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Russian Theory in Africa: From Marxism to the Bakhtinian Postcolony

The reception of Russian theory in and in relationship with the Global South is as much connected with global history as it is with the history of literary and cultural theory itself. Research on these connections is vibrant, however, with many fields still uncharted.

The best-known case of a reception of Russian theory in the thinking of the Global South is certainly the transfer of the concept of *hybridity* from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin to the theoretical framework of Postcolonial Studies. However, entanglements go beyond the term's illustrious career in Postcolonial and Cultural Studies, both with regard to Bakhtin and in a broader sense. The relationship between Postcolonial Studies and Russian or Eastern European thinking is twofold. On the one hand, it is a paradigm that was applied to Eastern Europe after the demise of the Soviet Union from the 1990s on, thereby fulfilling different functions that again roughly fall into two subfields. Firstly, the theoretical framework is applied in order to analyze hegemonial structures within imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, or the post-socialist world, and secondly, it has also proven useful for scrutinizing the relationships between Eastern Europe and the West.

On the other hand, we can observe an entanglement of the field itself with Eastern European thinking in the shifts facilitated by Postcolonial Studies and subsequent paradigmatic changes. Thus, from this vantage point, connections between the Global South and Eastern Europe can be productively re-evaluated. Hence we can take into account the importance of global entanglements within the world order of the Cold War while leaving its epistemological binarisms behind.

1 Modes and spaces of entanglements

This article focuses on different intersections between the paradigm of the Postcolonial Studies and Russian thought. However, it is important to note that the entanglements between Global South and Russian or East European thinking are certainly not restricted to this field. Historically, Marxism and in its vein Soviet thinking constitute a layer in the palimpsest of Postcolonial Theory (for postcolonial theory as a palimpsest, cf. Young 2001, 68). Recently, both Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (2020)

and Rossen Djagalov's *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (2020) have addressed different questions of global entanglements between the Global South and the Soviet space. Popescu's monograph is devoted to African literatures' reactions and interactions with the dynamics of the Cold War. It describes African literatures situated at a focal point, not only within those postcolonial dynamics they were subjugated to by the West, but also in a dialogue with and in opposition to the former Soviet bloc and the latter's outreach towards the Global South. Djagalov mainly focuses on the development and the effects of the Soviet Union's attempts to create and facilitate an internationalist counter model to Western hegemonial cultural structures that consciously supported and funded cultural structures and their agents in the Global South, such as the multilingual *Lotus* magazine. While this funding was readily accepted within the superstructures of the global Cold War, writers, filmmakers and other cultural figures from the Global South took advantage of the situation while safeguarding their independence.

The interaction facilitated by the Soviet Union had impacts that are still of relevance and, in many cases, still have to be accounted for. The fact that Ousmane Sembène studied the art of filmmaking in the Soviet Union during an internship with Mark Donskoi has left its conceptual and aesthetical imprints on the history of African film just as much as it did in the case of Sarah Maldoror, who studied in Moscow at the same time as Sembène (Chomentowski 2019; Dovey 2020), or in the cases of the later generations of Souleymane Cissé or Abderrahmane Sissako (Woll 2004). Monica Popescu (2020, 12) opens her book with a reference to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's stay in the Soviet writers' residence in Yalta while he was working on his *Petals of Blood* (1977), Łukasz Stanek (2020) draws attention to the impact of socialist architecture in West Africa, and Kate Cowcher (2019, 163) mentions the case of the Ethiopian artist and teacher Eshetu Tiruneh, a former student of the Surikov Academy of Art in Moscow, who had studied art history through the writings of Soviet theoreticians of African art such as Ivan Potekhin or Vil' Mirimanov. The approaches they developed on "polycentric supersystems" (Cowcher 2019, 163) may be forgotten in Western discourses, she writes, but remain present in the practical and theoretical work of those who studied them. They resurface in projects such as the art history textbook Tiruneh was preparing for young Ethiopian artists and will thus continue to be part of the intertextual realm within which African arts are discussed.

