VISUAL NATURE OF SURREALIST POETRY AND ITS VERBAL EXPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the visual nature of surrealism and examines linguistic features of surrealist poetry. The author outlines the aesthetic principles of surrealism as presented in the works of the movement leader Andre Breton.

It is stated that surrealists recognized the value of the image for poetic construction and attributed to it the role of a vehicle for inspiring the creative forces of the unconscious and liberating poetic imagination. This brought forward a form of linguistic revolution. Surrealistic imagery is verbalized through the cult of metaphor, synesthesia, arbitrary and spontaneous combination of words.

Reminiscence and hypotyposis became the key concepts of surrealist poetry revealing the specifics of intermedial connections of literary texts and works of art, their dialogue as different semiotic systems.

Keywords: surrealism, André Breton, David Gascoyne, surrealistic image, reminiscence, hypotyposis.

INTRODUCTION

Modern approaches to scientific research of art, literature and music correlations reflect life-long competition between different art forms and are often based on the theoretical speculations of the artists/literati themselves.

Thus Wassily Kandinsky wrote that "different arts experience an earning to say the things they can say the best through the means which only they possess. … Whether consciously or unconsciously, the artists appeal to their material; they check it, put on the spiritual scales the intrinsic value of the elements they use in order to create their art. And the natural consequence of this earning is the comparison of one's art elements with the elements appropriate to another art" (Kandinsky, 1989, 16).

Hence such interest to the artistic phenomenon of overcoming the limits and overlapping the borders of arts, which might be better explained or perceived in comparative perspective. This also explains the increasing number of research done within the theory of intermediality as the questions of the dialogue of arts, of the synthesis of art forms, of their interrelation and correlation receive nowadays greater attention and their study get a more systematic and deeper approach.

In this paper we focus on the nature of surrealist poetry. We look at surrealism as a dialogue of literature and painting. **The main aim** of our research is examination of linguistic peculiarities of surrealist poetry in comparative study. The theoretical works of surrealists and the poems of the British author David Gascoyne serve as **the material** for this article. We are especially interested in the works written by the poets who adjoined to the movement from other countries and wrote in different languages. This, in the long run, might give us an insight into how different languages reflect the idea of subconscious so dear for the surrealists.

MAIN BODY

Analysis of contemporary literature on surrealism reveals a significant number of scientific works regarding different aspects of this phenomenon whereas the issue of its verbal expression hasn't been properly studied yet. Shelley Quinn explains the shortage of direct textual studies of surrealist texts by the fact that they are seldom the objects of fond perusals. "The imagery in the poetry is so difficult to classify satisfactorily <…> that critics and scholars have turned their attention toward the more comprehensible theoretical similarities between Breton's and Freud's ideas, focusing the majority of their attention upon the idea of the unconscious" (Quinn, 1985, 6).

Nowadays surrealism is most commonly associated with paintings of such artists as Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, Max Ernst and others. People at large recognize the surrealistic painting style by experimental artistic approach, by the weird, imaginative and surprising imagery. Surrealism started as a literary movement though.

It emerged from Dada, was inspired by the teaching of Marx, influenced by the chaos and tragedy of World War I, and in the early XX century was charged with a desire to break from tradition and explore new forms of expression. The ideas of Sigmund Freud, who suggested that ultimate forms of truth can be found in one's subconscious, fueled the movement and directed the poets towards the exploration and liberation of the psyche where surrealists hoped to find a new source of creativity.

The new movement was officially launched in 1924 with the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* written by one of its founders and leader Andre Breton. The *Manifesto* outlined aesthetic ideas and philosophy of surrealism as a revolution and rebellion against logic and rationality. Poets and writers strove to create "super-reality" which was supposed to free imagination. The main medium of the movement was psychic *automatism* practiced through automatic writing.

Breton developed psychic automatism almost accidentally. In the *Manifesto* he mentions a phrase that he claims to once have heard in his mind before falling asleep: "*There is a man cut in two by the window*" (Breton, 1972, 21). This sentence was accompanied by a very weak but distinct visual image of a man being perpendicularly bisected by a window. The phrase astonished him by its visual quality and led, as he said, to a chance discovery of surrealist image and automatic writing.

We agree with the scholars who justly note that it would be rather "overly simplistic to cite this single point as the birth of surrealism" (Streahle, 2011, 23) but draw specific attention to visual nature of automatic writing. Breton himself testifies to the importance of visual elements in surrealism when he confesses in the *Manifesto* that in his and Soupault's experimental "automatic" work *Magnetic Fields* they noted "a considerable choice of images of a quality such that we would not have been capable of preparing a single one in longhand, a very special picturesque quality" (Breton, 1972, 23).

