

THE HAZY GAZE OF THE *BOGATYRS* OF THE RUSSIAN *BYLINY*

Abstract. *The text text discusses the aesthetic potential of one of the first post-Soviet comics, *Bylinnaya Rus'* (The Russia of the Epics, 1992) created by Viktor Agafonov. The comic saga, which is now valued as a most original example of rare post-Soviet comic book art, presents the adventures Russian folk hero (bogatyry) Ilya Muromets in a most inspiring and daring aesthetic manner. The composition, colour scheme, fonts, and text presentation of the work demonstrate clear parallels with the tradition of Christian Orthodox iconography, which somewhat complicates their comprehension for the average reader/viewer. This article offers a double reading of the work, reliant on the one hand on narrative analysis, and on the other (and at the same time) on an iconographic reading: it may be considered as an annotated introduction to a possible iconography of the comic book text.*

Keywords: *heroic epos, post-Soviet comics, visual poetics*

Introduction

The year of 1992 can be considered as a certain milestone for the protagonists of the Russian heroic epos, the Russophile, Orthodox Christian, muscular and cunning *bogatyrs*. Perhaps the most popular among them, Ilya Muromets, already famous as the protagonist of many a heroic epic tale (*byliny*), as well as various *byliny*-based tales, fiction films, and often portrayed on paintings, humorous wooden panels (*lubok*), and even Soviet propaganda posters, becomes the central figure of a 48-page long Russian comic book titled *Bylinnaya Rus': O slavnom i moguchem bogatyre rusksom Ilye Muromtse* (The Russia of the *Byliny*: On the magnificent and great Russian *bogatyry* Ilya Muromets, by Viktor Agafonov). The reasons for this relatively late entrance of the *bogatyrs* into the medium¹ are manifold, and can, for the time being, be summed up as a certain hostility towards the genre of comics and graphic novels, which was, sustained and encouraged

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¹ We are referring to Russian comics. Ilya Muromets was, in fact, featured in several Western comic books much earlier.

by the state authorities and intelligentsia, particularly strong in the Russian and Soviet context at least from the rule of Peter the Great and up until the fall of the Soviet Union (cf. Alaniz, 2010). The publication of the comic book on Ilya Muromets, which is the central focus of our text, may, to a certain extent, be seen as a turning point in official attitudes towards the medium that was previously more often than not sneered and frowned upon: the comic book (or *komiks*, in the Russian variant) was released in 1.000.000 issues, and dispatched to schools and kindergartens, presumably in order to function as a subtle teaching aid. In this regard, it actually proved to be rather inefficient, with its rich style, intensely descriptive aesthetics and intricate fonts that children tended to find difficult to decipher. However, it gradually became a rare collectible, appreciated by fans of Russian comics and national epos inspired fantasy of various genres (cf. readers' responses on Livejournal.ru (2015)).

It appears that the *komiks* in question has not yet been scrutinized by any kind of scholarship; moreover, scholarly analyses of post-Soviet Russian comics are, to this moment, very few, as we will demonstrate several paragraphs later. However, comics in general, and *Bylinnaya Rus'* in particular, are discussed on internet forums, such as Livejournal.ru, and are sometimes mentioned in scholarly work as passing comments or illustrative examples of, e.g. the operations of ideological state apparatuses, the impotence of contemporary Russian art, etc. This dimension – the nexus of the political and the aesthetic, is what appears to be most challenging, most ambiguous, and most inspiring about the *komiks* in question. Passing comments in scholarly work and enthusiasts' reviews on the internet alike tend to revolve around these two issues: the question of ideology and the question of the work's aesthetic value. This text is going to attempt to account for both dimensions, building on the presumption that it is both impossible and unjust to the work to try to separate the two into pure and distinct analytical categories. The key question addressed by the article is therefore that of the aesthetic charge² of the given *komiks*, which recounts five episodes in the life of Ilya Muromets, the mythical Russian national hero. The thesis we are going to proceed to examine is as follows. It appears that the *komiks* lends itself to many readings; perhaps the most obvious one relies on the plot, guided by the textboxes and speech bubbles. However, if one abandons this implicit text : image hierarchy, and treats each page, and each panel within each page, as an independent imagetext,³ prioritizing the formal properties of the medium, a different

² By this, we essentially mean the work's capacity to deliver a message that cannot be deconstructed back to the particular »parts of the sum«, the qualitative excess that separates it from mere »illustration« and »representation«.

