

# The Distortion and Demise of Language and the Written Word in Aldous Huxley and Selected Russian Dystopias

Marek Ochrem

University of Wrocław, Poland

**Abstract:** Critical studies of classic British dystopic novels from the first half of the 20th century have undeniably been extensive and voluminous, whereas the more contemporary Russian dystopias came into being later and there is therefore much less critical research on the issues raised therein, especially in comparison with the scholarship on British dystopia. The aim of this study therefore is to fill a gap in this field of academic research. Specifically, the author pays particular attention to the interplay between selected works of classic British/Russian dystopia and contemporary dystopic Russian novels. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to pinpoint connections between the reality of the dystopian worlds discussed herein and the real world.

**Keywords:** dystopia, Huxley, Russian dystopia, novels

We can safely assume that the nineteenth-century world and its whole philosophy, with its convictions and system of values, irrevocably came to an end after World War I. The post-war shift was profound and multifaceted. The edifice of science, culture, politics and society collapsed. Albert Einstein's theories caused a paradigm shift in astrophysics. Space and time ceased to be separate and unalterable entities. Quantum mechanics proved that micro- and macroworlds do not fit together well. New inventions and discoveries changed the way people coped with agricultural (genetics) or industrial production (assembly lines). In art, modernist and postmodernist painters and sculptors broke with tradition and began to develop innovative styles, such as cubism or Art Deco. In Europe and Asia, some monarchs were dethroned and new states came into being. Nevertheless, most importantly, the rise and expansion of totalitarian states and their ideology in the twentieth century (Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany and communist China in particular) took the issues addressed in the classic dystopias beyond the scope of literature. It is hardly surprising

that both publicists and literary scholars have devoted much attention to the literature dealing with the issues of fictional, yet all too familiar political realities. Nonetheless, in the 1980s and 1990s there was a lot of hope that the era of authoritarian regimes was coming to an end. The Scorpions, a German heavy metal band, came up with the song “Wind of Change,” a significant anthem for the political changes in Eastern Europe at that time. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, a famous political scientist, even prognosticated the end of history with liberal institutions – such as democratic governments, free markets and consumerist culture – becoming universal worldwide.

All but one of the Russian narratives discussed herein date back to the 1980s or the beginning of the twenty-first century (Zamyatin’s early dystopia *We* is the exception; *Moscow 2042* by Vladimir Voinovich is from 1986; *The Slynx* by Tatjana Tolstaya is from 1986–2000; and *Day of the Oprichnik* by Vladimir Sorokin was published in 2006). Thus, it is not surprising that their perspective on various sociopolitical issues is mostly a bit different from the deeply pessimistic outlook for the future in Zamyatin’s, Huxley’s and Orwell’s dystopias. At the end of *Moscow 2042* and *The Slynx*, the old reigns of terror cease to exist and are replaced with new despotic regimes. That “wind of change” is visible in those stories, whereas in Huxley’s dystopian world any change is just unthinkable and unfeasible.

This study demonstrates the role of both language and the written word in the ruination of the world represented in *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and in selected works of Russian dystopian literature. Moreover, it points out the dire consequences of either the absence or serious distortion of good professional journalism, quality literature and even rich vocabulary in conveying complex or unorthodox ideas. Such social evils as a decline in morality, ubiquitous window dressing and/or outright lies, the brutalisation of society, a reign of secret police terror, travesties of justice, highly conformist behaviour and an incapacity for independent and logical thought are just a few examples of the nightmares of the dystopian worlds discussed herein.

### **Current Research on the Issues Discussed in this Article**

A number of literary critics have commented on the role of language, journalism and belles-lettres in Huxleyan and Russian dystopias. Michael Sherborne writes about the simplification of language and meaningless repetitive discourse in Huxley’s *Brave New World*. As he argues, the World State in this dystopia equips its inhabitants with

a parody of meaningful discourse. In fact, the people in the novel, whenever they are faced with the need to say something, fall back on clichés from advertising slogans, nursery rhymes and proverbs. Still, the words and phrases they use are often corruptions of ancient ones changed to better suit the needs of the State. Sherborne draws the following analogy between Orwell's *1984* and *Brave New World*:

Like Newspeak, the official language of George Orwell's *1984*, the proverbial sayings of the World State are a way to reinforce orthodox ideas and to make it hard to conceive of alternative ones. (2005, 88)

Also, he points out that in Huxley's work many words have become taboo and/or obsolete ("father," "mother," "family," "parent," "home," "born," "Christianity," etc.). He compares the predictable and standardised rhetoric of the narrative to machine discourse.

Nathan Waddell, Krzysztof Hejwowski and Grzegorz Mróz, in turn, pay particular attention to the role of the Shakespearean element in John's life and the World State. Waddell indicates that Shakespeare is utterly incompatible with Huxley's dystopia:

In the World State the language of Shakespeare is firmly out of place, its profound sense of difference confusing and ostracizing John the Savage, rather than helping him decode his surroundings." (2016, 37)

Krzysztof Hejwowski and Grzegorz Mróz are more interested in the interplay between the great playwright's writing and the triviality of both the Controllers' world and the Americanised world of the 1930s. In their monograph on Aldous Huxley, they make an attempt to explain the possible reasons for so extensively including the Bard of Avon's literary output in the dystopia:

In *Brave New World*, the language of Shakespeare and the world of human experience depicted in his masterpieces ... became an antidote (the only one in the novel) to the shallow superficial world of consumerism, universal stability and prosperity, ... which Huxley observed with an increasing sense of surprise and horror in the mid-1930s. (Hejwowski and Mróz 2019, 46–47)

