

# CONSTRUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN IDENTITY IN 21ST CENTURY VAMPIRE LITERARY NARRATIVES<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *The article examines the construction of contemporary Russian identity within and through the 21st-century Vampire Narrative. It focuses specifically on the construction of geographical places (such as Russian villages, Moscow or America) as a means to map the world and construct Russian identity. The analysis concentrates on two literary works: a vampire dilogy by Victor Pelevin (Empire V [2006] and Batman Apollo [2013]) and Oleg Divov's novel Night Watcher (2004). They are put into their historical and contemporary context and submitted to structural analysis. Tlostanova's theory of Secondary Empire is then applied. Both works are profoundly patriarchal and colonial towards further, more Eastern Others, but Russian identity is constructed, above all, in relation to the collective West. Russianness gets metaphysical importance as the only actually valuable attitude to the world. The reasoning bears features of resistance and imperialism (masked as resistance).*

**KEY WORDS** *Vampire Narrative; Russian Identity; Narratological Structure; Mental Mapping; Subaltern/Secondary Empire; (Post)Colonialism.*

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<sup>1</sup> The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

All the translations from the original texts are made by the author of the article.

This work was supported by the University's Integrated Development Programme (ZIP), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the framework of Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development 2016–2020, action 3.5.

## 1 / INTRODUCTION

In the article, I examine the construction of postmodern/late modern Russian identity within and through the postmodernist (or rather, post-postmodernist) 21st-century Vampire Narrative. I especially analyse imaginative constructions of geographical places (such as Russian villages, Moscow or America) as a means to map the world and construct one's identity.

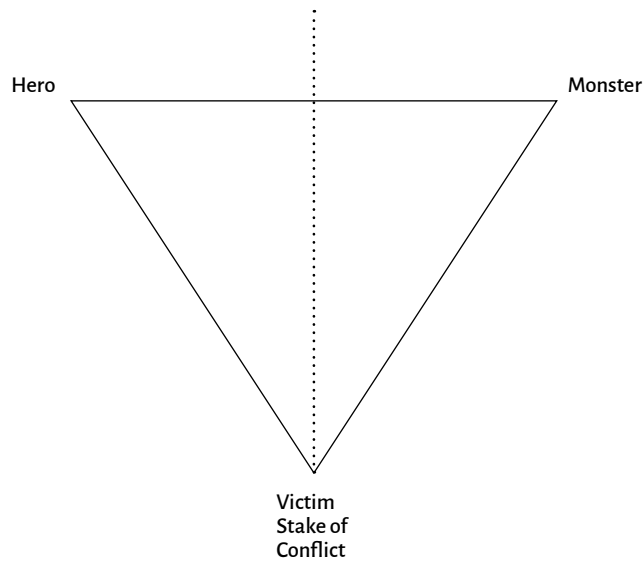
The vampire figure is here a fascinating tool for identity construction. The vampiric figure emerged primarily in the myths and legends of Slavic folklore (as *упыр* or *упи́р*) (see: Barber 1988; Kozak 2021). In the 19th century, however, it was appropriated by the Western culture to create its own Vampire Narrative, expressing its own fears and a sense of superiority. Viewed through the lens of the Vampire Narrative, the non-Western world appeared as a strange and dangerous place. The division of the world into West (the modern global dominator) and non-West, was thus defined with the Narrative created around a figure misappropriated from the very place that was marked as a non-Western (thus global) Other. This division has been further solidified with the emergence of mass culture and mass media. During the 20th century, Vampire Narrative underwent many changes, reflecting the changes in Western society, such as female emancipation, sexual revolution and race equality movements. It has also gone (back) East during the processes of globalisation. 21st-century Eastern European Vampire Narrative(s) are a double-mirror. Russian vampire narratives show how Russia sees the West and how it sees itself in response to the Western gaze. The study of those questions seems particularly important in light of recent events and the rebirth of Russian imperialism.

## 2 / MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analysis focuses on two literary works: a vampire dilogy by Victor Pelevin (*Empire V* [2006] and *Batman Apollo* [2013]) and Oleg Divov's novel *Ночной смотрящий* (*Night Watcher*, 2004). Both offer a remarkably complex narrative vision of contemporary Russia and contemporary Russian subjects. Both have an unquestionably postmodern character, i.e., they both continue and play with (discontinue) modern tradition in constructing postmodern, 21st-century Russian identity. In my article, they are put in synchronical and diachronic contexts: social, political, cultural and historical context, as well as the internal context of vampire narratives, specifically other 21st-century Russian vampire narratives. The article focuses on the analysis of 21st-century novels, a period commonly called postmodern (both terms of modern and postmodern should not be confused with, respectively, modernism and postmodernism, which are designations of cultural trends of the time, not of the times themselves). I treat this period as an extension, a cumulation of modernity. Thus I use the terms "late modern" and "postmodern" interchangeably.