The same is true for the paradigm of Soviet Socialist Realism, for instance, as a layer within the intertextual realm of African literatures. While many Global South writers were rightly opposed to being classified within this ideological scheme, it nevertheless forms one of the models that they were actively reacting to. Writers such as Alex La Guma, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, or Ousmane Sembène pro-

ductively adapted the model and integrated it into their own poetics. Agostino Neto's speech *Concerning National Culture* (1979) can serve as an example of how consciously Global South writers both read and reacted to Soviet literary formations. With hardly any further explanation of the terms which can thus be presupposed to be generally understood, Neto argues against a transferability of both Proletkult and Socialist Realism to Angolan literature. Lenin fiercely opposed the avant-garde project of Proletkult, he argues, because "the Soviet nation, for the elaboration of a new socialist culture aimed at the masses, should necessarily find fulfilment in and take advantage of its cultural heritage" (Neto 2007, 493). However, according to Neto's argument, Socialist Realism proved to be just as detrimental because of its fixed patterns of stereotypes that were an inapt model for Angolan literature. As a consequence, Neto consciously calls for cultural expressions that turn to "our own reality, without chauvinism and without denying our universalist calling" (Neto 2007, 493).

An acknowledgement of layers related to Socialist Realist aesthetics as articulated in the Soviet Union was also impaired by the general condescension shown towards this type of literature in Western discourse. In the final decade of the Cold War, which coincided with the time of the rise of Postcolonial Studies, Socialist Realist aesthetics were yet to be considered a topic worthy of research. Hence "African or Asian writers who claimed to enjoy and emulate the works of their Soviet fellows were perceived with added skepticism and derision" (Popescu 2020, 129). Western critics in particular "regarded them as politically naïve or derelict in their duty to preserve the autonomy of literary creation from the intrusion of the state" (Popescu 2020, 129). However, these were not the only reasons why Socialist Realist aesthetics were ultimately hardly ever fully embraced by Global South writers. Oftentimes, as in the case of Alex La Guma, commitments to Socialist Realist aesthetics ended in tautological statements. In the case of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it had more to do with "the creation of aesthetic solidarities that inscribed him within a progressive, Afro-Asian, or even tricontinental community of writers" than with a real engagement with the forms developed by classics of Soviet Socialist Realism (Popescu 2020, 130). In Ousmane Sembène's *Ô Pays, mon beau peuple!* (1957, *O Country, my beautiful people!*), it is possible to observe a number of formulaic analogies to Socialist Realist paradigmatic configurations corresponding to those elaborated by Caterina Clark in her *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (1981). However, they do not dominate his social (not socialist) realist poetics and constitute just one sublayer among many others (Drews-Sylla 2013).

Another example of a field that has yet to be studied systematically is the reception of various individual authors, such as Maksim Gor'kii or Georgii Plekhanov, in Global South thinking. The Senegalese artist Issa Samb, for instance, repeatedly referred to Plekhanov in his works (Kouoh 2013, 282–283, 310–311). As

Koyo Kouoh states, Issa Samb's "Marxist-influenced readings have contributed to the production of a radical aesthetic rarely present in the canons of contemporary art in Africa. After the student revolt of May 1968, which lasted several years in Dakar, Samb founded the Laboratoire Agit'Art in 1974 with a group of artists from various disciplines." (Kouoh 2013, 8–9). The projects undertaken in this laboratory were directed against those art forms which had been canonized under Léopold Sédar Senghor. Samb's artwork can best be judged within and not beyond poststructuralist or postcolonial paradigms. His works may serve as an example of how the two poles, autonomy of art and socialist inspired endeavors, were by no means completely opposite. On the contrary, just as in the Russian avantgarde, or in the cases of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o or Ousmane Sembène, they were dynamically fused.

