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## THE IDEOLOGY OF MASS LITERATURE: AMERICAN MODEL VS SOVIET

*All the comparisons we are making in literature are always very conditional because there are a lot of different circumstances in every country which are very specific for this place. Anyway, as human beings have something similar in their behaviour, so we can find similarity and even general directions of development in social and cultural trends.*  
(Pokalchuk 2000:75)

The market orientation of our society, along with industrialization, urbanization and democracy caused within culture the rise of such phenomenon as *mass literature*. The associations connected with this word combination, have, on the whole, a rather negative connotation and are generalized at once by such adjectives as *lowbrow, cheap, illusive, conveyer, primitive, cliché* etc. The stereotypical identification of mass literature production with cheap books in soft binding with primitive contents, which can be easily comprehended even while sitting in an overcrowded means of transportation after hard working-day, long ago proved to be both a one-sided and out-of-date reference. *Mass culture expresses moods and real experience of average people. That is why it becomes an important source of apprehension of reality and social consciousness, but not only a totality of cultural consumer values, a means of ideological influence on masses or simply anticulture* (Домбровська 2005:54).

The phenomenon of *mass culture*<sup>1</sup> (and literature, in particular) was, is and will always be actual and new, as it allows its researcher, who is constantly thirsty for knowledge, to scoop something essentially different and new. The quality of such research will depend on the *bucket*, used by the researcher, and the depth he can reach. Similar thoughts are to be found on the pages of *Culture*

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<sup>1</sup> The term *mass culture* is frequently used interchangeably with the intended term *mass literature*.

*Theory and Popular Culture*, the authorship of which belongs to well-known scientist John Storey: [...] *popular culture is in effect an empty conceptual category, one which can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use* (Storey 2005:1). In spite of the fact that the rudiments of this phenomenon stretch back into the annals of history, thorough theoretical investigations appeared only at the beginning of XX century. Analysis of this sort of culture production from an academic standpoint and with the help of appropriate literary methodology became both common and acceptable only at the beginning of this century.

Traditionally mass culture was always the object of apprehension as opposed to its elder sister 'high culture'. Their correlations have never been easy. Moreover, we can even say that in most cases they were (and mostly still are) of negative character. All the reproaches to mass literature are well-grouped in Peter Swirski's article *Popular and Highbrow Literature: A Comparative View*, where the author distinguishes four main charges against mass literature:

1) *the negative character of popular literature creation: popular fiction is objectionable because, unlike high literature, it is mass-produced by profit-oriented hacks whose sole aim is to gratify the base tastes of a paying audience;*

2) *its negative effects on high literary culture: popular literature steals from highbrow literature, thus debasing it, and it lures away potential contributors, thus depleting the latter's pool of talent;*

3) *its negative effects on the audience (readership): the consumption of popular fiction at best produces spurious gratification, and at worst can be emotionally and cognitively harmful to the reader;*

4) *its negative effects on the society at large: the mass distribution and wide appeal of popular fiction lower the cultural level of the reading public and encourage political, social and cultural dictatorship by creating a passive and apathetic audience rendered highly responsive to the techniques of mass demagoguery and propaganda.* (Swirski 1999)

Beginning from the very first charge, it should be mentioned that there exists a mistaken stereotype that the sole object of mass literature creators lies only in producing books orientated mainly towards the average recipient, who it is suggested are merely escaping from reality through *special type of passive non-critical perception* (Лексикон 2001:316). Because of its simple form and content such *belles-letters* is often characterized with the words: *the substitute of aesthetic enjoyment, non-national, cosmopolitan, easily translated* and which *editions of many millions almost simultaneously are sold in many languages* (*ibid.*:316). It is also often considered as the literature of escapism. However, in our opinion, such regalia can be applied towards samples of trivial literature, which are often termed *kitsch*, but do not concern all mass literature.

