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Locating the Totalitarian Insanity: The Chronotope of the Asylum in Mykola Khvyliovyi's *A Tale about the Sanatorium Zone* and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

ABSTRACT

The article compares the formal and intentional aspects of the novels *A Tale About the Sanatorium Zone* by the Ukrainian writer of 1920s Mykola Khvyliovyi and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey through the prism of Bakhtin's chronotope. The reason of many coincidences in these two novels about madness lies in the similar historical context of two eras – the post-revolutionary USSR and post-WWII America. The author of the article analyses the asylum (the cuckoo's nest) and the sanatorium (the zone) as the incarnations of ruining the personality. The time in such conditions is shown in a distorted form, which is why it becomes even more neurotic. The chronotopic structure of both texts clearly reflects verges of human existence in a totalitarian society and reveals the ways of psychoisolation and psychomanipulation undertaken by the power system.

KEYWORDS

insanity, totalitarianism, asylum, chronotope, Mykola Khvyliovyi, Ken Kesey

Since the 17th century the isolation of people with mental illnesses in Europe has been built on the model of a panoptic prison. This practice has inspired not only the spheres of politics and law, but has become a universal metaphor of the psychotic discourse in arts and literature. The act of creation involving psychotic discourse in the text indicates the line between insanity and modern literature, called by Michelle Foucault the "experience of mad-

ness.” According to him, to be an artist (or a genius) is not equal of being a madman, because the act of creation denies any sign of madness (the well-known formula of madness as “the absence of work.”) The proximity of madness and literature, says Foucault, “must not be interpreted as a psychological kinship that has been laid bare at last”:

Discovered as a language silencing itself in its superimposition on itself, madness neither demonstrates nor recounts the birth of an *œuvre* (or something that, by genius or by chance, might have become an *œuvre*); it designates the empty form from which such an *œuvre* comes, i.e. the place from which it is unceasingly absent, where it will never be found because it has never been there. There, in that pale region, beneath that essential cover, the twin incompatibility of an *œuvre* and madness is unveiled; it is the blind spot of each one's possibility, and of their mutual exclusion.¹

This phenomenon is presented in a number of novels and stories, especially in those which focus on depicting an asylum. Each country has its own “history of madness” in literature, but we can find some commonalities even in different periods of history. When comparing the formal and intentional aspects of *A Tale About the Sanatorium Zone* by the Ukrainian writer of 1920s Mykola Khvyliovyi and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, a lot of similarities can be found despite the fact, that they were written in different times and authors couldn't know about the other's text. The reason of such coincidences lies in the similar historical context of two eras – the NEP as the first step to the Soviet terror after the Great Revolution and Civil War and post-war America, which in the words of Sheldon Wolin was moving in the second half of the 20th century toward *inverted totalitarianism*. The mental institution (the cuckoo's nest) and the sanatorium (the zone) as its analogue are incarnations of ruining the personality. Using such architectonics in their works, both writers create a permanent chronotope of the asylum, where characters must behave like patients or medical staff.

Although Khvyliovyi doesn't call the scene of his novel “a madhouse,” the general atmosphere of the zone is full of mental illness – hysteria, schizophrenia, nymphomania, suicidal ideation etc. The doctors and nurses don't use radical curing methods in this sanatorium, but the patients are locked in an unseen prison of their own being, losing the connection with the real world. According to Dominique Colas, the basis of the early Soviet repressive machine lies in the psychology of its creators. Colas had noticed the rare but consistent use of the word “hysteria” and some other terms of psy-

¹ M. Foucault, *Madness, the absence of an œuvre*, [in:] *History of Madness*, ed. J. Khalfa, London 2006, p. 548.

chiatry in the writings of Lenin, especially in his letters.² When Lenin saw the threat of counter-revolution or someone was annoying him, he advised to immediately send the person to the sanatorium. It was a clear message of using the mental institutions for isolation and punishing the unreliable persons. The first uses of the so-called “sanatoriums” for repressive purposes were documented in 1919 during the imprisonment of Maria Spiridonova, Lenin’s former ally.