I am using primarily structural analysis and narratological methods to analyse Vampire Narrative works and then grounded theory (including elements of Marxist, feminist, postcolonial studies, intersectional and queer theory and others) to interpret the discovered meaning. I use the structural analysis of two novels in the context of the Vampire Narrative. I treat the Vampire Narrative as a (meta)Narrative in the analysis of tales by Vladimir Propp ([1928] 1968), analysis of myths by Joseph Campbell (1949) or Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958), or again by Roland Barthes (1977). The basic structure of the Vampire Narrative has been extracted by me during

my previous research, which will be soon published in my thesis. The research encompassed the Vampire Narrative from its birth in the 19th century till the present day. This structure spins around Good (Hero) fighting Evil (Monster) and the Stake of Conflict (Victim). However, I find placing the entire meaning/significance of the Narrative only in the metastructure/monomyth a little reductive, and what I find interesting is precisely the variations (yet not variants) of the structure (its versions, particular features, hybridisations, elasticities). For that, my structural analysis will focus not only on the existing elements but also on the ones which are lacking. In other words, it will contain elements of Derridian deconstruction (Derrida 1967a; 1967b). Thus, the narratives will be read according to the author's intentions and re-read against it, using the *resistant reading* technique described by Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch (1995). The eclectic combination of those, sometimes hardly compatible methods, permits us to discover the full meaning of the analysed material.



**Figure 1.** Vampire Narrative Structure

I also use grounded theory, specifically the theory of the Secondary Empire/Janus-Faced Empire of Madina Tlostanova (2008). Russia (inside Russian Empire, in USSR and then inside Russian Federation) has always been “in-between”, both (symbolically) colonised, submitted and colonising. There was the colonial difference between Russia and the West, and then the same difference between Russia and non-Russian parts of the Russian empire (therefore, “secondary colonial difference” was produced between those lands/people and the West [Tlostanova 2012: 138]). Russia was reflecting itself in the Western eyes and trying to mimic the West in the Bhabhian way (Bhabha 1994). Its colonising discourse was a transposition of the Western one: casting Russia as Western, civilised White and putting Western, oriental clichés (about India or Africa) onto Russian colonies in Asia. In that way, the act of colonising was simultaneously an act of colonial mimicry. According to Tlostanova, even at the times when the USSR (just like the Russian Federation, actually) was claiming its moral and ideological supremacy towards the

West (supremacy based on a socialist system, which was an adaptation of Western Marxism), the claims were funded on modern Western categories. “Double mirroring” (Tlostanova 2012: 135–136), an “incurable Russian disease” (Tlostanova 2008), makes Russia continuously want Western recognition, envy, love or hate – but always makes it stay under the Western gaze.

It is worth disclaiming here that the statement of the subaltern position (Morozov 2015) by no means leads to whitewashing Russian politics. It is a statement of structural position. And the structurally subaltern position is not a moral judgement, i.e., “subaltern” does not mean “morally superior”, “innocent”, or “justified”. However, the description of Russia’s double position is necessary to understand the reasons for Russian politics and identity issues. This position has been expressed in Russian literature since the czarist times (Thompson 2000) and finds its performance also in Monsters literature (see: Sobol 2020).

### 3 / NARRATOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NOVELS

In the classic version of the narrative, Hero was a male heteronormative white Western Vampire Hunter. Vampire was the Monster, and an innocent passive Victim was usually female. Vampire was a non-Western stranger<sup>2</sup>, actually, an un-human incarnation of the hostile nature opposing the civilisation represented by the Hero(es). Vampire is obviously unnatural (despite being close to nature). The Hero Hunters (the Crew of Light [Craft 1984] and Solar heroes [Janion 2002]) are natural and yet on the side of the civilisation (“naturalness” being, in fact, an artificial social concept [Bauman 1990: 165]). Heroes represent the modern world of liberal democracy (based on middle-class men) that opposes the old hierarchical system and/or de-individualised anarchy. Heroes’ domination is shown as gentle leadership. This is what Diana Taylor (1997) calls a “liberal” form of domination, the one that claims “protection” in opposition to the “macho” brutal one, the one that simply destroys. And even though the Crew of Light do destroy their obstacles (including the Victims they were meant to protect, once those Victims turn into vampires), such acts are presented as absolutely necessary and indeed merciful. The Heroes remain defined by their liberal paternalistic approach, be it for females or their other subordinates. The brutality is the Monster’s feature. Monster is a rebellious Other, the one who should submit but wants to dominate. Monster’s domination is improper: cruel, brutal or/and incapable.

The Vampire Monsters in Classic Vampire Narrative were racial(ised) Other and/or foreigners (and as such, they could be carriers of diverse types of Otherness, from sexual one to medical one). An Eastern European was a perfect prototype, for Eastern Europe was a close Other, a sort of European alter ego, and frequently a space of Secondary Empire (Tlostanova 2008), submitted (and sometimes revolting) to the West, but also colonising. Its domination was necessarily deviated, and the incapacity and/or cruelty of such a secondary colonisation was yet another proof of Western supremacy.

When the Vampire Narrative was thriving in the West, the belief in vampires was disappearing from Eastern Europe, and the “vampire” voice of Eastern Europe was quite silent. The folkloric stories about *upyr* or *vurdalak* were written down in the 19th century (e.g. Aleksander

2 For the symbolic dimension of the un-natural whiteness of the vampire figure, see: Hudson (2017).

Afanasiev was one of the first to write down *upyr* folk tales<sup>3</sup> on the wave of Western-imported romanticism and its nationalist/folkloric turn. Romanticist authors liked to use folk motifs, *upyr/upiór* among others, claiming (like Nikolai Gogol in his “Ukrainian” tales such as *Viy* [1852]) that they simply write down the people’s original tales. Despite those claims, *upiór/upyr* in their literature (Gogol’s *Viy*, Aleksey Tolstoy’s *Upyr* and *The Family of the Vourdalak*, Ivan Turgenev’s *Phantoms*) is necessarily a literary creation – and most probably inspired by Western literary fashions. Writers not only got interested in folklore, *upiórs/upyrs* included, under the influence of the Western trend of romanticism, but frequently they directed their works toward Western and/or Westernised public, with the best example in Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy’s *The Family of the Vourdalak* (1839), primarily published in French (*La Famille du Vourdalak. Fragment inédit des Memoires d’un inconnu*) and in France and only translated into Russian by Boleslav Markevich in 1884. Nevertheless, it seems quite probable that most of the works indeed had for basis actual folkloric tales, which would make their vampires more folkloric than fictional.