In opposition *mass literature – high literature*, the first, in D. Macdonald's opinion, was considered *a parasitic, a cancerous growth* on the second

(Macdonald 1978:168). The scepticism of such a viewpoint is clear. The middle class of society having established its existence, literature became an inalienable means of market relations. Then *in mass culture there disappears aesthetic sublimation and indifferent aesthetic identification, instead of that there is introduced the principle of reification, when aesthetic objects are converted into consumer products* (Гундорова 2008:55). Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Herbert Marcuse, José Ortega y Gasset and others could not forgive mass culture for this. However, it emerged that the relations between high and low cultures have positive features as well.

The active development of the modern society is in need of the same *dynamic* literature, whereas *high literature*, – Nila Zborovs'ka mentions in her article *Modern mass literature in Ukraine as culture-wide problem, – is actively busy with reflections*, while its *complex form and intensive inner searches do not allow the broad masses to use this literature* (Зборовська 2008:4). Such opinion should not necessarily mean that we have to dissociate ourselves from 'real' literature and pay attention only to those cultural achievements orientated towards mass consciousness.

As Anna Martuszevska, a Polish researcher of *that third* [mass literature – *O.D.*], says that it is very often the case that mass literature can be utilised by an inquisitive reader in order to *reach the literature of higher flight, prepare the ground for its reception* (Martuszevska 1998:274). As an example, the author gives quotes extracts from the dairies of well-known Polish writers, representatives of High Literature, who recall and describe the active and beneficial influence of *Popular Literature*<sup>2</sup> on their creative formation: *that third* served as an impulse and catalyst of creative energy.

The correlation between high and mass *belles-lettres* is seen from the fact, that *mass culture had never ignored the patterns, plots, [and] images of high art, borrowing them, turning them into clichés and reproducing in their own works* (Домбровська 2005:56). Besides, mass literature may also be useful to high culture, *prolonging life of genres and entire culture layers, which have already finished their active existence in its high sphere* (Зведев 1991:21) and serving as some idea fulcrum for new aesthetically rich achievements of art.

The sceptic viewpoint on mass culture, initially given theoretical substance by a Canadian scientist, Dwight Macdonald (1978), was only one of numerous attempts to interpret this multi-faced phenomenon. It is natural that among mass culture researchers (and mass literature, in particular) there were also optimistic people, who treated pop-art products as some ground for social consolidation. Here we should mention Edward Shils, D. W. Brogan, John G. Cawelti, Gilbert

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<sup>2</sup> The term *mass literature* is very often substituted for *popular*, as a synonym. Despite the debatable character of this question we would use the term *mass literature*, taking into consideration the fact that samples of high culture can also be rather popular among readers.

Seldes, Daniel Bell etc. D. W. Brogan explains the pessimism of his precursor D. Macdonald by his *too optimistic a view of the past* of America (Brogan 1978:197) and thinks that such intimate ties with the past hinder society in its development and make the growth of nation impossible (*ibid.*).

This group of researchers is also much more sagacious in determining the model of American culture. For instance, Edward Shils does not agree with sharp opposition of high to low, and offers to develop the existing cultural dyad into a triad: *these are "superior" or "refined" culture, "mediocre" culture, and "brutal" culture* (Shils 1978:206). Furthermore, he presents a detailed characteristic of each of them:

*Superior or refined culture is distinguished by the seriousness of its subject matter, i.e., the centrality of the problems with which it deals, the acute penetration and coherence of its perceptions, the subtlety and wealth of its expressed feeling. [...]*

*Mediocre culture is less original than superior culture; it is more reproductive; it operates largely in the same genres as superior culture, but also in certain relatively novel genres not yet fully incorporated into superior culture, such as the musical comedy. [...]*

*At the third level is brutal culture, where symbolic elaboration is of a more elementary order. (...) The depth of penetration is almost always negligible, subtlety is almost entirely lacking, and a general grossness of sensitivity and perception is a common feature. (Shils 1978:206–207)*

Such a point of view illustrates and summarizes the numerous endeavours of masscult researchers to compromise and find some *golden mean* or so called *boundary* or *intermediate zone*,<sup>3</sup> where the author may write without self-contradiction and having a considerable profit from such an activity.