Half a century later in the USA people were also losing contact with reality. Mostly because of the traumatic experience of the War and the fear of a nuclear conflict, together with the later Vietnam War. Margot A. Henriksen in her fundamental work *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* demonstrates the artistic expression of the post-WWII America “crowded with the insane,”³ who have to be cured in mental institutions. These people represented not only the veterans, who exhibit the psychological agony of anxiety, but the usual middle-class people and any other social groups, including “small men.” It was the main factor that launched the beat generation together with Kesey’s view of the American society.

The external opposition in both Khvyliovyi’s and Kesey’s texts transforms into an internal one and it reflects the hidden social, political, moral and philosophical controversies of post-revolutionary and post-war era. Contradictions caused by the limited real personal rights and freedoms are encoded in the topical concept of the zone and in the barred reality of the cuckoo’s nest.

The semantics of the word *zone* marks the limitation of space, both external (territorial) and internal (psychic) isolation. The zone is a construct of people, who are isolated by the bounded space and the contradiction between their true essence and the desire to appear someone else. The zone eliminates the individual perception, establishing thinking and behaviour stereotype set by the system. The tragedy inside the zone is the inability to realize the spiritual and volitional principles, to break free.

The meaning of the idiom *cuckoo’s nest* is just alike a metaphor of a closed system, in which the nestlings are properly isolated from the external influences and where they are bounded until they are ready to fly. The word *cuckoo* is not only a reference to the common meaning of the madman, but also shows the connection between the deviant behaviour of this species of birds and the mental state of the patients in the asylum. They are kept there

² D. Colas, *Le léninisme: philosophie et sociologie politiques du léninisme*, Paris 1982, p. 32.

³ M. A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*, Berkeley 1997, p. 118.

until they can adapt to the demands of society – and that in the view of the Americans is possible only through physical and mental elimination of their illness. The cuckoo's nest is a legitimised form of the system (the Combine), which presses on those who doesn't accept its rules by rebelling in the form of insanity against public order, the taboos, mechanization of existence and facelessness.

The two concepts of the asylum in the novels of Khvyliovyi and Kesey despite some opposites complement the authors' outlined picture of reality. The zone provides more space for free movement of the patients between different loci – the building, the couch lawn, the commanding heights, the lake. All these loci has their symbolic meaning, e.g. the commanding heights are the top of anarch's (the main protagonist's) thoughts and feelings, because "the best moments of being at the sanatorium zone were connected" with them.⁴ Whereas the space of the cuckoo's nest is far more limited, besides it has a rather vertical structure: on the floor of the therapeutic department the area of the patients' movement is clearly limited, it is separated from the staff room with a glass wall. The only place where patients can temporarily stay alone and uncontrolled is the tub room. The centre of this locus is represented by the control panel, which marks the point of McMurphy's resistance against the Combine and become the instrument of Bromden's escape from the "nest" in the final. Other floors of the asylum consist of the Disturbed ward, the Shock Shop and operating rooms. Transition from one level to another means moving between the circles of hell.

The resemblance of the zone and prisons, which later will be argued by Foucault, is declared by the cynical character Carno: "Life is still a prison; you only need to furnish it with a canary and a samovar."⁵ These details correlate with the radio and the drinking fountain in Kesey's novel: the "canary bird/radio" pair means the art for the masses, which is designated with simple functionality with no relation to the symphonic sound and spirit; the "samovar/ drinking fountain" pair shows the satisfaction of the basic physiological needs for a weakened human and serves only for sustaining the viability without any vitality. The basis of such systems is the seeming freedom, the illusion of democracy and equal access to life benefits, which actually turns into the equal unavailability of these benefits.