³ For the purposes of this article, comics are viewed as imagetexts: compositions where image and text are in no a priori hierarchy, and need to be read with an equal amount of attentiveness.

reading emerges, one that depends to a much lesser extent on conventional expectations from a linear narrative. Conceptually and analytically, this text will draw on the tradition of imagetexts that exists in the Russian cultural context, and correlates, albeit not always rigidly, with Orthodox Christian iconography, which develops a certain attitude towards the *visual*, and its interplay with the textual. In short, the so-called “guidelines” that we will employ for this particular analysis, will be inspired by the conceptualization of the subject as a receptively evolving agent, directed toward within transcendent realm within the Russian iconographic tradition. This methodological stance will, as we will argue throughout the text, allow us to advocate an original approach to comics studies, which integrates contextual particularities into textual analysis on the very level of the research question.

Russian Comics Studies: The Problem of Context

There seem to be at least two entries into the study of Russian comics: a universalist approach, oblivious to any potential cultural particularities of a certain context, and only attentive to the form and manifest content of the image-texts (such are attempts of early Russian advocates of the comic book genre who argued for its status as an art with reference to the medium’s formal capacities, e. g. Yerofeev (1996)), and a relativist one, that refers everything back to context (e. g. in Kara-Murza, 2015: 67). No doubt useful to certain ends, both approaches are essentially variants of simplified structuralism, and are as such incapable of addressing the question of the politics of aesthetics of a certain text. This question itself requires a certain categorical re-calibration: attentiveness both to the possibility of speaking in terms of the universal, and accounting for the context and historicity of all signifiers. José Alaniz’s monograph *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* (2010/2014), thus far, alongside Aleksandrov and Barzah’s (2010), one of only two comprehensive studies on the history, references, and present state of comic art in the Russian context, attempts to adopt this very stance in order to explore contemporary Russian comics from the perspective of aesthetics. Alaniz’s study comprises a historical background and close readings of several contemporary Russian *komiksy*. However, these close readings tend to fall back upon a combination of genre, narrative, and reception analysis, supplemented by interviews with the comics’ authors. This makes the analytical part of the work somewhat detached from an insightful section of the historical overview, which discusses the roots of Russian comics aesthetics. Our text would like to attempt a step further, namely to link the historical account of the development of image-text aesthetics in the Russian context with contemporary image-text interpretation in general and comic book analysis in particular. This is not an argument in favour of the exclusiveness of a certain

context; we are not going to propose that contextual specificities need to be essentialized. Rather, we are going to use a specific set of analytical tools, which can also be derived from the immediate referential framework of the case study, in order to address the question which in our opinion eludes other analytical frameworks, drawing from more conventional approaches to comic books.

Namely, a brief glance at the immediate context of the comic book *Bylinnaya Rus'* seems to direct one's attention towards three rather eye-catching dimensions: the work's production context, its value as an adaptation of the Russian heroic epos – *byliny* and related historical events, and its characteristic aesthetics. In the light of numerous debates on post-Soviet Russia's attempts at reviving the Russian national idea, and countering “westernization” through state support of Russian production of popular cultural phenomena, such as comics (cf. Kara-Murza, 2015: 50–67), it would be tempting to focus one's analytical attention on two things. Firstly, the fact that *Bylinnaya Rus'* was printed in one million samples, and, secondly, that it employs a seemingly linear, straightforward narrative, focused on a hero (Ilya Muromets) and his battles with five types of evil, to promote the image of the evergreen “Russian” hero, often to the detriment of historical accuracy (Kara-Murza, 2015: 67). Coupled with the fact that the comic book was published in 1992, against the backdrop of a certain degree of ideological confusion, and was – among other channels – disseminated via public schools, where it was distributed among elementary school pupils (aged 7–10),⁴ one would be tempted to conclude it was meant to function as a tacit teaching aide. Indeed, the only expert analysis (Kara-Murza, 2015: 67) referring to the work places it in this very context, arguing that it was nothing but an example of “manipulation of consciousness” via ideological state apparatuses.

