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DISABLED BODY IN THE RUSSIAN LITERATURE AND THE CINEMA: EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGES^[1]

The goal of my work is: using Feminist methodology on Disability studies to investigate the representations of the disabled people in classic Russian literature and the Soviet movies. I argue, that images of disabled people in the Soviet movie were developed through traditions of the Russian literature of the 19th century, the Orthodox ascetic ideals and the Soviet ideological notions about sexuality. It was analyzed the constructions of the disabled characters in the Soviet collective imagination and evolution of these constructions in the post-Soviet cultural discourse.

Key words: disability, disabled body, Russian literature, sexuality, Soviet cinema

Суковата Вікторія ІНВАЛІДНЕ» ТІЛО В РОСІЙСЬКІЙ ЛІТЕРАТУРІ ТА КИНО: ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ ОБРАЗІВ Метою роботи є вивчення еволюції образів інвалідів в класичній російській літературі і кіно, використовуючи феміністську методологію в області теорії дізабліті. У статті стверджується, що семантика репрезентацій людей з обмеженими можливостями в радянському кінематографі перебувала в сильній залежності від традицій російської літератури ХІХ століття, православної етики аскетизму і радянських ідеологічних уявлень про сексуальність. У роботі проаналізовано еволюцію репрезентацій людей-інвалідів в радянському колективному уявному і в пострадянському культурному дискурсі.

Ключові слова: дізабліті, інвалідне тіло, російська література, сексуальність, радянський кінематограф

Суковатая Виктория ИНВАЛИДНОЕ ТЕЛО В РУССКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ И КИНО: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ ОБРАЗОВ Целью моей работы является изучение эволюции образов инвалидов в русской классической литературе и кино, используя феминистскую методологию в области теории диаблиту. В статье утверждается, что семантика репрезентаций людей с ограниченными возможностями в советском кинематографе находилась в сильной зависимости от традиций русской литературы ХІХ века, православной этики аскетизма и советских идеологических конструкций сексуальности. В работе проанализирована эволюция репрезентаций людей-инвалидов в советском коллективном воображаемом и в постсоветском культурном дискурсе.

Ключевые слова: диаблиту, инвалидное тело, русская литература, сексуальность, советский кинематограф.

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For post-Soviet academia Disability studies (as with other minority studies) are completely new topics. In the Western academia the conceptual revolution “after Foucault” has made attractive body as new source of cultural identity. Michael Foucault produced detailed historical analyses of the ways in which power is exercised and individuals are governed through psychiatry, the penal system, discursive production and the control of sexuality. The body is the centre of attention of power, which visualizes oppositions of domination and subordination in the area of gender, sexual, racial and national differences. M. Foucault argued that power (the state) tried to subordinate subjects using his/her

sexuality and body (pain) experience as most the basic, biological mechanism of domination. Subjects and minorities who do not have the institutional and commercial power to resist (women, disabled and colored people, immigrants, homosexuals) are controlling politics and are pushed out the center of culture to its periphery.

The structure and methodology Disability studies came from 1990th years, as results of influences of liberal and multiculturalism ideology and feminist critique of total (universal) identity. The feminist and poststructuralist scholars analyzed the body is the centre of attention of power, which visualizes oppositions of domination and subordination in the area of gender, sexual, racial and national differences. Simi Linton [1; p. 134-136] considered disability as a cultural and political category to signify the “subordinated minority”. In the 1960th Erving Goffman introduced an idea about disability in society as a “spoiled identity” [2]. This author noted that disabled people occupy the same social status as racial and ethnic minorities in relations towards “hegemonic” majorities. Robert Murphy, following to Goffman’s ideas, developed conception of “ability” as a “passport” of “romantic love” and “economic success”, both physical and “moral cleanness” as well [3; p. 112-136]. The good body and youthful appearance in American culture is the “manifestation” of luck, wealth and prestige, attractiveness of “successful men”. Rosemarie Garland Thomson [4] wrote, that cultural visualizations of “disability” often were constructed as a combination of the different signs of “otherness”: “other” race, “other” sex, and “other” gender in one “abnormal” body. She analyzed “freak shows” in medieval history and argued that “disability” in these shows was a constructed combination of the different signs of “otherness”: “other” race, “other” sex, and “other” gender in one “abnormal” body. That is why “freaks” never appeared only as monsters, but as “sexualized” and “subordinated” monsters. The monsters’ deformed strange bodies allowed the heteronormative audience to imagine non-normative sex. “Traditional” (able bodied-heterosexual-masculine) communities “wanted” to suppose that people with “strange”, or unconceivable bodies, had to have corresponding “strange”, queer, and usually deviant sexual desires that threatened traditional morality. Robert McRuer wrote about “interweaving” “compulsory heterosexuality” and “compulsory able-bodiedness” [5], and, in our opinion, this “inter-penetration” and “inter-linking” is typical for any “marginal” and subordinated cultural qualities. Heteronormativity (as a “cultural obligatory category”) correlates with able-bodiedness, which is an “ideal” image of heterosexuality and “ideal love” in traditional culture.

In contrast to the many different approaches to disability in Western academia, disability identity in post-Soviet cultural discourse still connotes a mostly “medical” meaning. The representations of disabled people in the Soviet literature or cinema mostly played roles of the cultural “contrast”, “exotism” and “abnormality” in the picture of “normative” world. It does not mean, that disabled characters had not influenced Russian, or Ukrainian, or Soviet culture at all. The famous Ukrainian poetess and critic fin de siècle Lesya Ukrainka was chronically ill on tuberculosis. The great Russian writers Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky were not only talented and successful, but also very ill people. But these aspects of their subjectivity as the essential parts of their creativity have never been studied in Soviet humanity. Disabled characters were presented in the East Slavic literatures, but they were never “main heroes”; they were connected mostly with some religious and moral ideas, but very rarely with erotic descriptions. Images of disabled people were rare in classical Russian literature whose philosophy was based on asexual and anti-sexual Orthodox morality. The disabled body in Orthodox church morality was identified with a “seal of the Devil”, God’s punishment, which required that homosexual or disabled person pray for spiritual rescue. In Russian Orthodox asceticism the Body is opposed to the Spirit (in accordance with Plato’s philosophy), and this opposition is the basis for religious *heteronormativity*. In this point of view “heteronormativeness” is a form of cultural privilege, which keeps domination of the heterosexual majority (as a “cultural

center”) under homosexual (queer) minorities (as cultural “periphery”). Relations between heteronormativity and hegemony correspond as a tool and a purpose: cultural hegemony can be reached through the preservation of heterosexual homogeneous standards in society – the white masculine heterosexual middle-class “center” as an ideal and a norm. The minority in this system of values are pushed out of the centre as margins which either are excluded, or are exposed.

The most well-known representation of a mentally disabled woman in the Russian literature of the 19th century was Lisaveta Smerdyashaya (Lisaveta "Stinker", "God's fool", fool "in Christ"), in the novel “The Brothers Karamazov” by Feodor Dostoevsky. In the plot of this novel this mentally disabled and ugly woman was portrayed as an object of sexual desire of the father Karamazov, who raped her and then she gave birth to the son, who became a murderer of his own father in future. To recap we can notice, that the disabled persons in the Russian and Ukrainian literature of the 19th century were not “outcasts” or “demonic persons” but disability-phobia were realized in making disabled people “invisible” like non-existent in the cultural space.

The “official position” of the Russian Orthodox church is that it allows sexual relationships only between genders and on behalf of family for reproduction. This point of view dominated not only in the Russian literature of the 19th century, but persisted in a form of “heteronormativity” for all of the Soviet period. Early Soviet movies adapted many literary traditions of the classic Russian literature. The political ideal of Soviet power was of a homogeneous society, with a strong hierarchical structure at the top of which were members (functionaries) of the Communist party, and whose base consisted of peasant and proletarian masses without strong individual feelings. The "heroes-invalids" were not welcomed in the Soviet movies of the Stalinist epoch. The most famous figure of a crippled man in a wheelchair was visualized by Sergei Eisenstein in the well-known film *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). It was the episode where tsarist soldiers shoot down the defenseless peaceful citizens of Odessa, and a footless invalid had to symbolize the defenselessness of Odessa citizens before the guns and brutality of the Russian empire's regime. The footless invalid on Potemkin's stairs was shown by Eisenstein in the Odessa crowd, mostly represented by women with obviously Jewish appearance. It is natural for Odessa of that time; because Jews were a big part of Odessa civilians. But specifics of the visual politics in the Eisenstein’s movie are that the disabled, women's and Jewish bodies were united in one place as a common, general body. My idea is that combination of a disabled male body with Jewish women’s encirclement has to demonstrate same "weakness" of these people against soldiers' guns. I deem Eisenstein wanted to show that social statuses of Jews (as ethnic minority), women (gender minority) and a legless man (disability) are devaluated equally. I can suppose, that this “feminization” of crowd’s “collective body” in image of disability, women and Jews was addressed by Eisenstein to homophobic, misogynist, anti-Semitic Russian mass-consciousness. On the other hand, the philosophical idea of this episode on the Odessa stairs is that Jewish, women's and disabled male bodies were formed visually as "common", "hybrid", queer body, and this "queer-disabled" body was opposed to the symbolical masculine body of power - the soldiers with guns. The “masculine power” of state dominated under women’s, children’s, disabled, national and homosexual bodies, and it was visualization not only political but cultural domination, as well. The subordinated gender, racial, disabled or any powerless minority in this system of values are pushed out of the centre as marginals which either are excluded, or the reprisals are exposed.

Soviet power had obviously masculine nature, and image of "hegemony" during Soviet epoch belonged only to the Soviet power, or communist authorities, or soviet leaders. Leading Communist Party embodied itself as the "hegemonic masculinity", as the image of "Phallic power", but not a single man or woman could be a symbol of "hegemonic power". Phallic role in the Soviet Stalinist state (and cinema) could be

represented by only one person - Stalin, who had to be adored by anyone, both by men, and women, and children. It means that only Stalin has demonstrated (in cultural unconsciousness) "dominating" gender status, a position of "hegemonic" masculinity; but any other people needed to confirm their subordinated, "female" gender. That is why the typical Soviet movies never connected "sexual attractiveness" with a disabled body, as well as an "ideal (masculine) hero" was not connected with queer sexual desire. The leading Communist party determined the aims of the cinema – as the most mass-available art, - as propaganda. Soviet cinema had "to work" as an "advertisement" for the "Soviet way of life" and to create the images of the "ideal reality".

American cinema scholars R. Taylor and D. Spring characterize the movie of the "Stalinist Empire" as "the rejection of the past in favor of the Utopia of the future" [6]. In this (utopian) reality on the screen the majority of people were healthy, friendly, open, physically active, heterosexual, optimistic and patriotic (in both melodrama and comedy). Typically the "sexual attractiveness" was a privilege of a "positive hero", and had some "ideological task": "ideal Soviet person" had to have an "ideal" (health and "normal") body (to defend the Soviet state), a heterosexual family (to reproduce the "new defenders" of the state) and sexual contact only after marriage. That is why a "happy marriage" was the expected ending for many Soviet movies and for the "ideal hero" in them. In the Soviet culture the "strange", "deformed" body was marginalized, but was "accepted" by "normative" culture and "included" in it as a part of it. If a disabled body (mostly masculine) appeared in some fragments of a film, it was as an "allusion" to a war or the revolutionary past. Even rare visualizations of the "deformed" body were ideologized: a "disabled" body was never "sexy", or a "private" body, it was "appropriated" by power as an extreme variant of "required" service for the leading party. "Heterosexuality", "ability", and "stability" (stable national, sexual, cultural identity) were "desirable" and "normative" for positive heroes in the Soviet Stalinist movies.

The Soviet ideological "mythology" did not have the images of "hegemonic masculinity", which could represent itself through a «muscular», «young», "sexy" body. Orthodox ascetic ethics was installed in "Soviet ideology", and the images of "strong man" and of "hegemonic masculinity" were transformed in an image of a "strong man" in Soviet style. The Soviet style image of a "strong man" was created by Nikolay Ostrovsky in the novel "How steel harden". In spite of his being blind and paralyzed as results, Pavel Korchagin, a hero of Civil war, think himself as of strong man. Author presented his force not in sexual attractiveness, power or money, but in service the Communist party. So, the service for the Party was the highest men's aim in the mass-consciousness of the Stalinist epoch, and this service took all sexual energy; the service for man, husband was the highest women's aim in the Soviet popular culture. The sexual subjectivity in the classic Soviet literature and movie was shifted from public discourse and from public imagination.

Development of the cinema as an independent art (which combined new literary, cultural, visual, and political ideas and forms), the representations of disability started and continued to change. In the 1950-1980th the disabled characters appeared in the Soviet movie, mostly in the genres of "adventures", or "children's movies". In the Soviet "entertainment" movies the crippled persons played roles of positive heroes' antipodes. Their physical defectness symbolized moral degeneration, evil, or destructive motifs of their behavior. For example, in very popular Soviet movie the place and time can not be changed - "*Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zuya*" ("A place of meeting can not be changed") all male positive heroes were handsome, but a hunchbacked person and a stutterer were among gangsters. So, in the early Soviet cinema the en-abled body was bereaved subjectivity and used by ideology. In the later years the ideology was shifted into moral aspect.

After collapse of Soviet Union the representations of disabled body had changed. There were three main reasons to that: 1) more openness of the Post-Soviet society towards

former "prohibited" or "closed" issues; 2) social and cultural destabilization in society, loss of "common", "collective" identity, "common values", discovering of "local subjectivities", pluralisation of the public opinion and of ways of life; 3) availability of Western art achievements, theoretical sources, the desire to adopt Western cultural values. American scholar Simon Karlinsky [7] developed Foucault's ideas using East Slavic literature as material and linked the "political openness" of any society with general liberalization and resistance to political repression. The new (Post-Soviet) films with disabled body in the center of the plot demonstrate the liberalization of movie. Sometimes the disabled characters were presented as actants of sexual practices, and this presentations deconstructed the idea of "sexual norm" and "stable" cultural identity in the post-Soviet society because traditionally idea of sexual attractiveness only with able-body persons. Disabled people' sexuality dissolves the boundaries of the "norm" as the "cultural domination" and widens the space of the "margin zone". The idea of the margin losing negative connotation and became more neutral status in the post-Soviet public discourse.

The deformed male body as the object of sexual desire and as a sexual actant was showed in the several movies of recent years. The movie *The ten years without a right to correspondence* (1990) ("Desyat' let bez prava perepiski") shows the main hero's friend (a footless post-war officer), who makes sex with his abled body girlfriend. This movie showed sex on screen openly, naturalistically and in both ironic and tragic manner simultaneously. The notion of sex as a deeply intimate act deconstructed in this movie, and footless man is not a subordinated and "defenseless" person in this movie. His sexual ability and desire to partake in a duel with former Stalin informer (a representative of totalitarian power) are signs of his "non- traumatic" masculinity. There disability was presented as cultural resistance against Stalinist legacy, it was a "resistant disability".

The other recent movie *Of Freaks and Men* ("*Pro urodov i lyudej*"), directed by Alexei Balabanov (1997), was build as history of pornographic photography in the pre-revolutionary Russia. The film was shot in black-and-white style of the "silent cinema"; it showed the two boys who were the "Siamese twins", as the main heroes. These boys were used by a photographer-lecher both in pornographic pictures and in vocal performances. One boy became an alcoholic, the other died of melancholy. A female heroine in movie is a young girl-orphan, who partook in sadomasochistic photo-shows and had sex with one of these brothers-twins. This movie can be seen as a parable: about absence of difference between lechery and purity, about temptation inside and outside a person, about disability of body and "disability" of the soul and spirit, and the dependence of a seducer and lecher on his victims. What does it present true "disability" in this movie: to become a resistant for a tempted girl and for the disabled boys, or to become merciful for the depraved audience in movie and this movie's audience?

Other film *The Land of the Deaf* ("*Strana gluhih*", 1998) by Valerij Todorovskiy represented friendship between a deaf girl YaYa, who makes striptease-show, and an abled girl Rita, who need to serve for mafia "of deaf" in search for money for her lover Alesha. The idea of this movie is deconstruction of the traditional gender and power oppositions: men and women, domination and subordination, power and obedience, economical calculation and emotional affection, competition and cooperation, etc. In this movie deaf men have money and authority, but depend from women emotionally; mafia of "deaf" unites with abled women and gets victory at a mafia of "abled men". There the deaf girl YaYa is represented as a "femme fatale", who created her own "world of women" without men, and her "deafness" is a symbol of her non-ordinary abilities, which surpassed abled heterosexual men's abilities.

Two other movies were shot by Uriy Moroz on the literary plots by a modern popular detective writer Alexandra Marinina. Both films represent the male characters in wheelchairs. One hero is a ex-cop, who is paralyzed up to the waist (*The Stolen Dream*); the other hero (*The Stylist*, 2003) is a semi-paralyzed translator from Japanese. In

contrast to the typical interpretation of "footlessness" as a sign of "castration", the males in these films are represented as attractive, competitive and "sexy" in the traditional sense. They are ready to self-defense all time, and even to emotional attack. Having money and professional success helps them to keep their dominant identity, and only love (but not their disability!) makes them sensitive and emotionally open.

Since the beginning of the liberal transformations in the post-Soviet states we can see the first level of "visualization" of disabled persons, acceptance and interest to their "other" experience, as a part of world, as an one more source producing subjectivity. Sex of disabled persons symbolizes discovery of "liberal values" in the popular post-Soviet consciousness and public discourse as a new cultural resource. Disabled body in the post-Soviet movies legalized idea about diversity of subjectivities, different ways of life and private autonomy. Post-liberal humanity critiqued the idea of "total" humanism being equal "for everybody", and stressed the necessity to split "humanism" for different categories of "others", whose do not coincide with the "normative" identity in society. Acceptance of "other experiences" should be incorporated in the structure of social morality. By incorporating these ideas, post-humanism allows us to consider how "other" habitués generate a wide range of possible identities. And it is a beginning of a way to multicultural world, against disability-phobia.

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^[1] This article was wrote thanking to my fellowship at the California University at Berkeley, USA, and by the Fulbright Academic Exchange Program for scholars during 2011-2012 years. No organizations or persons are responsible for my text. All mistakes which still stay here, are, only my own.