In her monograph, Katarzyna Sobijanek concentrates on Russian dystopian visions, in particular on the issues of exercising control over people seen from a linguistic angle. She points out in *Oblicza totalitaryzmu we współczesnej antyutopii rosyjskiej* that effective control of language is tantamount to control over human beings: “The control of language and limitations on the number of words and expressions are in fact synonymous with controlling people” (Sobijanek 2013, 114–115, my translation). She also stresses that anyone brought up in a specific sociopolitical system is conditioned by the knowledge instilled in them. Sobijanek further notes that

as he [a character in a novel] does not know such notions as love, freedom, a critical approach, choice or mutiny, he is not likely to ponder over them, discuss them or, all the more so, live up to them. (2013, 115)

She further draws our attention to the fact that in Vladimir Voinovich’s dystopia we encounter all those long and often senseless abbreviations and acronyms, which are the Russian version of Orwellian Newspeak: Moscowrep (Moscow Communist Republic), CPGB (a merger of the Communist Party and KGB), Genialissimo (the Muscovite leader), natfunctbur (a toilet), etc. Sobijanek also comments on the freedom of expression in *Moscow 2042* by Vladimir Voinovich:

One’s artistic freedom is confined to obeying the colonel’s orders, who gives authors assembled in an office space instructions regarding the subjects they are supposed to pursue in the works they produce. (2013, 119)

Just as in the case of Sobijanek’s treatise, Joanna Madloch touches on some specific aspects of neo-Russian Soviet language in *Moscow 2042*. Specifically, she emphasises the role of Newspeak in this dystopia:

A distinctive “Soviet” tendency to use Newspeak and acronyms is ridiculed by means of using complex compounds frequently .... It is also noticeable that Moscowrep citizens are named according to the social position they hold. (Madloch 1994, 70, my translation)

Unlike Madloch, M. D. Fletcher addresses the issues of the non-existence of genuine literary criticism and the obsequious praise for Genialissimo's alleged artistic legacy in Voinovich's novel. Specifically, he writes about the absence of literary critics and the attribution of any pieces of good literature to the Moscowrep leader in the Moscow of the future: "There are no longer any critics, as their function has been taken over directly by the security police" (Fletcher 1989, 3). Specifically, at one point he refers to a literature class. The students learn that the sentence "I devoted my lyre to my nation" does not belong to Alexander Pushkin, but of course to Genialissimo. Thus, belles-lettres does exist here – in contrast to, say, Orwell's dystopian vision – as only the head of state can author anything in print.

As in the case of Sobijanek's and Madloch's studies, Tatyana Novikov elaborates on the issues of *Moscow 2042*'s artificial language in "The Poetics of Confrontation." Most newspeak in Voinovich's novel pertains to Moscowrep officialese, but in the case of Karnavalov (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's fictional alter ego), the character tries to get rid of existing neologisms and replace them with coinages based on Russian words. Novikov directs our attention both to Moscowrep and Karnavalov's jargon, stating that "the novel, at the linguistic level, plays with the Soviet officialese and political jargon" (2015, 4). In her opinion, this pertains to the logic of the carnival and "calls into question the existing structures and traditional cultural myths, causing a fundamental shift in the perspective from which they can be interpreted" (Novikov 2015, 4). As in the case of some other critics, Novikov also points out the coinages in the narrative. They reflect Karnavalov's nationalism and his deep conviction that the best form of government for Russia is monarchy: "Rejecting all words of foreign origin, Voinovich's eccentric protagonist substitutes 'television' (*televizor*) with 'looker' (*gliadelka*), 'newspaper' (*gazeta*) with 'reader' (*chitalka*) [and] 'airplane' (*samolet*) with 'iron bird' (*zheleznaia ptitsa*)" (Novikov 2015, 5).

Aleksandra Zywert, in her discussion on Voinovich's writing, debates in greater detail some issues raised in the above-mentioned studies. She notes that in Moscowrep even daily newspapers are published in the form of toilet rolls and are devoted almost entirely to the leader (Zywert 2012, 320). The researcher gives some thought to neo-ecclesiastical vocabulary:

The language and gestures of the Russian Orthodox Church have been changed. All the words referring to God have been eliminated

and replaced with neologisms better suited to the new quasi-religion. (Zywert 2012, 325–326, my translation)

Thus, “Oh, Lord!” has been substituted with “Oh, Gyena!” and “Thank God” with “Thank Genialissimo.” Zywert also writes about the issues of literature in Voinovich’s dystopia. She stresses the fact that belles-lettres has become worthless under the yoke of the Party and refers it to Lenin’s assertion that the communists need to be in charge of artistic freedom. Consequently, Moscowrep writers are similar to slaves and are treated like objects. The security service acts as literary critics; strict censorship has been imposed. Thus, in both Stalinist Russia and Voinovich’s dystopic novel, writers are not autonomous authors. A striking aspect of all literature and journalism is the preoccupation of all writing with just one subject: panegyrising the leader. In fact, it is the only permissible theme of literary works, the main goal of which is to confirm everyone’s belief and conviction that all the Communites live in the best country in existence, ruled by a great genius. Even books for children deal only with the leader’s childhood and youth. Genialissimo is hailed as the most eminent writer. Anything worthwhile is falsely attributed to his talent. Zywert notes that “on that occasion, when reinforcing the cult of the leader, an outright forgery takes place: the authorship of great groundbreaking works ... is assigned to Genialissimo, a genius, without exception, surpassing all his literary predecessors in talent” (2012, 337). Zywert compares this situation to the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. He was awarded the Lenin Prize for Literature, but in fact his trilogy was ghost-written by the Soviet literati. Such pseudo-literary output was a kind of tradition in the USSR. Zywert also focusses her attention on the dichotomy between paper and paperless literature in the novel. In fact, it is only the former that exists. In reality, there is no paperless belles-lettres, as there are no printers or mainframe computers to store anything anywhere. Another dichotomy persists between pre-revolutionary and contemporary literature. In the former, no-one is allowed to read the originals, whereas contemporary literary output is pure propaganda. Furthermore, literature has been altered beyond recognition as the totalitarian state works on the assumption that art should change people’s lives, not just reflect it. In a comparable manner to Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, in Moscowrep there are units who specialise in reshaping pre-revolutionary literature, as it is deemed highly imperfect in terms of both its form and content. Zywert points out that in the Soviet Union it was commonplace