Though doubtlessly insightful, this analysis does not seem to have much to say about the work itself: it is dissected into its material production circumstances, distribution processes, target audience politics, and a dry summary of its plot. At best, it may involve passing comments to the book's visual aspects. These comments will tend to argue that the author's style is confusing for the reader, especially for children, with its intricate fonts reminiscent of Russian Christian Orthodox icons, and its dense and colourful drawings, where it is sometimes difficult to tell the Tatars from the horses, the tapestries from the clothes and the icons on the church walls from the heroes. These comments, common in discussions on the comic book that can be found on comic-specific internet forums (e. g. Otzovik, 2015;

⁴ Evidence of this is available in the targeted children's' parents' accounts accessible at, for example: http://otzovik.com/review_1016854.html (2. 9. 2015). The author of this text also received a copy of the comic book in kindergarten in Moscow in 1995.

Livejournal.ru, 2015), point to a lack of medium-specific pool of references. In part, this may be explained by the fact that the tradition of comics arrived to Russia relatively late, correlating with the fall of the Soviet Union and the influx of popular culture from the West (cf. Aleksandrov and Barzah, 2010; Alaniz, 2010). In the early 1990s, the predominant official opinion tended to treat comics as a capitalist means of popular entertainment with no particular, (educational, let alone artistic) value; moreover, they tended to be associated with entertainment for children (cf. Yerofeev, 1996). Comics tended to be aligned with the once popular tradition of *lubok* – a form of folk art, once popular in pre-revolutionary Russia, and to an extent a precursor of the genre of the Soviet propaganda poster – illustrated and annotated wooden panels with often satirical contents. The *lubok*, popular with the peasants, was more often than not frowned upon by the *intelligentsia* and state authorities alike; the first despised it for its crudeness and simplicity, while the second were concerned about the satire, often seen as potential political subversiveness. (Alaniz, 2010: 30–89) To put it bluntly: comics were too ambiguous to be welcomed in Soviet and early post-Soviet Russia. It took almost an entire decade and Sisyphean efforts on the part of comic book artists to change this prevalent perception, and to turn the Russian expert and lay public's attention toward the comic strip characterized by authorship and its playful and emancipatory approach to image and text. In the meantime, early post-Soviet comics such as *Bylinnaya Rus'* became popular among fans and enthusiastic collectors.

It is safe to say that *Bylinnaya Rus'* today is more of a rare collectible than an example of forgotten, or rather unmemorable 1990s' post-Soviet Russian popular culture, often (particularly popular music and feature films, not literature) demonized as worthless, soulless caricature of Western production of similar genres. It seems to appeal to the fans on two levels: its original aesthetics, inspired to a certain extent by Russian 19th century painter's Vasnetsov's portrayals of the distant past of the Kyivan Rus', and its references to well-known Russian folk heroes, the *bogatyri* and their glorious feats (cf. Livejournal.ru, 2015). These two contexts, the ones roughly outlined by arduous fans, point to the comics' aesthetics as its singular characteristic that might require further analysis. Wherein (if anywhere) lies the uniqueness of the work; how can it be positioned in the context of fairy tales and remembrance narratives? And, how does it beckon to be read, if not simply as a (post)modern hero narrative?

Analytical coordinates

Having established that the excitement of the case study, *Bylinnaya Rus'*, comes from its aesthetic ambiguity rather than from the material coordinates

of its creation or its possibly intended functions, it is now time to elaborate on what we mean by aesthetics. Most debates on Russian comics tend to come to the conclusion, often reached in debates on new media: in order to acquire the quality of the artistic, a medium has to cease being a simple imitation or a supplement of another existent form of expression (e. g. cinema is not to be an illustration of a novel or any other literary genre). The medium itself is therefore a potential subjectivation strategy, a means of expression rather than of mere imitation. However, imitation is never pure and expression is never devoid of imitation (the debates are summarized in Alaniz's discussion in Alaniz (2010: 79–145)). The question is, rather, what are the basic references? As we mentioned above, it seems that most interpreters view the comics in question as either an imitation of a stereotypical image of mainstream American comics, depicting superheroic sagas building on the superpowers of an individual, set out to fight injustice and defend freedom, or an imitation or adaptation of the Russian heroic epos, earlier spread in the form of *byliny*, fairy tales and historical narratives (with appropriate adaptations). Having said this, we now have to avoid falling back on a purely comparative analytical framework: either comparing the work to other Western comics based on the adventures of a hero endowed with superhuman abilities, or treating as an adaptation of stories and characters borrowed from a different genre. Both approaches miss two aspects of the work's proper formalism: its original approach to image-text relations, and, related to this first feature, its somewhat reckless and irreverent attitude to the two pools of references outlined above. These two features, a definitive characteristic of the comic book's form, point to a possibility of a different subjectivation gesture, which is where we are going to direct our own analysis.