Westernisation slowly made *upyr/upiór* “folkloric” literature disappear, along with the name of *upyr/upiór* and the figure itself. In the 20th century, Mikhail Bulgakov’s Hella from *Master and Margarita* (that he began to write in 1928) is unquestionably fictive, not folkloric. And she is already a *vampir*. The name is of foreign provenance: the Russian word *vampir* is an adaptation of the English word *vampire*, alternatively French word *vampire*. Today the name of *upyr* appears in Western narratives (*Hemlock Grove*), which want to flaunt the Eastern European origin of their monsters, and so do the names of *strigoi* (*The Strain* franchise) or *vurdalak* (Jasper Kent’s saga, 2008–14), which are used interchangeably with *vampire*. Slavic names also appear in Eastern European works that desperately want to return to the origins but usually only manage to re-orientalise imported Western Narrative, with the best example being Sergey Ginzburg’s *Vamps* (2017, original title *Vurdalaki*) that, despite claims to adapt Tolstoy’s novella, focuses rather on re-creating a Russian version of Hammer’s *Dracula* movies.

In the 20th century, Eastern Europe did not give much attention to vampires (the lost *Dracula* movie from 1920 or Georgi Kropachyov’s *Viy* filmed in 1967 during the so-called Thaw are important exceptions) due to the general condemnation of the fantastic topics by Socialist Realism, the official cultural stream of communist countries. Fantastic themes were judged escapist, and vampires were too much associated with the West – and its political system. They appear mostly in dissidents’ works, such as Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* or the scandalous book by Andrei Sinyavsky, *Strolls with Pushkin* (1975, written in 1966–68, while the author served his term in the Soviet camp). Both works are undeniably original, but in terms of Vampire Narrative, they are Western Vampire Narrative imitations.

In the 20th century, the Vampire Narrative changed. The version with Vampire (as) Hero and Hunter (as) Monster emerged, as well as the new Classic Vampire Narrative: with non-white, non-male, non-heteronormative Hunter Heroes. The Narrative (re)turned East and Eastern Europe imitated, adapted, and reframed it. The fall of communism commercialised the publishing market and opened it to Western production, “catching up” with earlier and actual popular literature, especially English and American ones. Fantastic themes grew popular with

3 For an analysis of Afanasiev’s tales, see: Townsend (2011).

the falling system (Townsend 2011: 27–29) in times of ideological uncertainty and economic, social, political, and identity crises. Already in 1990, Igor Schavlak and Gennadi Klimov filmed Tolstoy's *The Family of the Vourdalak* as *Семья вурдалаков* (*Sem'ya Vurdalakov*; in English, the film is known as *The Vampire Family*), and in 1992 Yevgeni Tatarsky adapted Tolstoy's *Пупр*. Upon the fall of political faith, people turned to new and traditional forms of spirituality: old religions, neo-paganism and what Mikhail Epstein calls “minimal religion”, “faith as such”, “faith in general”, and “new type of religiosity” (Epstein 2016: 444). This kind of hybrid spirituality (deeply rooted in the tradition of *dvoeverie*) is present in most Russian vampire narratives.

In the 21st century, narratives trying to include Russia in the global community, or even the global dominating group, appeared. This was frequently done at the expense of some another Other. Alex Kosh, in his saga *Далекая Страна* (2006–2013), is creating a common enemy *шатерский халифат*, making obvious reference to the Muslim Orient. While Ksenia Bashtova (*Вампир поневоле* [2009]) or Yuliya Nabokova (*VIP значит Вампир* series, the first book of the same title, published in 2010) highlight the difference between Russia and the West, they both stress the community of life experience, such as love, family and, in the case of Nabokova – fashion.

However, the transition was difficult and disappointing for post-communist countries. The initial faith in liberalisation/capitalism/westernisation was soon deceived (Krastev and Holmes 2019). In Russia, it was also the national pride that suffered due to the decline of Russia's position in the international area. The disappointment led to a nationalist (re)turn, which did not exclude communist nostalgia, for Eastern European communist systems joined communism with a nationalist stance. This trend gained force in the second decade of the 20th century. “If in the 1990s the prerevolutionary era was by and large understood to be the ‘lost Russia’, then in the 2000s a nostalgia for the Soviet era was added to this. Nonetheless, the latter, contrary to expectations, merged with the former, giving rise to occasionally whimsical hybrids” (Dobrenko and Lipovetsky 2015: 5). Nostalgia is obviously present in Russian fantastic literature. In Sergei Lukyanenko's *The Last Watch* protagonist tells the Frenchman he just saved that he should not praise Gorbachev because, in Russia, one can get killed for that.

## 4 / ANALYSIS

### 4.1 / **Oleg Divov's *Night Watcher*, 2004**

In this story, a vampire is a simple corpse whose life cycle depends on the moon phases. Vampires are active only at specific times of the month when they need to drink blood. Primarily they look like humans, but with time and blood consumption, they lose their humanity, and their look deforms. Not every human becomes a vampire when bitten by one. A bite is an initiation, not a transformation. A contagion that gets activated only in certain people. Only those who were somehow predisposed to become vampires change. This element evokes the feeling of blame and guilt of the transformed people.

