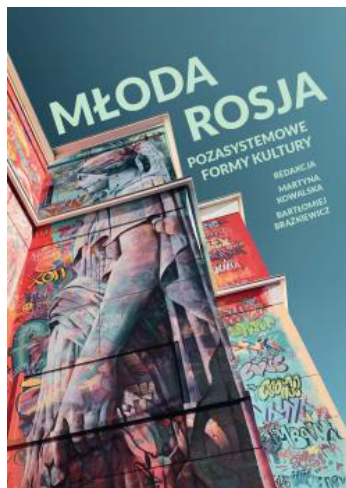


Young Russia: Non-System Forms of Culture. The Other View of Russia

MŁODA ROSJA: POZASYSTEMOWE FORMY KULTURY,
red. Martyna Kowalska i Bartłomiej Brązkiewicz, Kraków:
Wydawnictwo Księgarnia Akademicka 2024, ss. 182

[*YOUNG RUSSIA: NON-SYSTEM FORMS OF CULTURE*, ed. Martyna Kowalska and Bartłomiej Brązkiewicz, Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka Publishing 2024, 182 pp.]



The book *Young Russia: Non-System Forms of Culture* is a result of collaboration between researchers from various universities and institutions, including the Estonian Literary Museum, Humboldt University, Jagiellonian University, and the University of Bordeaux. The interdisciplinary approach of the publication ensures a diverse range of perspectives and points of view, contributing to the book's universal quality and making it of interest to different academic disciplines.

The publication comprises nine articles preceded by an introduction in which the publication's main idea is outlined. This part includes general definitions of revolt (in the context of Russian culture), system and non-system, which are subsequently developed in the following chapters. Rebellion is defined as opposition to a system that represents enduring values that have been established for centuries and which are widely accepted by society and state authorities. Furthermore, the system is the officially sanctioned and dominant cultural trends, while non-system represents an alternative culture and opposition to the ubiquitous socio-cultural-political system. In addition, the editors, Martyna Kowalska and Bartłomiej Brązkiewicz, describe the challenging process of publication, which

was temporarily suspended due to Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022. The difficult path from writing to publication serves to enhance the value of the book. The authors were aware of the geopolitical shifts occurring in the world, and although they do not explicitly refer to these changes in articles, they incorporate them into their analyses.

Despite its alphabetical rather than thematic order, *Young Russia...* is a coherent and complementary account of various forms of rebellion. However, two of the nine texts are particularly noteworthy as they address broader cultural issues beyond the conventional boundaries of art. The first article, by Michał Kuryłowicz, touches upon the topic of historical education, while the other paper, by Sergey Troitskiy, examines the subject of humour, irony, and memes, which are the most contemporary phenomenon in this area. The remaining texts, although they refer to these *expected* areas of culture, are also interesting and unconventional. Researchers frequently turn to niche works, which are often unobvious and even shocking (e.g. *Плюс жизнь¹, 28 дней²*). These publications reveal a different face of Russian contemporary culture, which differs significantly from the commonly known official mainstream culture and art. On the one hand, they illustrate the challenges facing Russian society, but on the other, they offer a glimmer of hope for change. Currently, the voices of opposition and disagreement are relatively quiet. Additionally, the war has further stunted change, yet it is hoped that over time society will become more and more aware and, despite the threats, will stand against the prevailing system. However, at the present time, official discourse does not permit discussion of social pathologies (such as homelessness, poverty, drug addiction, diseases), war, feminism, etc.

The main theme of the book is the concept of the *non-system*. The researchers offer various interpretations of this term, yet all of them share a common thread: an attempt to transcend the limitation of the socio-cultural and political framework. Artists and phenomena challenge the reality in various ways. These include, for example, writers who remain outside the mainstream, directors who address current social issues, playwrights who are not afraid to break social taboos. In addition, the book also touches on different cultural spheres: literature, drama, poetry, history, humour, and music. These fields seem to be different from each other, but the featured artists are united by one goal: to go beyond the familiar, to show the truth about the world and to break free from patterns.