Our reading is going to address the comic book as a whole, making no a priori judgments on features such as possible image-text hierarchies. We are also not going to try to fit the comics into any certain genre/tradition, such as the Western superhero comics or the *lubok*: both approaches would be questionable judging by the confused context of its creation. Rather, we will start off with its formal properties and advance our analysis on the level of the imagetext.

Content Analysis

Regarded as a whole, the Viktor Agafonov's 48-page long comic book titled *Bylinnaya Rus': O slavnom i moguchem bogatyre russkom Ilye Muromtse* resembles a blend of traditional editions of Russian folk tales, marked by intricate fonts, imaginative drawings of supernatural beasts, done in an affirmative, bold stroke and vibrantly colourful, and popular paintings of the Russian *bogatyri* created by 19th century painter Vasnetsov, and

apparently referring to the heroic epos – *byliny*, recounting the heroic acts of patriotic warriors, as well as episodes from their daily lives. Whether the comics continues in the tradition of the former (tale) or the latter (*bylina*) is not as trivial a matter as might seem at first glance, and not for reasons of simple classification: it is a statement that marks any further reading of the work in a constitutive way, which is why we take it as the starting point of our analysis.

A Tale in Epic Clothing

The title *Bylinnaya Rus'* (The Rus' of the *Byliny*) implies a definite direct connection of the comic book to the genre of *bylina*, but hints that it is not necessarily its direct antecedent. Rather, it is an adaptation of sorts. This comparison naturally raises the question of any possible remarkable differences between the *byliny* and Russian tales. Tales, as developed insightfully by Propp (1998), rely on a series of structural relations, which can in fact be summed up into a formula. The characters and the complexity of the plot naturally vary, but the main idea of the tale, usually resolved with an ending, considered satisfying within the given structural scheme, is stable. Tales take place in familiar, yet distant spaces, may involve supernatural happenings or forces, and may sometimes involve characters, referring to historical figures. They may be of folk origin or created by a certain author, but the issue of authorship is not essential.

The Russian heroic epos, *byliny*, may be recognized in many of these features, except, perhaps, the crucial, structural one. *Byliny*, apparently existent from around the 13th century onward, first codified in several collected volumes in the 19th century, recount tales about Russian warriors, endowed with superhuman strength and moral goodness. Typically, these warriors (e.g. Ilya Muromets, Dobrynya Nikitich, Alyosha Popovich) serve a mythical prince Vladimir Krasnoye Solnyshko (Vladimir Red Sun) who rules Kyiv, and protect the Russian soil from evil-meaning antagonists such as Solovey Razboinik (Nightingale the Robber) and his gang, the Tatar-Mongols or other (sometimes magical) evil forces. However, numerous *byliny*, originally sung by local storytellers, do not have such action-driven plots; they might involve the *bogatyr*s' squabbles among themselves, often of trivial nature, such as on the subject of whose clothing is most beautiful (cf. Harkins' (1976) account on the importance of boasting in the Russian *byliny*). The point of the *byliny*, which all consist of numerous local variations of the same story, is not to tell stories but, rather, to glorify certain characters. Certain characters evolve and change with time: Prince Vladimir, for example, becomes less popular in the later *byliny*, a development that Propp (1958: 100–111) attributes to the development of property relations

in Russia and accordingly transformed popular attitudes to state authorities.

Propp's (1958) analysis of the *byliny* mentions certain *byliny* that evolve to become tales; he does not elaborate this point, but it is implied in his analysis that they change in form (*byliny* were typically sung in a characteristic verse) and structure, adhering to the morphology of the tale. The tale, on the other hand, does not need to possess a particular, rigid form or be recounted in a single characteristic style, despite usually adhering to certain conventions, such as characteristic opening and closing phrases (e. g. "Once upon a time" or "In a land three nines of lands away" in the Russian variant) (Propp 1958, 8). The comic book in question combines features of both the *byliny* and of the tale, but its structure is much closer to the latter than to the former. It is not the language conventions used that are the problem, but rather the structural circumstance that it chooses to subordinate its storyline to a certain plot (developed over five separate tales), which mimics the *byliny* in its glorification of the chosen warrior (Ilya Muromets), yet is plot-, rather than character-driven.