Vampirism is not something supernatural – it is a mutation (just like lycanthropia or Siamese twins) that causes psychic disruptions and atrophy. Once a person is transformed, they function like somnambulists, waking up once a month as bloodthirsty monsters. Thus the main feature of vampirism is social isolation: one can talk to a vampire, but it is like through a glass

(Divov 2004: 118). No one knows the actual provenance of vampirism. There is a hypothesis about a parasite feeding on energy, coming from Space, who experimentally tried symbiosis with humans – and the unsuccessful result are vampires. But vampires can also be a transitional stage between a human and “elders”, an alien intelligence from Space. Some of them manage to reach this final stage of transformation, but most vampires perish from the hands of “masters”, “night watchers”, and vampire hunters, who themselves are in a transitional phase between vampires and “elders”. To become an elder, a vampire has to resist bloodthirst, which is the most difficult task because blood addiction is like drug addiction. Vampires live intensively, gain extreme power and die quickly. They symbolise transgression: total liberation from every norm (152).

Another hypothesis claims that elders are simply powerful people, mysterious global elites whose medical experiments lead to the vampire epidemic and who are now cruelly fighting the result of their own activity. Therefore vampires, while remaining the evil that needs to be neutralised, are also victims, the scapegoats bearing all the guilt of the elders. They are hunted down by masters, whose activity is controlled by elders. Finally, some actors of the narrative start to doubt whether the elders exist at all; or whether they are simply a tale made up to convince people that there is someone in charge of the situation. The reader seems to get to know the Aliens at the end of the novel (they call themselves “future ones”, *грядущие*): but then they deny having any relationship with the vampires. They say vampire mutation has existed since forever, but in the 20th century, humans started to experiment with it in order to produce new weapons. The experiment went out of control. The “future ones” are now just examining the results.

The action of the book starts at the moment when one of the masters rebels. Moscow night watcher enters in cooperation with humans. The protagonist, Andrey Luzgin, the solar hero, the hunter – is a muscovite journalist that seeks a sense of life and returns to the small village where he spent his childhood. There, when he was just a boy, he was forced by his father to kill a hawk – the act he hated at the time, but which made up his (patriarchal) destiny: a predator hunter, real male, social defender. Every hero in the story is male, and every one of them sacrifices his woman: Kotov kills his lover, who had turned into a vampire, the general permits to kill his daughter, and Dolonsky leaves his wife in an unknown place and sacrifices his lover. Dolonsky as a master, needed to overcome his vampirism to save the civilisation; his close women were unimportant compared to his mission. There is also Zykov, who has sex with an unconscious female vampiress, just because “it is an occasion” (they find the girl lying down with her naked bottom in the vampire lair, plunged in an unnatural coma). Before they annihilate her with the final injection of the silver – a new phallic gesture replacing similarly phallic stake from 19th-century narratives – Zykov treats her body with the more literal phallus, and his friend, Kotov, after a weak protest, bears witness, only worried that Zykov does not catch a disease from “theoretically” and technically dead, yet still breathing, girl (Divov 2004: 111–116). The girl is the bare body only, in Agamben’s sense (Agamben 1995). And while in the classic Vampire Narrative, this was always the case, the male violence was masked: brave Western men were on a selfless mission, and the sexual character of phallic submission of the woman (embodied in the scene of killing a female vampire with a stake) was hidden. Kotov still reminds Zykov about him being a Russian man of secondary education, not a savage Papuan (Divov 2004: 113), and

reminds him of his (relative) Westernness/civilisation, but in vain. While it was the Western civilisation that invented the rule of bare life, the exclusion of some bodies, the violence remained discursively masked in the core of Western civilisation – and it is not in the “Secondary countries” where the rule is adopted but remains crudely, coarsely, brutally literal: the scene of “noble” killing of the vampires by brave men changes into a secret, shameful scene of rape with male solidarity represented mostly by the silent permission for this embarrassing act.

The only man, who is not ready to sacrifice his wife, Misha, gets compromised and turns into a vampire himself. Finally, however, the model Hero the narrative proposes is not supposed to be a classic pure one. In the end, Luzgin criticises Dolonsky; he expresses his distrust of everything that presents itself as perfect; he distrusts any order, any system (Divov 2004: 158). But this distrust can only be expressed from the standpoint of “Russianness”. Being Russian is crucial in the presented narrative: and the narrative actually revolves around the conception of true Russianness, with Moscow cast as a kind of vampire sucking the life from true Russia. Not only vampire contagion comes from there, but the very nature of the city is vampiric. Westernised capital and women who do not want to stay in the province are the figures opposed to male heroes who are linked to Russian villages.