Thus started experiments with automatism, which, as a method of putting down one's thoughts quickly in a meditative state without interference of the overactive mind, relied entirely on the subconscious for creativity.

Automatic image as the core of surrealist aesthetics was assigned "the role of privileged vehicle for bringing forth into the conscious mind the creative forces of the unconscious" (Quinn, 1985, 3). The formula for its creation was taken by Andre Breton from Pierre Reverdy: "The image <…> can not arise from a comparison but from the bringing together of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationships of the two realities brought together are distant and apt, the stronger the image will be <…>" (Breton, 1972, 20). The example of such image is a famous line from the canto of

Lautreamont, whom surrealists called their prophet: "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella".

Similar ideas can be found in another *Manifesto of Surrealism*, written by Yvan Goll', who specifically emphasized the role of the visual in modern life and identified the move away from the auditory features of the pre-XX century poetry: "The speed of associations in the interval between the first impression and its final expression determines the quality of the image…. Before the twentieth century, the ear determined the quality of the poem: rhythm, sound, intonation, meter – all for hearing. Since the 1920s, vision has become triumphant. We live in the age of cinema. More and more we express ourselves through visual signs. Speed today determines the quality" (Goll', 1998, 450).

Focusing on such themes as love, the marvelous, freedom, the exaltation of desire, surrealists created poetry which was formed by images rather that figures of speech. And the purpose of many of these images was to disturb the habits of traditional perception and present a world governed by chance.

In their fight with logic surrealists claimed that if the "rational" reality was expressed through established language system, the "other" reality needed its language, too. A new, liberated language in surrealist poetry appears as a "personal property, which each man could use as he saw fit" (Nadeau, 1989, 219). Surrealists were convinced that only through the break with traditional linguistic methods and ordinary associations of words and linguistic constructs one can obtain the "true language."

The greatest importance was attributed to a word itself, to its meaning, "which is not that of a dictionary but which flowers in each syllable, each letter" (Nadeau, 1989, 149). Without violating language norms, poets adhere to a flow of free associations and create surreal visuality through a choice of vocabulary which combines nouns and verbs or adjectives in complete disagreement of their semantic meanings, combining mutually exclusive concepts and creating images that are often metaphorical and emphatically illogical. Synesthesia, metonymy, author's semantic neologisms, arbitrary combination of words, which create a certain mood – are among the most important peculiarities of surrealist poems.

Most vividly the visual nature of surrealism reveals itself in such phenomena as reminiscence and hypotyposis.

G.E. Lessing in his famous *Laocoon*, making an attempt to define the boundaries of painting and poetry, writes: "A picture in poetry is not necessarily one which can be transferred to canvas. But every touch, or every combination of touches, by means of which the poet brings his subject so vividly before us that we are more conscious of the subject than of his words, is picturesque, and makes what we call a picture" (Lessing, 2008, 88). The scientist points out that the images that arouse in reader's imagination create such sensual pictures that he forgets about the media/means that was used for this – about the word.

This definition is similar to what modern scientists call hypotyposis – vivid picturesque description which appears as a result of "the interaction of literature and plastic arts" (Generalyuk, 2011, 12). Contemporary scholars identify a few types of this phenomenon: hypotyposis-portrait, landscape, interior, genre scene. However, despite such a bold use of artistic terminology, the goal of hypotyposis is not the copying of paintings but rather creating visual picture with the help of words. It is a way of verbal representation of space, using various descriptive and narrative techniques that unite the visual impression produced on the reader through the text. From a linguistic point of

view, hypotyposis presents a certain interest because it "uses words to encourage the reader to build a picture before his eyes" (Eco, 2016, 115), and thus demonstrates the possibilities of verbal painting.

To demonstrate the importance and the dominance of visual components in surrealist poetry, we will use the poems from the collection *Man's Life is This Meat* of David Gascoyne – a leading English surrealist, an author of *The First English Manifesto* and *A Short Survey of Surrealism*. Automatic writing became an important stage in his poetic development though he was not as much inclined to explore the unconscious as preferred the chains of free associations.