Bylinnaya Rus' operates with plots provided by existent *byliny* featuring Ilya Muromets, but only uses the ones packed with the most action, and with a clear linear narrative. The comic book presents five events from the life of Ilya Muromets. We find out how he gained supernatural strength and became a *bogatyr* by drinking magical water offered to him by three random thirsty wanderers who knocked on his window, asking for a drink; how this new, energetic and powerful version of Ilya beat the evil bulge-eyed Tatars causing havoc in the wealthy and righteous town of Chernigov, and then defeated evil Nightingale the Robber and his horde of daughters and their husbands, blocking the road to Kyiv. Then, we are informed about how he made friends with fellow *bogatyr* Dobrynya Nikitich, a conceited, but essentially well-meaning young fellow from a wealthy family, on his way to Kyiv, and how Ilya finally, having come to Kiev and proven his strength to the nobility, officially got accepted into the *bogatyrs'* ranks at the court of Prince Vladimir and his wife Apraksiya. Each event is orchestrated as a separate mini-tale, and they also function as a whole: an account of some of the heroic deeds performed by Ilya Muromets, who is presented as the most righteous, dignified, and strongest of the heroes at Vladimir's court. Many less impressive moments from Ilya's life, as recounted by the *byliny*, are left out. The comics can therefore be described as a tale, using motifs of the *byliny*. This conclusion is important, as it drives us away from delving into the fragile and turbulent universe of the Russian heroic epos and its immediate references, and toward the genre of modern fantasy. However, as we will see in the following paragraphs, this does not necessarily imply that we are dealing with a fully conventional tale that leaves no room for intrusions of external, individualist aesthetics.

The Claim of Repetition

The comic book creates a fantastic universe through five separate stories, united by one overarching theme: the feats of Russian *bogatyř* Ilya Muromets, and his battles against threats plaguing the Kyivan Rus'. It would be tempting to resort to a summary of each of the stories, linking them into a linear narrative, following the life and evolution of Ilya as a hero. However, the work itself does not seem to point to this conclusion: Ilya's adventures are connected in a rather loose manner (by his intention to present himself to the Prince in Kyiv, and bring him Nightingale the Robber as a token of his respect), and finish when he decides to ride off into the fields and continue his patriotic journey, smashing any kind of enemy he encounters on the way. What leaves a stronger and visually more consistent impression is the way the five journeys that the comic lets us join, actually perform the same gesture: five times, Ilya saves Russia from a certain threat. Five times, his victory is followed by a highly individualistic decision "in the name of the land": not to stay with the locals and lead a peaceful existence, but to go on and pursue his vocation – serving mother Russia. Each time, he is pushed into a rather chaotic, colourful yet flat, almost two-dimensional world, a world that his figure is much too large for, and where his words and actions seem to fit in with the supportive textual frames, often used by Agafonov to contextualize and guide the action, rather than with the visual surroundings and the expectations or aspirations of the characters he meets on his way.

Five times, Ilya Muromets identifies a certain problem in his surroundings; this problem or menace does not have to be external. In the first tale, his problem is his own and his parents' physical weakness; the strength bestowed upon him by the magical water given to him by the generous wise wanderers allows him to solve his parents' problems: they are much too old and weak to take on all of the ploughing and other agricultural matters. Ilya takes care of a year's worth of work within the blink of an eye (or, quite literally, on two panels). In the second tale, he slays an army of Tatars attacking the wealthy town of Chernigov (here, the threat is at least seemingly external); in the third story, he clears the path from Chernigov to Kyiv by defeating the family of Nightingale the Robber who took it as their own. Then, he beats the pride and arrogance out of Dobrynya Nikitich, who challenges him to a face-off; they become blood brothers. Finally, Ilya shakes up the rather decadent and somewhat lethargic court of Prince Vladimir by presenting it with his token of respect: Nightingale the Robber whom he'd brought along from Chernigov. After he kills Nightingale (whose high frequency whistle almost tears down the whole town), he is offered to stay in Kyiv and serve the Prince, but decides otherwise: to go off into the "clear field" and protect Mother Russia.