to rewrite history, especially in the late 1930s. A good example was published in 1938, titled *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*. In the book, Stalin presented himself as the main revolutionary and civil war leader. Simultaneously, he did not mention many other Bolshevik activists who played a crucial role at that time. Finally, Zywert refers to the wretched life of dissident writers in Voinovich's dystopia. A good example is the protagonist of the narrative. Kartsev is under pressure to make major amendments to his own books. At first, the functionaries keep egging him on, then they try to make him feel guilty. When their efforts prove futile, he is branded an enemy of the state, and a smear campaign is launched against him. The writer suffers from hunger, poverty, loneliness, humiliation and utter degradation. Finally, he even contemplates suicide. This fictional character bears a close resemblance to Voinovich. The novelist, as well as many other Russian political dissidents, also fell victim to the Soviet authorities (Zywert 2012, 334–339).

Iwona Papaj compares a fictional character with a real historical figure, focussing in particular on their purported works. More specifically, in her monograph, she demonstrates analogies between Voinovich's version of Big Brother and Jughashvili and refers to the alleged versatility of Genialissimo and Stalin:

In *Moscow 2042*, the subject matter of books is viewed from a critical perspective. Genialissimo, who personifies Stalin, writes *Вопросы любви и пола* and *Сексуальная революция и коммунизм*. There are reasons to believe that this is an allusion to the emphasised thematic diversity of the Soviet leader's publications. As everybody knows, he raised the issues of linguistics, culture and poetry. For example, his statements about Pushkin influenced the studies on Pushkin. (Papaj 2008, 182–183, my translation)

Karen L. Ryan-Hayes, as with some of the authors mentioned so far, discusses at greater length certain important factors that resulted in the pitiful state of journalism and literature in Voinovich's dystopic reality. In her treatise on Russian satire, she stresses that in *Moscow 2042* the creative process has been obviated. Writers produce works devoted entirely to the leader. No-one reads the original books – only opinions about them. Furthermore, the organs of security are in charge of any literary criticism. Ryan-Hayes emphasises that in Voinovich's dystopia, socialist realism has been replaced with “communist

realism." She also draws our attention to another interesting fact. The Soviet Union suffered from a chronic shortage of paper. This phenomenon is satirically reflected in the novel. Due to a severe lack of paper, hardly any publications are printed in Moscowrep. Thus, the so-called paperless literature allegedly exists in this realm. In the case of computers the situation is even worse: There are no such machines at all. Upon his arrival at the airport, to his utter astonishment, Kartsev learns that 60 years in the future nobody really understands what floppy disks are used for. On a more pessimistic note, Ryan-Hayes observes that

creativity seems to breed rebellion and dissidence in classical dystopian works ... . *Moscow 2042* responds to this tradition with the discouraging premise that art can be utterly tamed and manipulated. (1995, 227)

On the other hand, however, the protagonist (which is a rare case in dystopian universes) helps to bring about the destruction of Moscowrep, and is then exiled from Karnavalov's monarchy, which comes as the next authoritarian state. Voinovich seems to adhere more to Zamyatin's belief in the permanency of revolution than to Orwell's vision of the dystopian reality that nobody can hope to topple. The great merit of Ryan-Hayes' monograph consists in the fact that she draws very apt comparisons between the Soviet and Moscowrep realities. One good example is her reference to the ubiquitous quality of both factual Soviet censorship and its fictional counterpart in the novel. At one point, Kartsev vehemently indicts Soviet censorship. He gives his interlocutors to understand that they cannot expect him to be a conformist. If he were such a person, he would have become a mediocre but prominent secretary of the Writers' Union, a Lenin Prize laureate, a Hero of Labour, etc. a long time ago. There would be no need for him to be a time traveller. He would never have arrived in Moscowrep (Ryan-Hayes 1995, 229). The author of *Contemporary Russian Satire* also analyses the debasement of language in the narrative. She notes that, as in the case of Orwell's dystopian work, Voinovich creates "Newspeak." It is also simplified and standardised to reflect the ideological conformity of the state. What he coins is exceedingly ugly and his coinages recall Orwell's Ingsoc. At the same time, however, the writer is satirising actual Soviet linguistic practice. It is enough to give just a few examples: "sovmarkhoz" (совет народного хозяйства [regional economic council]), "raikom" (районный комитет [district committee]) or "minzdrav" (министерство



здравоохранения [ministry of public health]). In the case of proper names, the debasement of language also takes place: “All the Communites have names ironically full of revolutionary significance: Dzerzhin Gavrilovich Siromakhin, Propaganda Paramonovna Bovinak, Iskrina Romanovna Poliakov, Kommunii Ivanovich Smerchev” (Ryan-Hayes 1995, 234–235). Even the protagonist is renamed, called “Classic” by the Communites. It is worth mentioning that, for a time, a roughly analogous phenomenon did take place in Soviet Russia.