The factors of the external space play a significant role in both texts. In the *Tale About the Sanatorium Zone* they are represented by the Galtaiian Borders, the experimental farm and the prison. All these locations contrast

⁴ M. Khvyliovyi, *Tvory v piatiokh tomakh*, vol. 3, Toronto–Baltimore 1982, p. 151.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

in a certain way with the reality of the zone and create an effect of an invisible sphere around the zone, outside of which there is a very different chronotope:

The town was always so incomprehensible, like a Korean idol. There was the side path near the experimental farm, where girls were returning from the greenhouses at the evening and sang songs at the lilac sunset. These were the wailful songs, which started with the lines about the “high mountain” and ended with “the youth does not return.” At that moment the experimental farm flew away from the sanatorium zone to unreal distances. However in the morning joy was bubbling here. When the dew fell down and the light was clamouring nuclearly, then the stones of all the spectral scale were falling to the roofs of the experimental farm. That was the crumbling of the land’s crown – the sun.⁶

The contemplation of these objects is only possible from the commanding heights, where anarch enjoys spending his time, especially with his lover Maya and the young poet Khlonia. It’s like a tower, which provides an opportunity to see the whole outer world, where his thoughts and dreams about anarchism eager. The tragic conflict inside him and with the society distances him from the commanding heights and the real world.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* there are some notable external spaces, such as the gym. It’s the place where basketball matches between the patients and the aids, initiated by McMurphy, took place. This change of scenery suddenly brings patients within the scope of normal, less regulated and more democratic existence, because the field has the same rules for everyone, in addition, everyone is able to stand up for oneself and for the honour of his team. Although the patients cannot compete with the skills of the aids, they like winners because they do what they are not permitted to do, at least in terms of Miss Ratched’s system.

The more explicit form of the external space is the town, which patients pass during their trip to the ocean. The very fact that they step out of the cuckoo’s nest causes a huge resistance from Miss Ratched, because in this case, patients can feel themselves as part of the outside world and even manage to survive without adapting to conventional norms. From the narrators perspective the outer world absorbed the features of the Combine:

All up the coast I could see the signs of what the Combine had accomplished since I was last through this country, things like, for example – a t r a i n stopping at a station and laying a string of full-grown men in mirrored suits and machined hats, laying

⁶ Ibidem, p. 136.

them like a hatch of identical insects, half-life things coming pht-pht-pht out of the last car, then hooting its electric whistle and moving on down the spoiled land to deposit another hatch. [...] Or things like five thousand houses punched out identical by a machine and strung across the hills outside of town, so fresh from the factory they're still linked together like sausages. [...] The houses looked so much alike that, time and time again, the kids went home by mistake to different houses and different families. Nobody ever noticed. They ate and went to bed.⁷

And yet the presence of patients in the town is a breakthrough, not only physical but also spiritual. No wonder that the patients during the trip feel unprecedented confidence in their own usefulness. Swimming in the open ocean becomes a real liberation from the mental prison, because this locus could not be a space for existence of the insane in the American post-industrial society. The fishing trip is a triumph for the patients, but they don't realize the illusory nature of such freedom.

In Khvyliovyi's novel the steppe is similar to the foresaid ocean, because in the romantic hallucinations and dreams of the protagonist it's associated with Makhno's spirit of anarchy. To a certain extent the function of the steppe, clearly presented to anarchy, is transferred to the Galtaian Borders, which separate the isolated world of the zone (in fact – the world of a huge mechanised state) from the rest of the world, whence in the vision of anarchy the future Attila rides carrying the real sanitation of humanity. The connection of two worlds is also presented by the river, which takes the scream of the sanatorium's fool to the sea.

The key moment in understanding the spatial limitations of characters is their inability to cross its boundaries. This marks the final defeat of the system that is able to keep people in mental hospitals on condition that "nobody is detained" there and anyone can leave even tomorrow.⁸ "But when anarchy was moving to the idea that he might, if willing, leave the sanatorium zone, somewhere in the deep hidings there was a thought that he doesn't tell the truth: that he will never leave from here, that there is no return from here, and that is – if it might be said – the whole drama."⁹ At the end of his suffering he is not only convinced of his despair, but also accepts that burden and puts up with it. The patients of the cuckoo's nest are held there on their own will, totally surrendered into the hands of the Big Nurse. McMurphy knows that his faith depends completely on Ratched's will: he can be sent back to jail or be kept for treatment. It remains unclear for him,

⁷ K. Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, New York 1976, pp. 235–236.