#### 4. 2 / **Victor Pelevin's *Empire V* (2006) and *Batman Apollo* (2013)**

The titles give postmodernist references to Alexander Prokhanov's fantasy vision of Russia as the Fifth Empire, to the figure of an ancient god, and to the bat-shaped superhero of American culture.<sup>4</sup> A vampire person is a symbiosis of a human carrier and the actual vampire, the vampire tongue (for a better understanding of the meaning that Pelevin wanted to express, it is crucial to keep in mind that in the Russian language, “tongue” and “language” are designated by the same name, *язык*). The tongues have gods' names (such as Rama), and they wander from one carrier to another, changing their incarnations just like *atmans* do in Hindu or Buddhist beliefs, to which Pelevin refers. Just like *atman* is actually the man (the very essence, the self of a person), a tongue is the essence of a vampire. Tongues choose their carriers, and that is how Roman Shtorkin, the protagonist of the diology, became Rama the Second. In Pelevin's conception, vampires are just as bad as the world is bad in general – and they are its hidden rulers. Vampires are the (anti)Heroes of the narrative. Vampires drink “bablos” (tongues need it). It is produced through humans, who are not vampires' prey: they are vampires' cattle. They are controlled by vampires with the aid of sexuality, social-economic status (expressed by money) and all the dreams and desires that those two produce in humans. That is the purpose of human culture, whose main elements are glamour (the look) and discourse (the text). “The ideology of anonymous dictatorship is Glamour. [...] The Glamour of anonymous dictatorship is its Discourse” (Pelevin 2015: 56). Those elements produced tension in the human brain: the feeling of one's own inadequacy, poorness and ugliness compared to the models one is given in the glam-

4 The original title of the first part, *Ампир В. Повесть о настоящем сверхчеловеке* (literally: Empire V. Novel about a real super-man) makes allusion to Nietzschean and then Soviet concepts of super(hu) man. This motif is quite explored in nowadays Russian literature and strangely linked to the issue of energy: if Pelevin's works can be linked to the petrol (Kalinin 2015), then in Eduard Verkin's *Остров Сахалин* (2018) even more disturbingly links the emergence of the true (tall, blond-haired, hyper-intelligent male) superhuman to the nuclear explosion.



our and discourse. This suffering emits radiation called aggregate M5. It is intercepted by Big Mice and distilled into bablos, which every Big Mouse feeds her vampires with. Actual blood is drunk by vampires only in small amounts (with the exception of dissidents who feed on blood) when they want to know a human.

Both glamour and discourse are signs. Their reality is virtual, not material; they are empty signifiers: they do not have any objectively existing significance, any actual fixed meaning. In the world of late capitalism, the chain commodity-money-commodity was replaced by the chain advertisement-money-advertisement (Kazarina 2010: 172). Pelevin builds a dystopian vision of contemporary Russia and the contemporary techno-capitalist/consumerist world in general: it is a world in line with Huxley's tradition – but contrary to Huxley, it is also deeply (auto)ironic and shows no way of possible rebellion. For every rebellion is absorbed (if not projected) by the mainstream.

Vampires, their tongues, come from Big Mice, giant bats, who created dinosaurs, and when dinosaurs disappeared divided into tongues, which entered into symbiosis with new animals and then bred (or took control over) humans. Every nation (culture) has (or rather, was created around) its own Big Mouse. Nations differ from each other regarding the way they produce bablos, and their human breeds/territories are marked by diverse currencies. Big Mice are the reversal of common vampires: they are bodies that change heads. The bodies are female (once again, Vampire Narrative is playing on the association of carnality with femininity), and Big Mice are Feeding Mother Goddesses. Big Mouse is both magnificent and monstrous, a deeply masculinist image of femininity. Her body produces bablos to feed vampires and consumes naive young females: their bodies are sacrificed to give Goddess new heads (Pelevin 2013: 29). When Hera, Rama's lover, becomes the new Ishtar, the Russian Big Mouse, she becomes tyrannical and possessive. Her body is dead, and therefore, she is sterile, yet her appetites are insatiable. She condemns Rama's mental and physical infidelity, yet she needs it to feed her hatred for men – and, therefore, – humans in general. Indeed, Ishtar is used by vampire men; her activity is controlled by them. Even her hatred is induced because it helps her produce bablos to ignore the sufferance that the substance comes from. Her meetings with Rama in limbo are controlled by the oldest (male) vampires, who decide about the images they will get so that Ishtar will be in a proper state of mind after such a meeting. She doesn't decide what will happen with the bablos she produces. Ishtar is a symbol of Motherland, a femininity to be protected – and controlled (Taylor 1997).

Pelevin's descriptions apply to the world in general, but he also describes specifically Russia and Russian culture, especially in the second part of the diology, where Rama – and by him whole of Russian society – is confronted with Emperor Batman Apollo, the American Big Mouse, previously the ruler of every world empire since the Ancient times. His name "Batman" is supposed to mean "big atman". Although unofficially, American Big Mouse dominates over all vampires in the world, which reflects Pelevin's views on global colonisation. Batman is the only Big Mouse whose head is (white) male, and his head is the only immortal one – the one that has never been changed due to some secret technology. He disposes of the book in which the entire history and knowledge of the vampires are written (in line with famous Foucault's statement about knowledge being power). Both the global system of power (Apollo) and global resistance (vampiress Sophie and organisation Leaking Hearts) are situated in the West. And in the end,

Sophie turns out to be, unconsciously, Apollo himself, for every rebellion is always intercepted by the system, especially the perfect system of global order.

Batman is a transgender, hermaphrodite being, his body being, as every Big Mouse body, female, and his head being male. Apollo is called “He or She” in a mocking way, and he is the source of highly mocked transgender tolerance (Pelevin 2013: 469). It is an abject figure (far more abject than Russian Ishtar) that lives on a ship that is a place of displaced repulsion (471). In the form of Sophie, he will give Rama the best fellatio of his life. This crypto-homosexual intercourse, ending up in castration (afterwards Apollo takes away from Rama the possibility to fly), is a metaphor for colonisation (of which Rama – Russia – is the victim), apparently seductive and pleasurable, but no less cruel for that.

Apollo, in general, advocates for the humanitarian (and more effective) sourcing of bablos: thanks to the technological revolution, the human mind can be stimulated to produce more M5 by virtual instead of real suffering. Apollo wants his methods to be adopted everywhere and criticises other methods as barbaric. In fact, all the methods ever and everywhere were invented by Apollo only: every now and then, he just changes the method for a new one and casts the previous one as bad. Right now, Americans have perfected glamour and discourse into “inforage”, and they despise “glamour-discourse” as an old un-fashioned Russian adaptation from the French (that has been abandoned by the French themselves). Russia “is not able to generate even one good simulacrum that could compete with foreign models on the informational ground [...]” (Pelevin 2013: 363).

The new method of getting bablos is no less oppressive; only the violence is better masked. In the new Western consumerist society, people are induced with models of success and beauty, and they suffer because they will never achieve those ideals. Their suffering is greater, it just gives a more pleasant picture without “shit and blood” (Pelevin 2013: 522). In a sense, the Russian system based on crude suffering, is more humanitarian – and more honest – and perhaps the most humanitarian are “rogue” vampires who drink blood, “Tolstoyans”, cast away from the system.

*Batman Apollo* further explores Eastern philosophy: Indian (including the oldest Vedic one) and Buddhist. All the creatures are (the thoughts of) the Great Vampire, the Cosmos. Individual consciousness is an illusion. Those who die go to limbo, Great Vampire’s memory, where their souls remain out of light: if the light comes on them again (Great Vampire reminds them to himself), they get their reincarnation. The possibility of reincarnation relies on karma. Karma can be cleaned by internal work or by the work of the helper, for there is no ontological evil in the pantheistic world. Everyone is just fulfilling the plan of the Great Vampire and the history that has been written in advance in the book possessed by Batman Apollo. Vampires and humans, they all suffer and feed on the suffering of others. But there is a possibility of liberation (nirvana, mukti). It is achieved by the liberation from the illusion of particular consciousness, of the division of “me” – “not-me”, subject-object, liberation from the language/tongue, and voluntary unification with the Great Vampire. It is the Secret Black Path that leads to total abnegation. There is no rebellion against the suffering, for there is no “me”, and this is the only effective form of rebellion, true liberation from suffering. A liberated person becomes equal to God, but there is no blasphemy in this: if all are parts of God, then it is simply the God that becomes equal to himself. This is a rebellion without rebellion.

Those conceptions are introduced to Rama by Dracula, taking the form of the Hindu god Krishna and asking to be called sadhu, like an Indian ascetic. His true name is Dionysos The Ocular, an English vampire whom London propaganda cast as Eastern European to return any suspicion of the existence of vampires in the City – yet again, not caring about what will happen in the East. He is an important figure: he exists both as a political construct and a real person. As a construct, he is internationally known as a vampire ideologist and role model vampire. As a real person, he transgressed the ideology of “liberal humanism”, the oppressive system made up in the West. He turned and embraced his Eastern European “fake” identity and Eastern ways of illumination. Dracula refers to Buddha and claims he got enlightenment through meditation and dhyana.

## 5 / CONSTRUCTION OF THE RUSSIAN IDENTITY AND RUSSIAN SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHY

Pelevin's and Divov's works, despite important differences, share many features and views. They are both deeply patriarchal. A woman is always close to mental illness, emotionally unstable, less developed, biological, and only acceptable if controlled by men. In Divov's novel solar heroes are necessarily men, characterised by cool determination proper for males (37), and women are either absent, subdued or demonised. Pelevin states that women if left emancipated, are both too promiscuous and deny sex and procreation to the men they tempt at the same time. Their excessive rights are the source of the triumph of homosexuality in rich Western countries (Pelevin 2013: 114). And homosexuality, as well as any transgression of heteronormativity, is abject in Russian vampire narratives. Divov sees Western-inspired sexual freedom and homosexuality as the main ailments destroying Russia: and the only cure is to return to the roots of popular male solidarity. Abject is also everything Eastern (in relation to Russia). In Divov's book, it is only the (ethnic) Russianness that is actually represented. Pelevin mentions other nationalities and ethnicities of the Russian Federation only to look at them with colonial despise (566). Russian Big Mouse resides in Moscow, but she distillates aggregate M5 from the whole state, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, and all those territories are simply “Russian”, and conjecturally so are nations of former USSR such as Moldavians.

But the true reference for Russian identity is the collective West. If *Empire V* was more centrist, *Batman Apollo* marks the visible rightist turn of the author. In the form of a fashion show (Pelevin 2013: 364–375), he exposes diverse postmodern myths (commercials, political slogans, ideological attitudes) to their own self-destruction. Such myths are constantly (re)produced, one in the place of another, each next made as a collage of the debris of previous ones, constantly reused and produced in order to produce power – power which is also empty of meaning. In the end, even *Batman Apollo* is a slave of the self-perpetrating system he rules (Khagi 2008). This “cargo-liberal”, “crypto colonial”, and “liberal jamahiriya” form of government (Pelevin 2013: 367–373), also called “liberal humanism”, is the worst of all. Pelevin finds liberal democracy oppressive, and its adoption puts Russia in colonial dependency on the West and Western capitalism. The use of fashion show form for his satire is particularly important: those were actually lifestyle and fashion magazines that had shaped public opinion before and during the unsuccessful democratic protests in Russia in 2011 and 2012.

Divov's reluctance for liberal democracy, which he also sees as a component/result of Westernisation, is expressed in his description of Moscow as a vampire: not only vampire contagion comes from there, but also Moscow is the (Westernised) vampire, sucking the life force from the rest of (true) Russia. Again: Russia is not perfect, it is ruled by political cliques, entangled in secret arrangements, and there is no one to trust and no one to tell the truth (or maybe there is no truth). But the vampires cannot harm a nation that is unified and strong (Divov 2004: 284). Russia will be strong by the strength of its men, the simple, pure Russians from yet unpolluted provinces. It is the Russianness-simplicity-province(village)-goodness-ourness (Arciszewska 2013: 139–140), as opposed to globality (Westernness)-science-technology-centre(-capital)-evil-Other. It is the Russian village that becomes the mythical centre of Russian identity. The mythical wanderer, the prodigal son, Adrey Luzgin, comes to his birthplace to cleanse himself “with village purity and wisdom” (Genis 2016c: 160–161). Divov builds national identity “within the context of the patriotic discourse of identity that predominates today, the sphere of cultural values is perceived and described in terms of natural resources” (Kalinin 2015: 122). In Divov's book, national identity comes from the Russian land, conceived in terms of nature and history, a land to which countryside people are organically linked: the truly Russian people seem to actually grow on the Russian ground. Village joins culture and nature, vampire hunters are joined by un-human creatures in their common Russianness, and Russian werewolves can find a job in the village sawmill.

Pelevin also uses the motif of Russian capital(s). Two historical capitals, Moscow and Petersburg, refer to two different forms of Russia. Moscow refers to a “cultural and geopolitical construct known as ‘Muscovite Tsarstvo’”, characterised by multilevel decomposition and degradation, half-hostile, half-vassal dependency, coarse sucking up to the West, technological backwardness, stagnation, thievery, and incapacity to control its vast territory (Pelevin 2013: 598). Petersburg refers to the world empire that was ruined in Soviet times when the capital returned to Moscow. By this differentiation, Pelevin both describes the Russian “Secondary Empire” situation and expresses it admiring “worldly” Petersburg against backward Moscow. But he sees a third possibility, a radical turn to the East, a rebuilding of the Empire as an Asian-Pacific superpower,<sup>5</sup> along with China and Japan – if only the European colonial complex of “Russian Europeans” permits them to turn their backs to the Europe who will never treat them as equals (598–599). Pelevin postulates here the construction of a new Russian identity by the neutralisation of the disparity that has always consisted of the core of Russian identity, torn between West and East.

Pelevin defines Russia and Russianness as “in-between” Europeanness (Westernness) and Asianness (wilderness), European sophistication and Asian lawlessness. Russian mind is European, while conditions of Russian life are non-Western (Pelevin 2013: 384). Russians constantly fear to discredit in Western eyes (281). They oscillate between imitation and masking their complex with aggression. This description of Russia and Russians is both self-colonising and affirmative, for it is the Russian situation that makes the best – and most honest – image of what life in general is. It is because the Russian system of simulacra is so imperfect – it is adopted

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5 Between the first and the second part of his dilogy, Pelevin dangerously aligns with Alexandr Dugin's neo-Eurasianism and highly political use of postmodernist discourse.

from the West but not yet rooted, or perhaps it cannot ever be rooted due to specific conditions of Russian existence – that it actually reveals itself and loses the transparency it has gained in the West. The bad quality of Russian simulacra is a virtue. If Western nations have their stable identities, Russia is always new, newly born (299–300), and this is the only identity of actual metaphysical value.

Russian crudity is a precious virtue for Russia and for the world. It is called Motherland Shield. The main task of the Russian state is to make people's life visibly unbearable (Pelevin 2013: 386). Their pain is great, for only great pain can reach from Vladivostok to Moscow to the residence of the Big Mouse. But it is also actually humanitarian. For it makes Russian people hope: that if they abolish tyranny and neutralise corruption and cold, their life will be happy and joyful. This hope gives sense to life; it permits them not to notice that life in itself is painful and full of suffering. That is why vampires have maintained some form of tyranny in Russia through the ages: for the good of the Russian people but also for the good of all people in the world. Pelevin presents an ironic version of Russian messianism: Russian Motherland Shield sustains everyone. Because in the world people read and hear about Russian misery and they get injections of happiness, for five minutes they can believe that the hell on Earth is in Russia – and not see that hell is everywhere where there is human thought (385).

Everything is constructed and reflects something that does not even exist; even the highest power is, in fact, just a structured emptiness (Lipovetsky 2015: 154). But in the end, on a metaphysical level, the empty centre, the Nothingness, becomes the sense. The impossibility of rebellion gives a sense of liberation: Rama is not sure whether he will follow Dracula. But he is sure he will always be in accord with cosmic order – for it is impossible not to be. This feeling of joyful abnegation finds its pictorial embodiment in his free flight at the end of *Batman Apollo*.

Eastern Christianity, a religion that formed Russian culture, is close to other Eastern religious forms. According to Epstein, who even uses the mandala symbol to talk about the religiosity of Russians, Hinduism or Taoism share few important features with Eastern Christianity. It is the view of God/Divinity/Transcendence as a Nothing(ness) and as a mechanism of Absence (Epstein 2016). The kind of spirituality presented by Divov and Pelevin differs (Divov is closer to affirming Orthodox church, Pelevin is closer to Far East religions), but both still can be inscribed into a realm of such a conception of Transcendency, of the world as a machine that is moving (cosmic whirl that Rama finally sees) – and the movement itself consists its teleology.

The recognition of emptiness also has an epistemological value: there is no objective truth existing outside of people's individual and social minds: "to reveal a lie is not to come closer to the truth, while to multiply lies is not to distance oneself from the truth either" (Genis 2016a: 277). This statement is far away from modern Western convictions. It uses the epistemological-ontological strategy of "onion" (Genis 2016b), a strategy of constructing reality from the emptiness and getting to know it in the process. The senses are constructed, and signified are invented (simultaneously) with their signifiers. Rama finally stops caring about whatever was invented, dreamt or lied about; he just lives and organically grows meanings of/for the world. At the end of *Batman Apollo*, he can fly out of the trap just because he has thought about this reality. He accepts the impossibility of truth not as a tragedy but as a chance. He is able to do it because he is Russian.

## 6 / CONCLUSION

Pelevin and Divov's works share many characteristics of postmodernist literature (Lipovetsky 1999: 10, 154–156). However, they are mythologising by de-mythologisation (Lipovetsky 2015: 147–148). They are deeply anti-utopian, but they turn, above all, against Western utopia (or rather, utopian visions of the Western liberal capitalistic democracies). They give the expression of the deception with the Westernisation/liberation project as a panacea for Eastern Europe, a project created both by Western and Eastern European elites of transformation times, “the light that failed” (Krastev and Holmes 2019). The vision of “new Russia” is painted as a phantom country based only on the rule of pleasure and pure economism – of which the economy is a phantom, a vampire. Liberal capitalist democracy is not freedom; it is a totalitarian system of violence in which individual pleasure (seeking) is used as a tool of oppression on the service of virtual masters of capitalism – and the more liberal and Westernised Russia will get, the more oppressive it will become (Vladiv-Glover 2016: 23–40).

Deconstruction goes even deeper than undermining social, political or economic constructions of the West. It undermines the very basis of Western civilisation, its individualism, and opposes to it an alternative, collective way of thinking, authentic Russian collective values – which, of course, does not go without being de-constructed itself – and, paradoxically, affirmed in the process. Thus both narratives finish with a messianic isolationist vision of Russia as “a fortress of morality amidst a spiritual desert [...] [which] found herself once more in the hands of enemies, this time represented by American dollars” (Genis 2016c: 160).

Russian history is a history of constantly repeating trauma: the trauma of Soviet history and the ending of the Soviet empire, “of Russian history seen in its entirety” (Dobrenko and Lipovetsky 2015: 10), the trauma of everyday existence on the individual and social level – a universal trauma of human existence, but also a specifically Russian experience. Ultimately, it is this trauma and its acceptance that leads to noble tragic greatness: specifically, Russian greatness of moving forward with trauma, not of moving on it, of encompassing trauma, of bearing the existence. Divov's book ends up with the celebration of the memory. Luzgin is returning to the werewolf boy: for they both will not forget. The latest trauma – predatory capitalism – is also somehow encompassed and then neutralised by Russianness with its ability to resist the system by accepting the inevitability.

The reasoning bears features of both resistance and imperialism (masked as resistance). Subaltern Empire (Morozov 2015) opposes the Western system and yet intercepts its discourse to make claims for recognition (Čanji and Kazharski 2022: 7–8). It appropriates Western terms such as “humanitarian” and applies them in its own way (like “humanitarian suffering”), requiring the recognition of its right to create and modify the norms, thus recognition of its superpower status. Due to this claim in Russian narratives, “[...] postmodern parody exists side by side with a decidedly traditionalist longing” for the empire to exist (Livers 2010: 479–480). If *Empire V* showed the Russian Idea as a commodity, only produced to accompany capital on the global market (Khagi 2008: 569), *Batman Apollo* returns to it in a serious way: after all, there is an actual meaning hidden beneath cynically commodified Russianness – a meaning noticed by Rama when he returns from the Western world of *Batman Apollo*.

## CONSTRUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN IDENTITY IN 21ST CENTURY VAMPIRE LITERARY NARRATIVES

**SUMMARY** The article studies Russian postmodern Vampire literature, and through it, it examines contemporary Russian identity and the ways in which it is being constructed. Particular attention is given to the description (or rather, imaginary construction) of geographical places such as Russian villages, Moscow or the United States of America. Descriptions of those places constitute a mental mapping of the world and, therefore, of one's position in the world – of one's identity.

The analysis focuses on two literary works: a vampire diology by Victor Pelevin (*Empire V* [2006] and *Batman Apollo* [2013]) and Oleg Divov's novel *Night Watcher* (2004). The novels are studied with the methods of structural analysis and put into their historical and contemporary social and cultural context. Tlos-tanova's theory of Secondary Empire/Morozov's theory of subaltern empire is then applied.

The study discovers that both novels are profoundly patriarchal and colonial towards further, more Eastern Others and more ambivalent towards Western countries. In the novels, Russian identity is constructed, above all, in relation to the collective West. It is the main opponent but also the main point of reference. Only on this background can the Russianness be really performed.

The Russianness, constructed based on tradition (a construct in itself), gets metaphysical importance. It is revealed to be the only actually valuable attitude to the world that is immanently cruel. The reasoning bears features of both resistance and imperialism (masked as resistance). The residence awards the global domination of Western culture turns into an obsession over one's uniqueness and the feeling of Russian metaphysical and moral superiority.

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