The aforementioned literary scholar Katarzyna Sobijanek also writes about the language of the “oprichniks” (the tsar’s political police functionaries) in Vladimir Sorokin’s vision of future Russia. She points out that their utterances contain a number of archaisms, neologisms, security service jargon and Chinese loanwords, thus stressing the importance of the Chinese language in the novel (Sobijanek 2012, 151). The scholar also notes that the monarch, wielding authoritarian power in his country, controls all news outlets and spreads state propaganda (2012, 155). There is also a reference to the role of books in the neo-*oprichniks*’ world. In the narrative, Russian literary masterpieces *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy are burnt in the clairvoyant’s fireplace. Sobijanek emphasises that in the prophetess’ view only books serving a utilitarian purpose should exist. This can be a reference to Proletkult, an experimental Soviet artistic institution that aspired to create a new, revolutionary working-class aesthetics. Undoubtedly, there is also an allusion to *The Master and Margarita*, a novel by Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, and its famous quote: “рукописи не горят” [“manuscripts don’t burn”]. Moreover, in the researcher’s opinion, the books set ablaze in the story are reminiscent of the Nazi book-burning campaign in the 1930s. It is a well-known fact that in the Third Reich non-Aryan books and authors were banned (e.g. German poet, writer and literary critic, Heinrich Heine) (Sobijanek 2012, 158). Another important issue raised in *Day of the Oprichnik* pertains to the depiction of a totalitarian society where people are brought up in an oppressive atmosphere of hypocrisy, fear and outright lies. Simultaneously, the citizens of such a state are indoctrinated to think that they live in a lawful state. Sobijanek asserts that all of these factors lead to the distortion of language, stifled by ideology. In such circumstances, it is defenceless and becomes a pliant tool in the hands of the state (Sobijanek 2012, 174). She also raises the question of the demise of literature in her article titled “Прогнозирование будущего России в романе-антиутопии “День опричника” В. Г. Сорокина.” To her mind, an average citizen respects books.

It is no wonder that the burning of publications both in Nazi Germany and in Sorokin's novel is supposed to intimidate people into obeying. Komiaga revels in this barbaric act, as his attitude towards it reflects his ruthless character. After all, as Sobijanek points out, book burnings are clear manifestations of totalitarianism (2009, 133). To sum up, in her view the linguistic aspect matters greatly in Sorokin's dystopia.

Alla Latynina, in her review of *The Slynx* by Tatyana Tolstaya, devotes her attention to the demise of books in this novel, which is strongly reminiscent of the situation in *Brave New World* and *1984*, where old publications are practically non-existent. She focusses her attention on the protagonist of the novel and his infatuation and obsession with books. She stresses Benedikt's weak-mindedness, which results in the Golubchiks being shaken down. The main character's strong desire to come into possession of all the available books is insatiable and it is not only he who hunts them down: "So, as the Saniturations head out looking for books (there will be arrests, for sure), Benedikt shows even his teacher no mercy: he betrays Nikita Ivanich, too" (Latynina 2003, 7).

In Huxley's dystopia, the solution to the eternal conflicts besetting mankind since time immemorial is prenatal and social conditioning at its most extreme. In this world, people cannot be at odds over anything in the vast majority of cases, as they belong to different castes in the first place. Moreover, they are programmed to avoid anything unpleasant. Thus, naturally, they abhor whatever might disturb them in any way. Still, even if they feel a temptation to clash over anything, *soma* – a new wonder drug – is always at hand. Consequently, dramatic music, fine art or great works of literature do not exist in this reality. The expression of overwhelming human emotions through music or poetry could result in unexpected feelings and could adversely affect the ignorant bliss of Huxleyan society.

John the Savage is one of the very few people in the World State who knows Shakespeare's literary works. Living outside the World State, due to his "otherness," he is ostracised by his peers (in contrast to them, his complexion looks pale, he can read and his mother behaves promiscuously). That is why his only companions in the Reservation are the playwright's works; because they have become his ticket into the world of moral values, he values them highly.

John is acquainted with Shakespeare because he is an outsider, so it is hardly surprising that almost nobody in the World State has ever heard of the great playwright. The dramatist's artistic output, so saturated with deep, extreme and

violent emotions, is incompatible with the world of triviality, infantilism and babyish nonsense and with the reality of shallow ideas and simple-minded people. The only remaining books are reference manuals.

“Do they read Shakespeare?” asked the Savage ... .

“Certainly not,” said the Head Mistress, blushing.

“Our library,” said Dr. Gaffney, “contains only books of reference.

If our young people need distraction, they can get it at the feelies.

We don’t encourage them to indulge in any solitary amusements.”

(Huxley 1983, 133)

The heavy cost of such reality is a universe of complaisant people who mentally are not far from children basking in simple sensual pleasures of life. To a degree, it is a re-enactment of the Book of Genesis in reverse order. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they become engaged in the struggle between good and evil. In Huxley’s dystopia, people again return to a state of almost child-like innocence at the expense of their lack of sophistication, complex emotions and deep understanding of the world as a whole. When John asks Mond why they cannot read *Othello*, the Controller answers that they would not even understand what the play is really all about.

The only people who have access to real literature are the World Controllers, including Mustapha Mond. Because they are in charge of the World State, they need to be intelligent enough to notice if anyone wants to upset the status quo and the balance of the new political and socioeconomic reality. That gives them the right to possess the books which are inaccessible to the general public, among other things. As the old publications deal with matters such as family, God or romantic love, they are called “pornographic” by the World Controller. People are conditioned by the State to wince at the very thought of all those traditional values, which they refer to as “obscene.” To sum up, as citizens of the World State do not understand deep emotions and strong or irrational feelings, real literature does not exist in Huxley’s flagship dystopia. Even if it did, no-one would comprehend it.