⁸ M. Khvyliovyi, *Tvory...*, op. cit., p. 134.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

why all the patients believe in the therapeutic effect of their isolation, if not for themselves, then at least for the society.

The time in such conditions is felt in a distorted form and becomes even more neurotic, which influences character's behaviour. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* the author uses an amorphous chronotope, where Bromden's view is reduced to a form of a comic book: "Like a cartoon world, where the figures are flat and outlined in black, jerking through some kind of goofy story that might be real funny if it weren't for the cartoon figures being real guys..."¹⁰ This cartoon-like being is fragmented and split into phases, where each character's field of action is limited by its "frame", and their thoughts and expressions pop up in the form of "word bubbles" (as it's shown on one of the novel's cultic book covers with arts of Joe Sacco). Bromden feels that time is being manipulated with a fog machine, which helps the Big Nurse "to set the wall clock at whatever speed she wants." This feeling of "fake time" enhances the effect of existence detached from reality, which is set according to the considerations of Miss Ratched:

She's given to turning up the speed this way on days like, say, when you got somebody to visit you or when the VFW brings down a smoker show from Portland – times like that, times you'd like to hold and have stretch out. That's when she speeds things up. But generally it's the other way, the slow way. She'll turn that dial to a dead stop and freeze the sun there on the screen so it don't move a scant hair for weeks, so not a leaf on a tree or a blade of grass in the pasture shimmers. [...] You sit solid and you can't budge, you can't walk or move to relieve the strain of sitting, you can't swallow and you can't breathe. The only thing you can move is your eyes and there's nothing to see but petrified Acutes across the room waiting on one another to decide whose play it is. The old Chronic next to me has been dead six days, and he's rotting to the chair. And instead of fog sometimes she'll let a clear chemical gas in through the vents, and the whole ward is set solid when the gas changes into plastic.¹¹

It is clear, that this sort of "fake time" exists only from the narrator's schizophrenic perspective, but it's a universal view of all the patients and all the members of the totalitarian society, who experience the manipulation of the system.

A similar picture can be found in the *Tale About the Sanatorium Zone*. The time is outlined unclearly, though the season in the text is defined as autumn with a corresponding symbolic stress. However the alternation of days and periods is acyclic, which is traced in sudden changes of weather.

¹⁰ K. Kesey, *One Flew...*, op. cit., p. 39.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 82.

The climate in the text expresses the condition of persons lost in the Soviet world; it becomes a huge metaphor of anarch's internal experiences, emotional blasts and self-denial. At the meantime the sanatorium, i.e. the asylum has a strict daily routine, which creates an oppressive atmosphere of mechanical existence, brought from the everyday life.

Such mechanised organization of chronos ruins any rational aspects of time in the novels. In fact, Bakhtin proves the presence of time which is "utterly excluded from action"¹² in novels built in a form of vision, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He says:

Everything that on earth is divided by time, here, in this verticality, coalesces into eternity, into pure simultaneous coexistence. Such divisions as time introduces – "earlier" and "later" – have no substance here; they must be ignored in order to understand this vertical world; everything must be perceived as being within a *single time*, that is, in the synchrony of a single moment; one must see this entire world as simultaneous.¹³

It's the exact way of putting the vision of inferno into anarch's hallucinations and Bromden's nightmares, "a big machine room down in the bowels of a dam where people get cut up by robot workers."¹⁴

One of the sanatorium's patient Unicum claims that "everything in the zone is done automatically":

At eight o'clock – the bell rings, then breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea, supper. Between them – couches, one of them is silent. In the hours of couches there are always quarrels with the nurses. As you see, it's impossible without this: one patient is undisciplined; the other just accidentally doesn't follow the order... For example, during the silent couch instead of lying like a log someone jumps up and gets away somewhere.¹⁵

So patients just meet their basic needs most of the time, nothing more. The complete absence of therapy (especially in psychological forms) reduces staying in the sanatorium to an animal existence, which sometimes is hedonistic, and sometimes unbearable.

The American mental institution of the second half of the 20th century does the contrary – it creates a widespread therapeutic system and intro-

¹² M. Bakhtin M., *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics*, [in:] idem, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. M. Holquist and C. Emerson, Austin 2010, p. 156.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 157.

¹⁴ K. Kesey, *One Flew...*, op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁵ M. Khvyliovyi, *Tvory...*, op. cit., p. 77.

duces various forms of influence on the patients psyche with quasi medical purposes. This “progress” of curing the madness is highly praised by the Public Relation man,

“saying how overjoyed he is that mental hospitals have eliminated all the old-fashioned cruelty”: “What a cheery atmosphere, don’t you agree?” [...] “Oh, when I think back on the old days, on the filth, the bad food, even, yes, brutality, oh, I realize, ladies, that we have come a long way in our campaign!”¹⁶

This regulated system, designed to discipline the patient and to eliminate its individual volitional impulses, causing the dominance of the so-called “gray weekday of the sanatorium,” when any time period of existence loses its meaning and any activity, which was to be directed to overcome the absurd, turns itself into absurdity: neither the endless sojourning, nor vegetating in the same place does not allow to feel the Dasein. The isolation patients are depicted as yet not death, but also as no longer living. That’s why Iuri Lavrinenko interprets the zone as “a morgue of revolution, where living corpses of the rebellion heroes came from everywhere [...] to cure their mental scars or just to rotten.”¹⁷ The couch in the sanatorium zone is just an act of nonsense, as the whole schedule at the cuckoo’s nest. Nurse Katria, who represents a runaway in Khvyliovyi’s novel, dreams about the only ideal world: “I imagine the future only as a beautiful fragrant garden, where the human itself will be the master. In any other cases life has no sense. To fight only for winning the right to be a supplement to a machine is folly.”¹⁸ The mechanical existence is the greatest burden for a person as a mental creature. By losing this basement anarch loses faith in the possibility of building a different world.

The chronotopic structure of both texts clearly reflects verges of human existence in a totalitarian society and reveals the ways of psychoisolation and psychomanipulation undertaken by the power system. Both Khvyliovyi and Kesey make attempts to create the contemporary society, which is clearly divided into victims and executors. Confrontation of their texts shows the chronotopic organisation of the text. Further comparative studies of the two novels could reveal the phenomenological and poetical basis of madness in two different literatures through the common prism of totalitarianism.

¹⁶ K. Kesey, *One Flew...*, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁷ I. Dyvnych [Iurii Lavrinenko], *Ideii khudozhnikh tvoriv M. Khvyliovoho*, [in:] Department of manuscript funds and textology of Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the NASU, fund 206, folder 18, p. 1.

¹⁸ M. Khvyliovyi, *Tvory...*, op. cit., p. 79.

MIEJSCE SZALEŃSTWA TOTALITARNEGO:
CHRONOTOP AZYLU W *POWIEŚCI O SANATORYJNEJ ZONIE* MYKOŁY CHWYLOWEGO
ORAZ W *LOCIE NAD KUKUŁCZYM GNIAZDEM* KENA KESEYA

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł jest propozycją komparatystycznej analizy formalnych i tematycznych aspektów dwóch książek: *Powieści o sanatoryjnej зоне* autorstwa dwudziestowiecznego ukraińskiego pisarza Mykoły Chwyłowego i *Lotu nad kukułczym gniazdem* Kena Keseya, przy użyciu koncepcji chronometru Bachtina. Autor analizuje azyl (gniazdo kukułki) i sanatorium (zonę) jako inkarnacje zepsucia osobowości. Czas w takich warunkach jest przedstawiony w zniekształconej formie, współgrając z neurotycznością przestrzeni. Struktura chronotopowa obu tekstów wyraźnie odzwierciedla ludzką egzystencję w społeczeństwie totalitarnym i ujawnia sposoby psychoizolacji i psycho-manipulacji podjętej przez system.

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obłąd, totalitaryzm, azyl, chronotop, Mykoła Chwyłowy, Ken Kesey

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