The third masscult research group compared it [mass culture] with ideology. *Literary texts*, writes Nila Zborovs'ka, – *give [a] certain image of world, and that is why they have ideological results. Mass literature [...] is the sphere, "where in order to direct the reader to a certain view of universe" a strongly marked "policy of signification" is being reproduced* (Зборовська 2007:3), under the influence of which the representative of a certain society is being moulded. The adherents of such an approach try to find and understand the psychological mechanisms of the emergence of such 'bespoke' literature production.

The ideology of mass *belles-lettres* can be explained, at least, by the fact that it is, first of all, a *sociological* phenomenon (according to Yuri Lotman), which *is concerned mostly not with the structure of any text, but with its social*

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<sup>3</sup> The term *boundary* or *intermediate zone* appeared in the domain of Soviet literature studies in the middle of 70s for the works which simultaneously embody elements both of high or mass culture (Зверев 1991:23).

functioning in the general system of texts, which constitute this culture. Thus, the notion of “mass literature” determines, above all else, the relations of some collective to a certain group of texts (Лотман 1997:819). However, the responses of readers to a given text are often dependent on the general sociocultural context, planned and forecast in advance by the creators of mass production.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century produced two predominant ideological models of mass literature: **American** and **Soviet**. They differ, first of all, in the motives behind the production of such literature and the forms of its presentation. The inaugural theoretical substantiation of the Soviet model of mass culture belongs to Dwight Macdonald, famous Canadian scientist. The author of *A Theory of Mass Culture* sets forward the following arguments:

*Yet the fact is that the U.S.S.R. is even more a land of Mass Culture than is the U.S.A. This is less easily recognizable, because their [Soviet – O.D.] Mass Culture is in form just the opposite of ours [American – O.D.], being one of propaganda and pedagogy rather than of entertainment. None the less, it has the essential quality of Mass, as against High or Folk, Culture: it is manufactured for mass consumption by technicians employed by the ruling class and is not an expression of either the individual artist or the common people themselves. Like our own, it exploits rather than satisfies the cultural needs of the masses, though for political rather than commercial reasons. (Macdonald 1978:169)*

Similar arguments have also been observed in the article “Mass Culture as Realisation of Enlightenment Project: American and Russian Consequences” authored by Russian scientist Grigoriy Tul’chyns’ky, who asserts that *it* [Soviet model – O.D.] was a qualitatively different type of culture – without democracy and human rights, i.e., mass culture of totalitarianism, where there occurred the transition from the personality oriented “from inside” to the type of personality oriented “from outside” (Тульчинський 2006:191). That was not a society of independent individuals anymore, but, on the contrary – a passive featureless mass.

The investigations of the phenomenon of mass culture differed completely depending on the origin and localization of its researchers. In the West, scientists tried to treat mass literature independently and thoroughly, whilst in the territory of the former Soviet Union the viewpoint of its explorers was often narrow, prejudiced and completely subordinated to the general political ideology. Mass culture was perceived by such Soviet scientists as Olena Kartseva, Z. Hershkovych, V. Anastas’yev, O. Nikolyukin and others as *bourgeois anticulture* and underwent total negation. They considered the content of the production of this type as

*certain type of relations, directed to the suppression of the individual consciousness of the personality, manipulation of his/her emotions, making his/her feelings, thoughts, desires ... common. This is a conventional sign system, it is a myth of bourgeois society, it is, using popular in America today term – “tokenism”: peculiar gestures, people’s*

*hieroglyphs of intercommunication according to the conditions of the system.*  
(Анастасьев 1974:16)

The problem of the representatives of such an approach lay in their blind subordination to the rules of the system of different, though not less dangerous, type.