In *Moscow 2042*, Vladimir Voinovich manages to incorporate quite a lot of humour into his narrative and, simultaneously, he depicts a future Russian society imbued with social evils and absurdities. We are dealing with two realities in this dystopian novel. The first one pertains to West Germany prior

to its reunification and to the USSR in the post-Stalinist era, with its relentless onslaught against nonconformist and dissident writers. The second one concerns the vision of the futuristic Russian capital, where communism reigns supreme in the Moscow Communist Republic.

Vitaly Kartsev, Voinovich's fictional alter ego and the narrator/protagonist, when explaining to Smerchev the difficult situation of literary men and literature in the Soviet Union, expresses a pungent criticism: "In my time there were two literatures too – Soviet and anti-Soviet. But, of course, both were paper literatures" (Voinovich 1990, 258). This utterance speaks volumes about the sad fate of Russian literature that was critical of the Soviet regime. In the Soviet Union, dissident writing was not published whatsoever. In turn, mediocre writers loyal to the communist authorities were pampered with massive subsidies, and their books were released by the thousands. Thus, this scathing attack on communist cultural policy does not come as a surprise. Dzerzhin from *Moscowrep* sums it up succinctly.

They banned some writers, thereby assuring them popularity and stimulating great interest in their works. And others, on the contrary, they published in enormous editions, which was completely pointless because no one read them. A tremendous waste of paper and money. (Voinovich 1990, 248)

It is worth bearing in mind that both Kartsev in the fictional world and Voinovich in the real one have been forced into exile. Both totalitarian states feel hostile towards dissident writers. In the post-Stalinist USSR, the government spared no effort in either silencing inconvenient writers or exiling them. Voinovich, a bit comically, describes how the authorities try to deal with an embarrassing situation when Karnavalov, a famous dissident novelist, does not want to leave the country of his own free will and, finally, is secretly parachuted into a foreign country.

In the case of Voinovich's imaginary world, *Moscowrep* officials usually ignore nonconformist literary works even if feelings of deep hatred are expressed towards the supreme Muscovite ruler known as Genialissimo. This is not surprising, because in *Moscow 2042* great literature and professional journalism hardly stand a chance of being printed, as publishing, like most things there, is just window dressing. Consequently, nobody needs to fight against writing,

as, in fact, hardly any electronic or print publications are released. Even if they are, interestingly enough, they are printed on toilet paper and all of them refer to Genialissimo in one way or another.

The toilet paper was, however, made of newsprint. ... I grabbed the end of the roll and began pulling it toward me. And, to be frank, I was not well prepared for what I saw then. No, the roll had not been made from old newspapers. The newspaper itself had been printed in roll form. (Voinovich 1990, 137–138)

It is worth noting the parallel between the quality of press releases and articles printed in Moscowrep (which are nothing but state propaganda) and the material used to publish them. To make a long story short, under Muscovite communist rule, literature and journalism have shrunk both quantitatively and qualitatively. In terms of quantity, due to a distinct lack of paper, the state has resorted to printing on toilet paper. Thus, it is obvious what happens to them sooner rather than later.

In the case of electronic publishing, the state of affairs is even worse. To his utter amazement, Kartsev learns that the artistic teams' writing is never stored in any computers' memory.

"No, listen, I still don't understand," I said with anxiety. "Does this really mean that everything those sergeants write isn't recorded anywhere?"

"That's a good word for it – *recorded*," said Dzerzhin happily. "That's it exactly, none of it is recorded anywhere. A perfect, exact, and very apt definition – it is *unrecorded*." (Voinovich 1990, 247–248)

It comes as a great shock to him that even the mythical mainframe (a large powerful computer which is supposed to collect and artistically blend all the authors' works) is just a big hoax.

I imagined a vast room lit by fluorescent lights, a host of monitors with green screens, flickering signal lights of various colors, and silent people in snow-white lab coats working the keyboards. ... And

so just imagine what I felt when I opened my eyes and saw a small room lit by a single bare bulb, forty watts at best, which did not contain a computer or anything of the sort; there wasn't even a stool in the place. ... "What's this?" I asked absolutely flabbergasted. "This is my invention of genius," said Dzerzhin with a self-satisfied grin. (Voinovich 1990, 247)

As far as quality is concerned, Moscowrep's government policy consists in restricting belles-lettres to extolling Genialissimo as a genius, in both literature and most other fields of science, technology, art, knowledge, etc. Artistic teams, acting under strict discipline, praise him to the skies. Regrettably, most journalism and literature boils down to fictive stories about the ruler's heroic virtues and amazing achievements. Needless to say, all the accounts and tales have little to do with his real life.

To his bewilderment, Kartsev learns that there is an obvious contrast between Soviet literature and the journalism of his times and their contemporary counterparts. Admittedly, the Soviet novels or newspapers were imbued with propaganda, but some authors were nevertheless able to include things like romantic love or poetry in their books or articles. Furthermore, in sharp contrast to Moscowrep (where Genialissimo is the only reference point), Lenin, the Soviet cult leader, is not the only louse falsely portrayed in Soviet belles-lettres. On top of all that, Dzerzhin strips Kartsev of his illusions that the citizens of Moscowrep are unaware of the farce they are dealing with. "What's interesting about our society is that everyone knows everything, but everyone pretends to know nothing. Is that clear?" (Voinovich 1990, 248). It is not very different to the reality of the Soviet Union, where many people saw a wide divergence between what the government propaganda machine presented and what everybody witnessed in real terms. In fact, Moscowrep stands even in sharper contrast to Huxley's dystopia, where the vast majority of the citizens of the World State would never understand even basic political, emotional or religious concepts.