The statement that the five tales are making seems to be clear: our *bogatyř* with supernatural powers might be helping “the weak” to counter various kinds of beasts, but he is also traveling through an “incurable” universe, plagued by its own inherent, structural issues: fields that are too big to plough, riches that are carelessly spent or hoarded, rather than invested, passivity and respectful fear at the sight of powerful criminals, conceitedness and arrogance toward those of seemingly lower status, and obscene, self-indulgent behaviour of those in power. Ilya never judges any of these traits; rather, he alleviates the “symptoms” that he encounters and continues his way, in the name of an ideal that he seems to firmly believe is greater than just a sum of these “parts” – Mother Russia.

The Subject in Transition

We have, up until this point, established that the world of *Bylinnaya Rus'* revolves around the comic's protagonist, Ilya Muromets. However, it would be premature to assume that he is just the privileged object of the author's proceeding, a marionette of sorts. Rather, he appears to be an *active* subject of the comics. This might provoke unintended associations to the “lone wolf”, the post-apocalyptic cowboy, such as Max Rockatansky from the famous Mad Max franchise or virtually any hero following the archetype of an individual who, having suffered a loss, decides to dedicate their life to fighting evil. Nevertheless, we shall try to argue that Muromets's case is somewhat different, and that these differences may be tracked down along two interrelated dimensions. One is the role he plays in the comic book, and the other is the aesthetic of the entire fantasy world of *Bylinnaya Rus'*, which we shall examine in the next sub-chapter.

Let's begin with the problem of the protagonist. If we first established that it is undoubtedly Ilya Muromets who drives the plot forward, it is now time for some necessary explanatory comments to that claim. Rather than being the protagonist who gives the reader a certain point of view, which the reader may either adopt or criticize, Ilya Muromets seems to be a subject who “falls into the world”, and who is influenced and significantly transformed by exterior forces. According to the comic book, he is always part of a confused, almost two-dimensional world where it is difficult to tell the icons on cathedral walls from people. He needs text, mostly in the form of explanatory panels, to rationalize his behaviour, to make sense of it. On the other hand, amidst this chaos, he is always driven by an ideal which seems to be transcendental and transcendent at the same time. From the first to the last tale, Muromets claims to have one goal: to protect Russia and its people. Yet this ideal, which, according to any logical reasoning, should encompass the people he deals with on an everyday basis, turns out to be completely

transcendent, inexistent in his world: the people he encounters are personifications of the “evils” he sets out to fight: weariness, laziness, arrogance, individualism, snobbishness. They only make out the ideal together, as if their togetherness rid them of their individual faults, as if distance assembled them into another type of subject. These characteristics, in particular, Muromets’s orientation towards a collective transcendent which may only be achieved through work on the world (and only in consequence on the self) align the subjectivity of the comic book with the entire fantasy world rather than with Muromets alone, and hint at a disposition that reminds one of the Russian Christian Orthodox iconographic tradition. As pointed out by Ouspenski and Lossky (1999: 23–51), and developed into the so-called theurgic understanding of aesthetics in Ivanov and Chulkov (cf. Glatzer-Rosenthal, 1997: 383) the latter built on this exact transcendent collectivism, which dispenses with the subject as an individual by means of working with this individual, making him/her succumb to the rules of reading the icon (the world he/she is confronted with), in order to undergo a process that resembles transfer in psychoanalysis: giving up one’s own initial subjectivity to form a new provisional subject with the interlocutor (analyst or, in our case, the icon).

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If the textual narrative aligns Muromets with the individualist hero of the classical Western film, considering his role within the complex imagetextual world of this particular comic book, leads us to a different conclusion. The comic book as a whole may be interpreted as a mechanism of transfer subjectivation, leading Muromets towards a new level of subjectivity, situated in the realm of the transcendent and collective. This is achieved by a curious interplay between the logical, rationalist textual narrative and the chaotic, “flat” imagery. However, it would be premature to assume that this interplay actually *results* in this kind of iconic subjectivity. In the following sub-chapter, we will try to re-calibrate the overall aesthetic of the comic book with this question of subjectivation in mind.