Speaking of the American model of mass culture, the fact should be mentioned that it is often treated as the synonym to the whole American culture. *Popular culture is considered as a sociocultural “product” of America, for which it has reserved all the rights* (Рахимова 2007:216). While hearing the phrase *mass culture*, the recipient will, for sure, think of the USA. This mentality stereotype can be explained with the following factors, defined by G. Tul’chyns’ky: 1) American society stepped into the mass cult stage much earlier than other countries; 2) *mass culture received here exclusively favourable conditions for its development*; 3) the reason for such expansion of mass values in the territory of America is explained with the great attractiveness of mass production (Тулчинський 2006:186).

Denis William Brogan highlights among the reasons for the emergence and development of mass cult both **urbanisation** and **unification**. Here are his arguments:

*The first is that it has been necessary to create a popular culture for an urbanised society that does not inherit a common national tradition, even an obsolete national tradition. All western societies have to create a new urban tradition because the fact of an urbanised society is new in England and Germany as well as in the United States.*  
(Brogan 1978:194)

If in the processes of urbanisation European and American societies are similar, the necessity of unification, in Brogan’s opinion, is not characteristic of the European countries. Having centuries-old strong and independent traditions ... *they have not had to create a unified national tradition. The Americans have had to do both, to make the change from rural to urban culture and to create a unified urban culture to be ‘sold’ (in the special American sense of the term) to a population with recent roots in Sicily, Norway, Ireland, Kentucky, Croatia* [the highlighting is mine – O.D.] (Brogan 1978:194). America, as a country of free society, needed the literature of the same type: simple and entertaining either in form or in content. Using E. Shils’ terminology, we should say that was *mediocre* literature for the middle class, the base of mass culture. Being the achievement of the most numerous level of society which is rather dynamic in its development, mass literature must also be in step with its consumers.

The readers, who are the representatives of middle class, are often thought to be literarily tasteless, intellectually primitive, homogenised, passive, pessimistic

and even immoral. However, Peter Swirski reasonably disproves all these charges and gives such arguments:

*[...] we should keep in mind that popular fiction, which mainly addresses itself to its widest consumer, the middle class, is frequently more conservative and puritanical than its highbrow relative because it strives to reflect and cater to the middle class social and sexual ethos.*

*People choose literary content to fit their individual and social preferences, rather than adapting their emotional and intellectual lives to what popular fictions describe.*

*[...] most people from the lower middle and middle middle class, i.e. the group most "at risk," are not isolated brutes living out escapist and violent fantasies, but rather active members of family, peer and social group. (Swirski 1999)*

Such characteristics cannot, however, be applied to the Soviet society, which was officially constantly proclaiming itself as the society of free and humanistic people, but, in fact, was appreciably different. This model of mass culture was orientated towards the 'lower' but not the middle class. The real middle class in the USSR was represented, in Tul'chyns'kyi's opinion, by the *political and professional elite, which included party nomenclature and clerks, professoriate and highly-paid scientists, famous artists and pilots* (Тулчинський 2006:192). These real representatives of Soviet mass culture *were completely dependent on the authorities, underwent numerous "purges", repressions, even physical destruction* (ibid.:192). Freedom of speech, so peculiar to the American mass lit model, was persistently being eradicated in the Soviet mass lit domain.

The principles of unification were of great necessity in the country which consisted of psychologically and culturally different nations. Though all Soviet republics were announced as independent but open to cooperation for the unified aim of the whole Soviet society, in reality such social order appeared to be incapable of existing eternally. The ideological creators of this model of mass culture in comparison with their American counterparts were governed by different goals and in some parameters tried to achieve contrasting effects. The ideological and dogmatic principles of Soviet mass literature are clearly seen in the following quotation:

*Soviet art, as is generally known, is not subdivided into "mass" and "elite" and penetration of culture into masses serves in socialistic countries for fine aim of bringing up high humanism, ideas of peace and socialism, brotherhood between the folks, respect to human virtues and intolerance to all the displays of racism and violence, so characteristic for the American mass literature. Creative mastering of reality, love to freedom and fight for peace, honesty and adherence to principles, socialistic citizenship and sensitivity, disinterestedness and generosity – these are the qualities, brought up in their readers by the best Soviet books, published in great number of copies. (Николюкин 1973:7)*

The main aim of the ‘originators’ of Soviet literature was to form mass society of

*totalitarian, mobilising type and its corresponding mass culture. [...] It was a society of unusually unconcerned and unaccountable people of mass, who, in fact, were not building, but eating their future away* (Тульчинський 2006:192).

Building a unitary nation without taking into consideration the mental and cultural peculiarities of each folk and taking them well in hand emerged as a fatal mistake for the Soviet Union and its culture.

The processes of urbanisation, which turned out to be one of the main preconditions of the appearance of mass literature, had a remarkable influence on Slavic literatures as well. The emergence of townfolk as a separate class required the changes of accents and of cultures themselves. The rich traditional folklore, which by some investigators is often opposed to the production of mass literature, was partly beginning to come to an end in favour of more popular forms of ‘democratic literature’.

Industrialisation and scientific-technical development played rather an important but significantly different part in the development of both mass lit models. In the USA such social processes helped mass culture to broaden its sphere of influence and rise to the higher level of its consumption. The development of mass media, radio and cinematograph produced a revolution in the consciousness of the average American. Film language was considered to become a universal means to unite a multi-cultural country. Thus, we should highlight such characteristic features of the American mass literature (and mass culture, in general), which it has obtained in the process of its development:

- *accessibility and democracy;*
- *stress on class homogeneity of the society;*
- *sensibility and correspondence to the psycho-physiological structures of the person;*
- *commercial significance, where culture is examined as the mechanism which produces demand and regulates supply.* (Рахимова 2007:219)

In the domain of modern American multicultural society these qualities help mass literature function and develop, produce conflicts and extinguish them, be always fresh and actual.

In the Soviet Union, improvement of living conditions originating in technical progress (though its level of development remained far behind the American one) caused changes of opposite character. *In 1970s there came to an end the transition from traditional pre-industrial to mass industrial society, and, secondly, from totalitarian-mobilising – to consumerism* (Тульчинський 2006:194). Numerous technical, economical and social achievements which helped to consolidate American society emerged to begin the phase of the Soviet Union downfall.



The filling of the post-soviet market with the samples of American mass culture is one of the displays of wide-range globalization, and the sector of literature is not an exception here. To such cultural rehabilitation from long-lasting ideological dictate *the post-soviet countries appeared to be as open as possible – because of the desire to disavow their totalitarian past* (Лімборський 2008:6). Easiness of such mass ‘captivity’ in the domain of post-soviet literature G.Tul’chyns’kyi explains with its ‘indefensibility’ against the ‘attack’ of the western mass culture. The scientist asserts: *if in most foreign countries the sociality has fixed institutional forms of civil society, which gives the individual formal but still the referential points of identification, Soviet and post-soviet man is divested of this* (Тульчинський 2006:200). A similar situation may be observed in modern Ukraine as one of the former Soviet republics.

Despite all past divergences between American and Soviet scientists in their views on the phenomenon of mass literature, it bids for world supremacy more and more today. Mass literature cannot be associated anymore with the word ‘primitive’, as in most cases it manifests itself as *a universal phenomenon, which overcomes cultural, national, political and financial obstacles much more successfully than high literature and just for this deserves attention* (Таранова 2008:53). Besides, *only unique can be global* (Тульчинський 2008:6), i.e. worth more profound studying. Modern *belles-lettres* is not treated as marginal any more. For most people it plays a part of their natural cultural environment. For the investigators in the domain of literary studies it continues issuing new challenges which make it always actual and new.

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