Sim Simych Karnavalov, one of the novel characters, is a monarchist planning to restore tsarism in Russia, and is therefore obsessed with using only "native" Russian words and taking it all to absurd levels. For example, he calls newspapers "читалки" ["readers"] and television "гляделка" ["the looker"]. Thus, he creates and uses neologisms based on Slavic/Russian root words (e.g. "читалки" from "читать" – to read) as he thinks loanwords and other foreign/

Western influences corrupt his mother tongue and culture. It is now wonder then that he sticks to whatever he perceives as traditionally Russian. This is the status quo in the novel narrator's present time. When the plot of the narrative fast-forwards to 2042 Moscow, in Moscowrep, we encounter coinages as well. This time, however, in derivational terms they resemble often nonsensical compounds of the Soviet era.

I was feeling the call of nature, actually two calls of nature, and, slightly embarrassed, I asked where the men's room was.

"The men's room?" Smerchev frowned and looked inquisitively at Irina Romanovna.

"What Classic Nikitich means is the natfunktbur," said Iskrina Romanovna with a smile. (*Voinovich 1990, 134*)

Moreover, as in the case of Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, people are given names related to their job or in honour of something or somebody. Hence, Kartsev is called "Classic" as his novels allegedly belong to the literary canon. Furthermore, acronyms like "Moscowrep" (Moscow Communist Republic) are in use, which is still characteristic of the contemporary Russian language.

In conclusion, the reality of Voinovich's dystopia is not as pessimistic as in the case of many other works of this genre. After all, at the end of the novel, a new regime comes to power, which may be somewhat good news – for literature and journalism as well.

Similarly, in the case of *The Slynx* by Tatyana Tolstaya, at the end of the narrative the ruler is ousted in a coup and the protagonist's father-in-law seizes power. The author paints a bleak post-apocalyptic picture of the future of Russia after a local nuclear conflict. The country has regressed to a new Stone Age in the aftermath of some unspecified nuclear blast. It is cut off from the rest of the world and people have turned into two subspecies: the Degenerates, who are the genetic mutants born after the Blast, and the Oldeners, the war survivors who have achieved what appears to be quasi-immortality (apparently they do not age). The first group is endowed with the mentality of ignorant, uneducated and uncivilised bumpkins, whereas the latter are people who remember pre-war Russia and desire to restore culture to its pre-apocalypse condition. However, the crux of the matter lies in the divergence between the past and the present. As it has changed greatly, even language as a means of communication

is a barrier to a good rapport between the Degenerates and the Oldeners. The narrator explains it succinctly: "When it comes down to it, the Oldeners don't understand our words, and we don't understand theirs" (Tolstaya 2007, 23).

In Aldous Huxley's *World State*, language is imbued with clichés, set phrases and banal – often nonsense – rhymes. In the case of Tolstaya's dystopia, it gets distorted and simplified due to the passage of time and the primitiveness of the world after a cataclysmic event vaguely specified in the novel. In Benedikt's unsophisticated place of residence, some words and phrases that refer to very general notions get distorted or oversimplified in terms of meaning. A good example is the term *philosophy* as the study of the nature of the universe and the meaning of existence. In the novel, it is spelt *feelosophy* and pertains more to one's frame of mind.

Today, for instance, toward evening, right at work, who knows why, feelosophy suddenly churned up inside Benedikt. Dimly, like a shadow under the water, something in his heart started to turn, to torment and call him. (Tolstaya 2007, 48)

In the novel, the Oldeners still know the words that have become obsolete because they do not refer to any real things or notions known to the Degenerates. As technological civilisation came to an end after the Blast, no-one save the nuclear holocaust survivors understands words such as *car* or *petrol* in a reality with no automotive industry.

Now he's saying: guzzelean. It's water but it burns. Just where has anyone ever seen water burning? That's never happened and it never will. ... Nothing in nature says for water to burn. Unless the Last Days are coming? (Tolstaya 2007, 226)

As this is sometimes their only link with the pre-war world, it is not surprising that the Oldeners stick so much to both the out-of-date expressions and the old traditions and customs, even if the Degenerates do not understand them whatsoever. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the Blast survivors so meticulously hold the funeral ceremony depicted in the literary work.

In a society which is as primitive as this, books, if extant, are a rarity. Benedikt the scribe, the main protagonist, learns that at the end of the novel when



he tries desperately to track down any which may remain. Moreover, few people who are not indifferent towards the written word are not always sure if and how many of them still exist: "They also say that somewhere there are Oldenprint books. Who knows if it's true, but there's a rumor. Those books, they say, were around before the Blast" (Tolstaya 2007, 33).

In the course of the story, the central character falls in love with his books more and more and, towards the end of the plot, he realises how many factors can pose a major threat both to them and to other pieces of art: "There are threats to art all around: from people, rodents, the damp!" (Tolstaya 2007, 258). Finally, books become something priceless for him.