The Aesthetic of Dissonance

We have already pointed out that the world of Ilya Muromets – the image *and* the world of Ilya Muromets – the subject of the explanatory textual panels of the comic book, are out of joint. There is a striking dissonance between the explanatory panels, which function as a transcendent frame of reference, an ideal, and the images (including the text in the conversation bubbles). Yet, the two form a whole, a conglomerate, which, according to the key figure of the comic, Ilya Muromets, cannot be torn apart. In fact, Ilya Muromets as a hero functions upon the presupposition that this imagetext *can* and *has to be* read as a whole, despite the striking discrepancies

between the text and images. For example, Ilya's persistent motive to "defend Mother Russia and serve Prince Vladimir", and his rejection of vices such as over-indulgence in Earthly delights of any kind, are in stark contrast with the life of Prince Vladimir, who is shown (i.e. depicted on a visual level) as an extremely wealthy and fun-loving individual, used to unconditional obedience from his subjects, and apparently not taking the suffering of his people to heart. Nevertheless, Ilya does not reconsider his loyalty to the Prince and his court, nor his motive of defending the "helpless", even upon seeing that they are not, in fact, entirely helpless, but, rather, expect exterior forces to come to their rescue. It may therefore be concluded that the overall aesthetic of the comic book, and hence of its fantasy world, is based on this image-textual incoherence.

The text of the explanatory panels appears to function as an axiological framework, whereas the imagery focuses on the contrasting "lifeworld". The intention of the comic book seems to provide a space for these two dimensions to merge, for the fantasy world to really become a complete, coherent imagetext. However, the world may only be interpreted as such if one adopts the perception of Ilya Muromets, who is neither a complacent, passive observer, nor a dreamer of a better world, nor an active revolutionary, driven by aspirations for societal change. Rather, he intervenes in specific situations, alleviating malignant symptoms of societal decay (the robber who appropriates an entire route, showing that there is not enough willpower among the inhabitants of the two cities once connected by the road to put an end to his evil-doings; the mythical Tatar-Mongolian horde that occupies Chernigov, while the wealthy inhabitants of the town seek refuge in the cathedral rather than take up arms to fight them, etc.), and then continues his way to seek new challenges.

Ilya Muromets is completely oblivious to social reality; instead, he seeks but a transcendent ideal: peaceful, pious, Christian Orthodox Russia. He has to keep travelling, because settling down would mean fitting into the world, which in fact has little to do with this ideal, as he realizes time and time again, having rescued the people from yet another menace (the unmanageable fields on his parents' property, the Tatars, Nightingale the Robber, Dobrynya Nikitich from his arrogance, Prince Vladimir from Nightingale the Robber). As the cycle of stories nears its end, we get closer and closer to the imaginary nexus of power: the court of Prince Vladimir. As we progress, the imagery becomes more and more colourful, the structure of image and text frames grows in its complexity, and more and more emphasis is placed on interpersonal relations. On the other hand, Ilya's conviction that he has to fight for Mother Russia also becomes ever more pronounced, almost to the level of a mantra, as if to counter this visual chaos.

Concluding remarks

As a whole, the aesthetic of *Bylinnaya Rus'* may be read as a simplified version of an icon, one that suggests the subject embarks on a difficult journey of dispensing of his own individual motives and petty conclusions about the world, in order to allow their subjectivity merge with a collective axiological impulse. On the other hand, the comic does not really provide any evidence of this strategy's success: the collective subjectivity that might leave all egoism behind seems to remain restricted to the realm of a transcendent ideal which is not even necessarily primarily collective: its collectivism is grounded in religious and nationalist axioms (it is restricted to Russia and Orthodox Christianity).

It may therefore be argued that this particular *komiks* – regardless of whether it was primarily intended an educational adaptation of certain mythical events from the Russian past, a nationalist tool of sorts, or as an attempt to locally reinterpret and appropriate the genre of American superhero sagas – expresses a powerful original idea, which may be tracked down through an analysis of its aesthetics, if the latter is regarded from the assumption that the specificity of the comic book medium itself allows particular ways of image-text arrangement. The image-text relations in *Bylinnaya Rus'* seem to be in a certain counterpoint, which allows for a specific subjectivation gesture. This subjectivation gesture tends to push us toward a realm that is both transcendent and collective; the comic book's aesthetic, which differs from the icon in its primary context: it operates within the transcendental lifeworld rather than the divine transcendent (it is to be read and followed rather than prayed to) also demonstrates that this gesture is paradoxical and inaccessible to a common individual. Unless, perhaps, they encounter a group of traveling strangers who let them drink magical water that would transform them into a *bogatyr*.

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