Here is an example of hypotyposis in a poem by D. Gascoyne:
A flock of banners fight their way through the telescoped forest
And fly away like birds towards the sound of roasting meat.
Sand falls into the boiling rivers through the telescopes' mouths
And forms clear drops of acid with petals of whirling flame
(Gascoyne, 1965, 21)

1) In the passage prevail words of concrete meanings which belong to different semantic groups: *flock - banners, telescope - forest - mouths, sound - meat, boiling rivers, petals - flame*. They create absurd images in a clash of incoherent or even mutually exclusive concepts. Their automatic flow resembles a kaleidoscope of changing pictures: metaphorical combinations of a *flock of banners, a telescope forest, telescopic mouths, flame petals*, a synaesthetic analogy of *the sound of roasting meat* (with components of visual, audial and taste perceptions; the image still doesn't lose its visual dominance).

2) A special visual effect is created by combining the concrete words with abstract ones. For example:
white curtains of infinite fatigue
white curtains of tortured destinies
Here abstract concepts – *endless fatigue, tortured destinies* – are described through concrete images – *white curtains*. In this case, the poet leaves the reader a large space for interpreting the poem. White curtains can mean purity, suffering, sickness, infinity. Similar examples: *wing-shadowed day, broken song, you ache more darkly, feathered hour*.

3) Visual effect is also produced through the use of color-worlds: *coal-black Hate*, *white weight*; combinations with emotive vocabulary as for example personified images: *brainless wind*, *hysterical rain.*

Certain illogical absurdity of surrealistic images serves as a challenge for the reader. According to U. Eco, "for the sake of real visuality, there is no need to say more than what will force the reader to participate in the process of creation, filling the empty space and adding details on his own initiative. The technique of hypotyposis does not only show, but cause a desire to see" (Eco, 2016, 108).

In the scientific literature, intermedia which focuses on the specifics of intra-connections of literary texts and works of art also takes the form of reminiscence.

Reminiscence (lat. reminiscentia) in a literary text is "an implicit or indirect reference to another text, work of art or to the fact of cultural life" (Literaturnaja jenciklopedija, 2001, 871). Reminiscence can act as an element of irony, criticism of the previous cultural tradition, as a means of creating an artistic image or the dialogue of the author with his cultural predecessors.

We talk about reminiscence when we see the whole system of verbal and visual interrelations in a poetic text, when images, motifs, themes are taken from works of painting, whose interpretation allows us to clarify or deepen the meaning of the poetic work. It is precisely such a system that can be traced in many surrealist texts.

David Gascoyne's poem "Salvador Dalí" begins with the lines:
The face of the precipice is black with lovers;
The sun above them is a bag of nails; the spring's
First rivers hide among their hair.
Goliath plunges his hand into the poisoned well
And bows his head and feels my feet walk through his brain.
(Gascoyne, 1965, 21)

The combination of spontaneous images resembles the artistic manner of the Spanish painter Salvador Dali. Known as "a true pioneer of the Surrealist movement, Dalí created works to explore his paranoia-critical method. Using Freudian ideas about dreams and madness, he produced obsessional images in which detailed reality is suddenly transformed into different, intricate, and disturbing images" (Cumming, 2005, 392).

The poem of D. Gascoyne is full of strange surreal images. The nouns of concrete meanings *(precipice, lovers, sun, nails, rivers, hair)*, the color epithet *black*, the paradoxical metaphorical comparison of the *sun* as *a bag of nails*, the bright visual image of the giant *Goliath* and the metonymic image of the *feet walking through his brain* – together they produce a vivid visual impression. The juxtaposition of static not-connected objects makes the whole image exceptionally dynamic though in these five lines there are almost no verbs of active movement. These rapidly changing paradoxical dream images are in the spirit of Salvador Dali and his method.

CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing the linguistic experiment of surrealists, we may note that the new artistic reality open to interpretation is born through an arbitrary "automatic" image that is verbalized in correct syntactic and grammatical constructions with absolutely free use of words. It allowed the poets to break free from the influence of abstract thinking and the established language system. But whether they managed to expand the potential of the language – a super task that the whole avant-garde of the early XX aimed at, is still an open question that needs further study.

Despite Andre Breton's declarations that the medium of surrealist psychic automatism was automatic writing and despite initial focus on automatic poetry as the central practice of surrealism, some scholars argue that "image has surpassed text as the primary expression of the surrealist movement" (Streahle, 2011, 23). Perhaps this orientation on the visual effect was the reason that beyond France surrealism was more clearly expressed in painting. In poetry, it is more often traced as a technique, a trend in development. Therefore, in our opinion, the creativity of many poets-surrealists is more influenced by intermedial relations, and while speaking of their poetry we often turn to the notion of reminiscence or hypoteposis.

Deepening into the philosophy and technique of the surrealist verse is undoubtedly an interesting aspect for further linguistic research. Hopefully it will facilitate the comprehension of this quite complicated poetry.

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