A book was out of the question, better to die than give away a book. Like an idiot he went and gave the Head Stoker the one with "Slitherum Slatherum," and then he was sorry, so sorry! He kept imagining what a good book it was, how beautifully it stood on the shelf – clean and warm, and how, poor thing, it was probably lying around at the Stoker's somewhere now in a messy, gloomy, smoky izba. (Tolstaya 2007, 228)

It is worth stressing that no real publishing houses, bookshops or department stores exist in the wooden settlement Moscow has turned into. Consequently, new books – or, more precisely, manuscripts – are copied and sold at street markets. Furthermore, Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe, the new ruler of the land, claims authorship of all the publications existing in Tolstaya's dystopia. In fact, he has appropriated the authorship of all the manuscripts that he has allegedly written. Such a hoax does not come as a surprise in a world where people do not have any real access to trustworthy information and, what is more, to put it simply, most of them are impaired in mind and body (except for the few remaining Oldeners). Benedikt, who is the central character in the novel, labours under the illusion that Glorybe has truly written all the publications in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. However, in the course of the narrative, he learns something he can hardly comprehend at first: The manuscripts themselves can be taken as proof of the mendacity of such statements. Obviously, it is not feasible for the same author to write continuously in completely different styles. Varvara Lukinishna points this fact out to Benedikt when she tries to pinpoint the common denominator of all the available books allegedly authored by Glorybe.

“You know, Benedikt, poetry is everything to me. Our job is pure joy. And I’ve noticed something. Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe, he’s different at different times. Do you understand what I mean? It’s as though he speaks with different voices.” (Tolstaya 2007, 37)

In Tolstaya’s Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, the Saniturations, who are the guardians of public order, sow terror whenever the Degenerates and Oldeners come across them. In Benedikt’s universe, those detained by the Saniturations never return: “Because they take you away and treat you, and after treatment people don’t come back. No one ever comes back” (Tolstaya 2007, 40).

In conclusion, in Tolstaya’s panorama of a futuristic rural Moscow, real books or journals are hardly available and only the few nuclear holocaust survivors realise the full extent of its vulgarity and crudeness. Except for the Oldeners, people can barely understand anything unrelated to their everyday life of country bumpkins. Only the Blast survivors cherish the hope that progress and civilisation are not completely a thing of the past.

In the case of *Day of the Oprichnik* by Vladimir Sorokin, the fictive state seems to be even more sinister than Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. In his disturbing panorama of futuristic Russia, people suffer under the yoke of an autocratic neo-tsarist regime that runs the country with an iron fist. The so-called “oprichniks” are the monarch’s cruel henchmen who sow terror wherever they go. They are as ruthless as the original *oprichniki* (the tsarist guard set up in the sixteenth century to crush the real and imaginary enemy of Ivan the Terrible, the first Tsar of Russia). In a manner typical of many dystopias, literature in *Day of the Oprichnik* is obsequious to the new tsar. Many works are just panegyrics on the monarch.

How dear Russia in you did resound,  
How by Nature your spirit was shapen,  
How abruptly your own time came ‘round. (Sorokin 2011, 91)

Admittedly, unlike publications in *Moscow 2042* being totally devoted to extolling the virtues of the absolute communist ruler, writing in Sorokin’s dystopia also deals with other subjects, but even then, it is imbued with high praise for the splendour, magnificence and superiority of the Tsardom of Russia. The titles of the books published under neo-tsarist rule are indicative of this fact: *The Motherland’s Expanses*, *The Colour of Apple Trees* or *Song of the Chechen Mountains*.

Obviously, many articles and literary works pertain directly to the alleged integrity and virtues of the monarch, a bit similarly to the laudatory articles and pseudo-biographies of Genialissimo in Voinovich's dystopia: *His Majesty's Childhood* or *I Have You to Thank for Everything!*

As in the case of many other dystopic worlds, literature in Sorokin's novel is curtailed qualitatively. In fact, it deals with just three main themes: "On the left side there's Orthodox Church literature; on the right the Russian classics; and in the middle, the latest works by contemporary writers" (Sorokin 2011, 89). Moreover, publications are subject to preventive censorship. Even bookshops need a government permit to sell publications: "Bookstands are also standardized, approved by His Majesty and approved by the Literary Chamber" (Sorokin 2011, p. 90).

At one point, the author makes explicit reference to *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, where books are outlawed and burnt if found anywhere. Bradbury's novel depicts the destruction of the written word by firemen, whereas in Sorokin's narrative a clairvoyant and especially the oprichniks wreak havoc on belles-lettres. However, there is a significant difference between the novels in the scale of destruction. In *Fahrenheit 451*, fire brigades burn all the books they can find or come across. In Sorokin's dystopia, the tsar's courtiers do away with those deemed subversive or superfluous. "'What you looking at? You never burned books?' 'We burn only harmful books, Praskovia Mamontovna. Obscene and subversive books'" (Sorokin 2011, 114).

Komiaga, the protagonist of the novel, pays a visit to an important clairvoyant, Praskovia Mamontovna. She is portrayed as an intimidating woman speaking in riddles and accompanied by her Chinese bodyguards. The seer is tough on the classics that, in Komiaga's view, are helpful to the state because they lead to a resurgence of nationalism. In Huxley's dystopian universe, literary masterpieces hardly exist, whereas in Sorokin's world a number of them are still extant. Praskovia enjoys burning the greatest masterpieces of Russian literature (*The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky or *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy) and simultaneously recommends reading exclusively reference books and manuals (similarly to *Brave New World*).

"Dovey, books should only be practical: about carpentry, stove-building, contracting, electricity, shipbuilding, mechanical engineering, artificial hearing, on weaving and sheaving, on casting and basting, on foundries on boundaries, on plastic and mastic."  
(Sorokin 2011, 114)

Thus, she shows herself to be a complete ignoramus and fraudster behind the veil of a feigned atmosphere of mystery and mysticism. She provides Komiaga with enigmatic or meaningless messages and incomprehensible puzzles when he wants to learn anything.

One more question. I haven't ever asked it, but today something urges me to ask. A serious frame of mind. I screw up my courage.