In a socialist-leaning context, Samb was not the only African cultural actor to refer to Plekhanov. In his essay "Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature" (Onoge 2007 [1985]), the Nigerian Marxist social anthropologist Omafume F. Onoge refers to Plekhanov in order to underline an argument that establishes that bourgeois literature is an invalid tool for an adequate scientific evaluation of (African) literature. The allegation is that bourgeois literature only criticizes content and "stagnates on the mere descriptive reproduction of manifest material" (Onoge 2007, 471). Onoge's reception of Plekhanov is embedded in a more general Marxist context. Later, he refers to Georg Lukács, whom he attests decisive achievements in Marxist criticism with regard to European literature, before turning to an "emergent Marxist mode of African literary theory" (Onoge 2007, 472). Thus it is not solely Plekhanov who is referred to, but Plekhanov in a global array of Marxist thinkers and criticism which is scrutinized for its relevance for African literature. While for Onoge Plekhanov is just one representative of socialist thinkers in a wide field spanning from Marx and Engels to Mao Tse-Tung, he nevertheless seems to have studied him closely, judging by the notes in which he cites Plekhanov extensively (Onoge 2007, 475).

Onoge's essay not only serves as an example of the integration of Russian socialist texts into the theoretical thinking of African Marxist theoreticians. It also spotlights the relevance of foreign language publishing activities within the Soviet Union, which produced enormous quantities of books distributed in the Global South (Djagalov 2020, 96–102). Onoge cites several of these sources, among them not only Plekhanov but also Lunacharskii, both published in Moscow, the former by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in 1957, the latter by Progress Publishers in 1973 (Onoge 2007, 475). Kate Cowcher (2019, 162) likewise highlights that Soviet texts distributed through Soviet cultural programs circulated in Africa and reached its audiences. In the case of Ousmane Sembène, one of these books can be seen in the short Soviet documentary *V Senegale* (1961, *In Senegal*) produced

on the occasion of Senegalese independence. However, an assessment of these publications with regard to their impact on a reception of Russian thinking in Global South contexts has yet to be undertaken.

2 Russian layers in Edward Said

Onoge, but also Sembène belong to a generation that Djagalov denominates as Third-Worldist critics and scholars whose work would be continued by postcolonial scholars. “What has changed, however, was not only the location where that cultural and intellectual labour is performed (from the capitals of Africa, Asia, and Latin America or Moscow to Anglo-American literature departments) but also its substance.” (Djagalov 2021, 225) As Monica Popescu states, “Neil Lazarus has observed that issues central to postcolonial studies, such as Said’s injunction to ‘unthink Eurocentrism’, were formulated a couple of decades earlier by African scholars and writers.” (Popescu 2020, 28) “[I]ntellectuals from the Third World laid claim to an anti-imperialist vocabulary that criticized both American and Soviet forms of domination.” (Popescu 2020, 41)

From a different perspective, fundamental aspects of postcolonial thinking can also be connected to the thinking of the early Soviet Union. Thus Russian thought forms a layer not only in the socialist or Marxist-Leninist strata of the historical postcolonial palimpsest but also in the later, canonical theoretical framework of deconstructive Postcolonial Studies.

It has often been observed that concepts that developed out of early Soviet discourse were quite similar to later postcolonial thinking, for instance, within Soviet Oriental Studies. The linguist Nikolai Marr argued against models of genealogical trees for language development (on Marr see Galin Tihanov’s chapter on semantic paleontology in this volume). In his conception, languages do not split into different branches but rather intersect, or, to use this term, hybridize (which is, however, not to be confused with postcolonial hybridization, cf. Sasse 2018, 138). Vera Tolz shows that there is a direct connection between Soviet Oriental Studies and Edward Said. Said studied with Arab scholars who combined Marxist and postcolonial perspectives during the 1960s. Furthermore, some of these scholars had educational ties to the Soviet Union (Tolz 2011, 20) and were thus familiar with paradigms of Soviet Oriental Studies. Tolz argues that Anouar Abdel-Malek directly referred to Sergei Ol’denburg. Citing Aijaz Ahmad, she shows that not only a few arguments, but the entire conceptual framework of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), his critique of Western orientalism, is astonishingly close to Sergei Ol’denburgs critique of Western Orientology (Tolz 2011, 100).

The second pillar on which Said's theoretical framework rests, the concept of hegemony based on Antonio Gramsci's thinking, can also be related to Soviet discourse, as Craig Brandist (2012, 26–28) shows. Brandist argues that Antonio Gramsci spent enough time in the Soviet Union during the early 1920s to learn Russian well enough to leave the closer radius of the Italian delegation with whom he had travelled. Thus he can easily have become familiar with the emphasis on culture within the concept of hegemony that was already being developed within the discussions of this period and which would later become so important for Said's thinking. Like Tolz, Brandist concludes that the relationship between language structures and other cultural fields fundamental to structuralism and, subsequently, to poststructuralism and postcolonialism was already present in early Soviet debates. However, it was only beyond the boundaries imposed by the totalitarian Soviet structures that these germs of critical thinking could fully develop into the critical paradigm that was to shape the debates of poststructuralism and postcolonialism.

There is one more instance in Said's thinking which leads back to Russian contexts. One of the authors he kept returning to throughout his academic career was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). *Heart of Darkness* is one of the literary texts that became seminal for the field of postcolonial studies. Its ambiguities, the harsh identification with the colonial project on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the disturbing distance that the different modes of narration evoke have turned it into one of the most discussed literary texts in the field. Said attributes the text's ambiguities to Conrad's biographical background. In his first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), Said deals with the identity conflicts, the processes of self-definition of the assimilated migrant of Polish origin coming from imperial Russia to colonial England within the contexts of "imperial struggle, war, exile, cultural dislocation, and assimilation" (McCarthy 2010, 17). In Said's reading, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) becomes a text shaped by an ironic distance to any representation which stems from the permanent knowledge of the author's own marginality in imperial England. On the one hand, according to Said Conrad is totally assimilated and fully identifies with the imperial project, on the other hand his own hybrid identity as a migrant to England as a Pole from imperial Russia whose father was imprisoned because of his nationalist engagement imbues him with ironic distance to representation per se (Said 1994, 27). Seen through this lens, it is migration, a hybrid identity, and distance from the conditions of imperial Russia that catalyze the flourishing of the critical potential (cf. also Drews-Sylla 2017).

3 Hybridity and postcolonialism

That a distance to Russia, or rather the Soviet Union, led to a further theoretical development which allowed the critical germ to flourish, is certainly also true for the best-known case of a reception of Russian theory within the field of Postcolonial Studies: Homi Bhabha's transformative appropriation of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of hybridity. The case has been described by Mieke Bal (2002) as a prototypical example of a *travelling concept*. These concepts are characterized by a fluidity of meaning, application, and functioning as they travel "between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities" (Bal 2002, 24). The term hybridity originates in biological discourse, where it was and still is used in order to describe cross-breeding in horticulture. During the nineteenth century, it was also transferred to racializing discourses. Mikhail Bakhtin, however, transformed it into a linguistic category used to describe the polyphony of the novel.

In postcolonial discourse, "hybridity [in its broadest sense] commonly refers to the creation of new *transcultural* forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft 1998, 135; italics in the original). This hybridity of the cultural discourse – the transcultural forms that are produced by the colonial discourse – "reverse the structures of domination in the colonial situation" (Young 1995, 23).

Bakhtin's intentional hybrid has been transformed by [Homi] Bhabha into an active moment of challenge and resistance against a dominant colonial power. Bhabha then translates this moment into a 'hybrid displacing space' which develops in the interaction between the indigenous and colonial culture which has the effect, he suggests, of depriving 'the imposed imperialist culture, not only of the authority that it has for so long imposed politically, often through violence, but even of its own claims to authenticity.' (Young 1995, 23)

For Bhabha's reconfiguration of hybridity, this unsettling of power hierarchies, of questioning and destabilizing hegemonial relationships is crucial. Therefore, its application to denote any kind of cross-cultural exchange as 'hybridity', which happened all too often in the subsequent excessive usage of the term, misses decisive aspects. In Bhabha's reading of Bakhtin, the latter "provides a knowledge of the transformation of social discourse while displacing the originating subject and the causal and continuist progress of discourse". (Bhabha 1994, 269)

It is noteworthy that the extensive reception and transformation of the Bakhtinian notion of hybridity is rather surprising, as Sylvia Sasse (2018, 131–134) observes. In Bakhtin's writings, it is not a central category. The phrases featuring the expressions "hybrid" or "hybridity" are rather peripheral and are used more extensively in only one of his essays, in "Slovo v romane" (1934–1935, "Discourse

in the Novel”; Bakhtin 1981). Sasse explains that contrary to common understandings, dialogicity and hybridity are not identical, that they are separate categories that can but need not interact. The “intentional hybridity” that Young refers to in the quotation above is an intentional and consciously attributed artistic device within the novel. These hybrids are polyphonic, dialogic, because there is no unconscious mixture which turns the hybrid into a monologic construct. Within the hybrid as an artistic device, a dialogue is taking place, a confrontation. Ambivalence and ambiguity are an inevitable result of the dialogic intentional hybridity in the novel.

The adaptability and translatability of this Bakhtinian conception of the hybrid into the intellectual debates of Postcolonial Studies is not surprising given the fact that founding texts of the field, such as Said’s, can also be reconnected with the cultural atmosphere and those very debates within which Bakhtin began to develop his own thinking. The applicability is even less surprising if the general interest in non-European art forms at the time is taken into further consideration, not in the sense of a straight argument, but rather in a broad discursive frame. Not only Western European, but also Russian and early Soviet thinkers shared an interest in both the practical and the theoretical research on form, and this research was often combined with an interest in those works of art that lay outside the Eurocentric canons. It was a Latvian art theorist, Voldemārs Matvejs, writing under the Russian pen name Vladimir Markov, who, just a little before Carl Einstein even, was the first to analyze African art as art that used specific forms (*Iskusstvo negrov* [1914, *The Art of the Negroes*]). Even though Matvejs’ work on African art did not have much impact due to his early death, his writings on art theory were to have an impact on Malevich, Tatlin, and the Constructivists (cf. Howard et al. 2016). In literary theory, it was Russian formalism that not only laid many of those conceptual foundations that would be further developed in twentieth century literary and cultural theory from structuralism and poststructuralism, from narratology and concepts of intertextuality to cultural semiotics. The Russian formalists and their contemporaries were also interested in orality in literature, as in *skaz* (Ėikhenbaum), a mode of narration intrinsically connected with orality, or in folklore, as elaborated by Vladimir Propp. The tools they developed were decidedly applicable not only to canonized classical Eurocentric writing. On the contrary, their application to formal structures, to art as the sum of its devices (Shklovskii) and, in late Formalism, the conception of literature as a system of inconstant and changing interaction with its social surroundings mean it is predisposed to analyzing any kind of literature and literary system.

4 Formalist readings of African literature

Postcolonialism's reception of Bakhtin was catalyzed by the general rediscovery and re-evaluation of Bakhtin's theories by Western scholars, which was initiated by Julia Kristeva's essay "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman" (1967, "Word, Dialogue and Novel"; Kristeva 1991) and the subsequent development of the concept of intertextuality out of Bakhtin's dialogic word. In the Anglophone world, the first publication of Bakhtin's writings was *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, only shortly after the book's belated publication in Russian in 1965 (Renfrew 2015, 174). It led to Bakhtin's being associated with folk art, laughter, and, of course, the carnival. More translations appeared throughout the 1980s, notably the collection *The Dialogic Imagination by M.M. Bakhtin* (1981), edited and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, which was the second major collection of Bakhtin's writings in English. The volume's essays include the work containing Bakhtin's notion of hybridity, "Discourse in the Novel".

The general intellectual and academic climate that catalyzed the transformation of the notion of hybridity from a literary device within the dialogic novel into a fundamental category of postcolonial cultural critique is not the only re-reading of Russian literary theory that can be observed in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Bakhtin's rediscovery was partially pre-figured, with regard to the thinking of and in Global South literatures, partially paralleled by the reception and re-evaluation of Russian Formalism. Both Russian formalism and Bakhtinian thought found their way into the thinking of and about Global South literature and culture roughly at the same time and were to shape the field's discussions decisively.

In 1989, in his essay "Orality, Literacy, and African Literature", Abiola Irele discussed the renewed attention of scholarly interest in questions of orality and its relation to literacy with regard to African literatures. He argues that the study of African oral forms is embedded in an intellectual climate that facilitates serious discussions of these questions. The first of the two factors he identifies as a reason for this development is the attention the development of structural linguistics drew to the oral basis of language. As is well known, he continues, this development was stimulated by Russian formalism, "much of which, as is evident in the case of Vladimir Propp, was based on the examination of folk and oral material" (Irele 2007, 74). Therefore, in Irele's understanding, Propp's impact on narratology, his reception in Western academic discourse, would eventually contribute to preparing the field for the academic reassessment of orality in African literatures.

A year later, in 1990, Kenneth Harrow (2007) applied readings of Shklovskii's and Tynianov's formalist writings on African literature in order to free it from sociological explanatory models, which were still playing an important role in the

discussions of the time – among them certainly Marxist models, such as Frederic Jameson's. Harrow is pre-eminently concerned with the problem of the periodization of African literature, for which Formalist approaches can prove useful, he argues. Formalism teaches that art reacts to art; the target for change in art is always primarily other art. It is only secondarily that larger social systems become relevant. Thus developments in African literatures can be explained via their inner dynamics just as much as via the social configurations under which they are produced. Harrow argues that such an approach restores to literature its integrity as a system. It is not a mere reaction to social circumstances that initiates the development of new forms. In African literatures, just as in any literary system, it is the continuous process of automatization and defamiliarization pointed to by Formalist thinking that is at work. In this reading, earlier works of African literatures during the colonial period provided a point of departure with their revalidation of African cultures while still perpetuating automatized colonial values. Later texts would react to the automatized idealization of African cultures that these texts provided with devices of defamiliarization. Ironic, anti-colonial or revolutionary fiction began to appear in which the negation of the earlier successes emerged as a new form. Later, these texts, one might add, were often read within postcolonial theoretical paradigms. In any case, these works are not creations *ex nihilo*, but rooted in the constant processes of the dialectic between automatization and defamiliarization that will always continue to produce new forms. As a consequence, a new way of describing processes of change emerges that is different from previous models, which were grounded in concepts such as progress or notions of development and which ultimately remain grounded in colonial discourse even though they may be anti-colonial in intention (Harrow 2007, 426).

5 The African Bakhtin

The reception of Bakhtin is a parallel phenomenon and deeply intertwined with the application of Formalist readings to African literature, as can be seen by Harrow's remark that he is interested in Russian Formalist thinking in spite of the Bakhtinian critique of formalism (Harrow 2007, 423). In African receptions of Bakhtin, however, it was not hybridity that was foregrounded. The case of the Zimbabwean novelist Dambudzo Marechera, for instance, shows how the urge to develop explanatory modes for African literatures that are both grounded in literary theory and situated beyond automatized binary models also accounts for mediated readings of Bakhtin in African literary thought. In his essay "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature" (Marechera 2007 [1987]),

he refers to Bakhtin via Neil McEwan's book *Africa and the Novel* (1983). What appeals to Marechera is that McEwan's book allows him to bypass the division of European and African literatures via a reading of Bakhtin. The notion of carnival can unite writers from different backgrounds without distinguishing between them geographically. As a result, works by a writer like Wole Soyinka can exist beside those of Rabelais and Swift in the category of the Menippean novel (Marechera 2007, 187–188).

