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BORIS AKUNIN'S POSTMODERN *ČAJKA*

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Abstract

The article explores Boris Akunin's *The Seagull* (2000) as a postmodern detective story. Akunin exploits and simultaneously makes light of the basic concepts of postmodernism: parodic and intertextual stance, the erasure of the line between high and mass literature, a mixing up of genres, a non-linear plot, emphasized theatricality, and metafictionality. It also discusses Akunin as a representative of intellectual mainstream fiction, and intertextuality is both a discursive tool of the postmodern scepticism toward cultural heritage, and a defense mechanism of culture.

Keywords: *Boris Akunin; Anton Chekhov; 'The Seagull'; Postmodernism; Parody; Intertextuality*

In April of 2001 Moscow's School of Contemporary Drama Theater premieres *Čajka* (*The Seagull*). A hurried ticket buyer, having chosen the classic title, without paying attention to the name of the author – after all, who does not know who wrote *Čajka* – could expect to re-experience the classic, which had been running in the same School of Contemporary Drama since 1998 with an all-star cast. This hypothetical, absentminded theatergoer would be somewhat puzzled by the stage set of the first act. Instead of the park on Sorin's estate, where Čechov's first act opens, she sees before her the set of the last act's opening scene: “Одна из гостиных в доме Сорина, обращенная Константином Трепьевым в рабочий кабинет” (p. 7; “One of the living rooms in Sorin's house, converted by Konstantin Treplev into a study”

[p. 116]).¹ The most striking thing onstage, however, is the collection of stuffed animals, a whole army of them, and “[н]а самом видном месте, словно бы во главе всей этой рати – чучело большой чайки с растопыренными крыльями” (p. 7; “[i]n the most prominent place, as if at the head of the army, stands a large stuffed seagull with crushed wings”). Under the seagull, Konstantin Treplev “сидит один за письменным столом. Рядом лежит большой револьвер, и Треплев его рассеянно поглаживает, будто котенка” (p. 7; “is sitting alone at his desk. A large revolver lies nearby and he strokes it absentmindedly, as if it were a kitten” [116]). It has become clear by now that the play is not by Anton Čechov. This theatergoer now remembers, that exactly one year prior, Boris Akunin’s play *Čajka* was published in the prestigious literary journal *Novyj mir*.² At which point she smiles, fishes a chewing gum out of her purse, and prepares to be amused.

The play is subtitled “A Comedy in Two Acts”. In Act One, just as occurs at the end of Čechov’s last act, Treplev has a conversation with Nina, and a loud noise brings Doctor Dorn into the room, only to discover Treplev dead. The action does not stop there: on taking a second look, Dorn discovers that Konstantin has not committed suicide, but that he’s been killed. The characters react to the news, and Dorn establishes the fact that the killer must be one of them. Act Two consists of “takes” (“дубль”) that begin at exactly the same moment, and thus cancel out the preceding ones. In a succession of eight such takes, each of the characters is forced to confess to murdering Konstantin Treplev, for reasons (variously) of jealousy, love, fear, professional curiosity, or revenge. Dorn (of the von Dorn, soon-to-become Fandorin, family)³ takes charge of the investigation.

The critics were not amused. They might have ignored the play altogether, had it not been published in the prestigious *Novyj mir* and later taken on by a leading theater director, Iosif Rajchel’gauz.⁴ Reviewers dismissed both the play and the production as either a tasteless joke, or, when acknowledging the playfulness as a potentially productive postmodernist technique, a failed take on Čechov. When literary critics and the academe entered the discussion, they brought in the heavy artillery of literary theory: deconstruction, postmodernism, intertextuality, simulacra, palimpsest, pastiche, hypertext, and genre theory. To date, there is at least one dissertation devoted entirely to Akunin’s *Čajka* and its intertextual links with Čechov’s play.⁵ Several authors address these links in related studies.⁶ Some teaching manuals suggest Akunin’s *Čajka* for the 11th grade school curriculum.⁷

An obvious question arises in light of these facts: what is the academic value of studying Akunin’s play? I suggest three closely related answers (although one is tempted to suggest eight); they comprise the subject of this study, as follows.

1. Test case for the study of postmodernism. As is the case with works by all secondary writers, Akunin’s text provides material for the study of

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