"So what else do you want?" Praskovia looks at me steadily.

"What will happen to Russia?"

She doesn't answer, but looks at me carefully.

I wait with trepidation.

"It'll be all right." (Sorokin 2011, 119)

When conversing with the seer, Komiaga casts his mind back to the "book and manuscript bonfires."

I've seen many book and manuscript bonfires - in our courtyard, and in the Secret Department. For that matter the Writers' Chamber itself burned quite a bit on Manezh Square, purging itself of its own subversive writers, thereby cutting our workload. ... They kept bringing them and bringing them. From other cities they came to Moscow, the capital, to burn the legacy of the White Troubles. They came to take an oath to His Majesty. That fire burned nearly two months... (Sorokin 2011, 115-116)

This deliberate act of the destruction of literature is reminiscent of the Nazi book burnings in the 1930s, when about twenty thousand books were burnt in Germany. Both in the case of Hitler's fascist regime and in Sorokin's fictional world, publications by writers deemed un-German and anti-tsarist, respectively, were doomed to annihilation. The German book burnings were just a prelude to the later calamities and crimes of the Holocaust and World War II. Perhaps Sorokin wanted to point out here that if contemporary Russia stays its autocratic and warmongering course under Putin, no good will come of it. Regrettably, the Russo-Georgian War (2008), the annexation of Crimea, the Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and finally the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine confirmed some of his worst fears.

To recapitulate briefly, journalism and literature in *Day of the Oprichnik* are subject to strict rules in terms of what can be published. Unauthorised publications are outlawed. The monarch and his courtiers are determined to crack down hard on anything that even borders on nonconformity.

For the issues discussed in this study, there are at least three important common denominators. The most obvious is linguistic phenomena: the demise and distortion of words in *The Slynx* due to the rural Stone Age character of post-apocalyptic Moscow or the newly coined terms in *Moscow 2042* related to its novel totalitarian system. The second vital denominator pertains to the physical destruction of books, the extent of which depends on the novel. In *Brave New World*, only the World Controllers can possess them, whereas in the case of *The Slynx* and *Day of the Oprichnik* they still do exist, but are liable to annihilation due to the passage of time and burning, respectively. The last important factor is the distortion or even demise of the truth. In the case of Huxley's novel, only World Controllers have access to pre-Fordian literature and journals; in Tolstaya's dystopia, a nuclear blast and the relentless flow of time are responsible for the pitiful state of affairs; and in Voinovich's book everybody knows everything but everyone plays dumb.

Even nowadays autocratic regimes wage war on books and journalism. In China, its authorities insist that "subversive" literature should be withdrawn from Hong Kong libraries. On 5 July 2020, the BBC World Service reported that

at least nine books have become unavailable or marked as "under review," according to the South China Morning Post newspaper. They include books authored or co-authored by Joshua Wong, a prominent pro-democracy activist, and pro-democracy politician Tanya Chan. ("Hong Kong security law" 2020)

This was unquestionably a further step towards subjugating this former British colony to authoritarian communist rule. It turns out that people fight under the banner of freedom of thought and speech outside of the realm of literature as well. And the fight never ends.

## Works Cited

Fletcher, M. D. 1989. "Voinovich's 'Consumer' Satire In 2042." *The International Fiction Review*, 16.2.

- Hejwowski, Krzysztof, and Grzegorz Mróz. 2019. *Nowe wspaniałe światy Aldousa Huxleya i ich recepcja w Polsce*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- "Hong Kong security law: Pro-democracy books pulled from libraries." 2020. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53296810>.
- Huxley, Aldous. 1983. *Brave New World*. Hong Kong: Longman House.
- Latynina, Alla. 2003. "'There's Your Spiritual Renaissance for You': On Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx*." *Russian Studies in Literature*, 39(4): 66–71.
- Madloch, Joanna. 1994. "Moskwa 2042 Władimira Wojnowicza: science fiction czy powieść rozrachunkowa?" *Rusycystyczne Studia Literaturoznawcze*, 18: 67–72.
- Novikov, Tatyana. 2015. "The Poetics of Confrontation: Carnival in V. Voinovich's *Moscow 2042*." *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 42(4): 491–505.
- Papaj, Iwona. 2008. *Rytuały językowe w satyrze Władimira Wojnowicza*. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej.
- Ryan-Hayes, Karen L. 1995. *Contemporary Russian Satire: A Genre Study*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sherborne, Michael. 2005. *Brave New World: York Notes Advanced*. York Press. Pearson Education Limited.
- Sobijanek, Katarzyna. 2009. "Прогнозирование будущего России в романе-антиутопии "День опричника" В. Г. Сорокина." *Политическая лингвистика*, 4(30): 133–137.
- Sobijanek, Katarzyna. 2013. *Oblicza totalitaryzmu we współczesnej antyutopii rosyjskiej*. Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie.
- Sorokin, Vladimir. 2011. *Day of the Oprichnik*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Tolstaya, Tatyana. 2007. *The Slynx*. New York: The New York Review of Books.
- Voinovich, Vladimir. 1990. *Moscow 2042*. San Diego–New York–London: Harcourt Brace Iovanovich Publishers.
- Waddell, Nathan. 2016. "Signs of the T: Aldous Huxley, High Art, and American Technocracy." In *Brave New World: Contexts and Legacies*, edited by Jonathan Greenberg and Nathan Waddell. University of Nottingham.
- Zamyatin, Evgeny. 2012. *We*. New York: Harper Voyager.
- Zywert, Aleksandra. 2012. *Pisarstwo Władimira Wojnowicza*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu.