, varying introspection
		drama-structure
		frame-structure, heterodiegetic narration with full-fledged introspection
<i>Monoklon (2010)</i>		heterodiegetic narration with unmarked (but varying) introspection
	"Timka"	heterodiegetic narration without introspection, mimesis of speech turns suddenly into full-fledged introspection
	"Gubernator" ("The Governor"), "Smirnov"	heterodiegetic narration without introspection
	"69 serii" ("69 series")	frame-structure, metadiegesis
	"Putem krysy" ("The Way of a Rat")	skaz
	"Kukhnia" ("The Kitchen")	description addressed to the narratee ("the-one-looking-through-time")
	"Zanos" ("Kickback")	heterodiegetic narration without introspection turns suddenly into drama, metadiegesis
<i>Metel' (The Snowstorm, 2010)</i>		direct speech (mimesis of speech), heterodiegetic narration with unmarked (but varying) introspection