Marechera's essay is a *tour de force* through his readings of European literature, which he continuously connects with African literature. In a final argument, Marechera identifies with the Soviet-Russian dissident writer Andrei Siniavskii. He extensively cites Siniavskii's writings on Russian literature in order to define his own position: "My task as a writer was to take the veins of modernism, symbolism, futurism that had developed in poetry and transfer them to the language of prose." (Siniavskii as cited in Marechera 2007, 190) According to Marechera, Siniavskii made this statement after he was accused of being a modernist, an allegation that Marechera had to face himself when his book *Black Sunlight* (1980) was banned. Like Siniavskii, whom Marechera cites once again, he asserts he "will never give [his] blessing to censorship on [any] grounds – any more than I would go to war, or prison, or for that matter, death." (Siniavskii as cited in Marechera 2007, 190). Marechera ends his tour de force with references to Russian absurdist authors, under which he subsumes not only the Oberiuty Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii and Nikolai Zabolotskii, but also the conceptualist Dmitrii Prigov. Russian literature is thus integrated into a world literary horizon within which Marechera proudly takes his place.

In Bakhtin's thinking, the category of the Menippean is closely connected to the carnivalesque. The extent to which the carnivalesque became one of the key categories in the reception of Bakhtin, which is of similar significance to that of hybridity in postcolonial thought, can be demonstrated with the prominent example of Achille Mbembe's influential *On the Postcolony* (2001) and its chapter "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly". The chapter was originally published in 1992 as "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony". In 2001, the essay was to become a chapter in the English translation of *On the Postcolony*, first published in 2000 in French. For Mbembe, Bakhtin's carnival is a point of departure from which he develops his description of the postcolony as a "chaotically pluralistic" but internal coherent space. "It is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes." (Mbembe 2001, 102) Bakhtin located elements of the obscene and the grotesque in non-official cultures, Mbembe writes. In a generalizing move, however, he argues that these elements "are intrinsic to all systems of dominations and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed" (Mbembe 2001, 102).

Bakhtin's concept of the carnival as a counterculture that temporarily reverses the order of things is transferred to both official and unofficial cultures. In Mbembe's reading, the carnivalesque becomes the central organizing principle of the semantic space of the postcolony. The grotesque and the obscene are used to erect and ratify particular regimes of violence and domination just as they deconstruct them (Mbembe 2001, 105). Bakhtin is thus once again used in order to transcend binarities, in this case those of "standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, the state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalization vs. detotalization" (Mbembe 2001, 103). In contrast to Bakhtin, Mbembe claims that in the postcolony, the grotesque and the obscene are not to be understood as grounded in the ordinary people. The grotesque and the obscene not only provide refuge from the dominant culture when they ridicule it and thereby point out its arbitrariness. In the postcolony, Mbembe postulates, state power resorts to the grotesque to dramatize its own magnificence via certain ceremonial displays which render them spectacles for the 'subjects' to watch. "It is only through such a shift in perspective that we can understand that the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandement* and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space." (Mbembe 2001, 104)

In summary, it can be concluded that Russian and Eastern European theory's entanglements with African thought have proven productive throughout the twentieth century. They encompass fields not discussed in this article, such as the reception of Russian Realist writers such as Tolstoi (cf. e.g. Foster 2013), as a counter model to colonial European literatures, or early (later often disappointed) hopeful references by Global South thinkers to the Soviet Union as a "new society", as in the case of Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950, 1955) (Césaire 2000, 52). Socialist Realist paradigms belong to the world literary palimpsest of African literatures just as much as readings of Russian Formalism and of Bakhtin. The latter in particular have been applied to develop models that sought to conceive of African literatures as literatures transcending the binary schemes imposed on them by the division of the world into Europe and the rest. Russian thought has thus provided multiple points of departure for Global South thinking that will certainly have to be explored in more detail in future research.

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