In order to demonstrate the comprehensive and multifaceted scope of the book, it is necessary to discuss its individual parts. The publication commences with a paper titled “Non-System Dimensions in Sergey Arno’s Works” by Bartłomiej Brażkiewicz. The author presents a broad definition of culture, with a particular focus on Russian culture. He goes on to analyse works written by Arno, who uses irony and satire to mask criticism. The most significant issue is for the writer is *to be himself*, even if it results in misunderstanding.

The second article presents remarks on contemporary cinematography in Russia and the phenomenon of Sokurov’s Masterclasses, particularly the works of Kira Kovalenko, which address the topic of The Caucasus. Olga Caspers bases her research on the concept of “своеволе”³ and subsequently presents Kovalenko’s films as a sign of protest.

The following paper concerns poetry. Maria Stepanova’s poems are analysed in the context of war. The language is deconstructed in the manner analogous to the surrounding world during war, resulting in the style that is curt and sharp. Florence Corrado also examines the role of language, words, and their deconstruction in critical situations.

The next article, by Martyna Kowalska, concerns committed literature in which the authors oppose injustice. Moreover, the article illustrates the critical situation of the Russian social welfare system and points to the ongoing problem of a lack of support for people in crises. The main text is preceded by an introduction in which the author defines the idea of committed literature.

The text by Michał Kuryłowicz, which has already been discussed above, is in turn a discussion of Nikolai Rozov’s concept of history. In it, the author presents the researcher’s proposal to purge Russian history of myths and political games. Furthermore, the author attempts to analyse the phenomenon of Russia’s self-definition over the years and concludes with his reflections on the events of February 2022.

The next researcher, Marta Lechowska, addresses the subject of theatre, or more precisely anti-theatre. She provides a description of the activities of Mikhail Ugarov, who put forward the thesis that theatre is an anachronism that has remained in the past and does not respond to the needs of the contemporary world. The director, who departs from the conventional approach, is increasingly perceived as an extremist in the Russian reality, largely due to his documentary theatre productions that expose the truth.

The following text, written by Pascale Melani, contains an analysis of the feminist drama *28 дней*. The playwright presents the stories of the female biological cycle in her drama, which is divided into sections corresponding to specific phases. This article draws attention to the problem of feminism in Russia and topics related to femininity, which are still perceived as taboo.

Sergey Troitskiy's paper focuses on theories of humour and irony, as well as the online space as a venue for young people to express their rebelliousness. In addition, the article extensively addresses the concept of Aesopian language, which can also be used as an instrument of opposition.

The final text concerns music that transcends the mainstream due to its artistic nature. Elżbieta Żak focuses on a particular band's alternative music, which defies all genres. Their concerts are rather performances than conventional musical events. As a result, they attract a large number of fans, not only in Russia.

Young Russia... appears as a voice of justice that does more than merely highlight Russia's pessimistic, authoritarian, and anti-European characteristics. The authors initiate a crucial discussion on those who oppose national power and those who are outside the cultural mainstream. The book demonstrates that Russia is not an authoritarian monolith, as it allows for the expression of dissenting voices. The researchers highlight the phenomenon of the "system vs non-system" opposition within different groups (writers, playwrights, musicians, etc.) and in different subject areas. There are overt political objections, but also disagreements with certain actions in social and cultural life. However, the main problem in Russia is that the very refusal to support those in power is an anti-political and anti-Kremlin expression. All forms of nonconformity are suppressed, yet the creators persevere. Despite being misunderstood and marginalised, their work holds a significant position within the culture. It is possible that dissident traditions are developing once more in Russia. Although they will affect only a few, the courageous artists will leave a lasting mark on history.

This book can serve as an excellent foundation for students who have just started their research path, but it could also become an extension of existing studies for more experienced researchers. Using relatively straightforward language, the group of specialists present different forms of protest against the national power and socio-cultural system. Despite the multiplicity of opinions expressed, the book presents a coherent narration of contemporary Russia. *Young Russia...* represents a premilitary step towards further discussions on

non-system culture in Russia, as well as an attempt to revisit Russia and the research on it and the conversations that have almost completely fallen silent with the advent of the war. This book demonstrates that Russia is a diverse country where not everyone accepts authoritarian rule, injustice, and the consideration of problems as taboo subjects.

Notes

¹ Eng. *Plus Life*.

² Eng. *28 Days*.

³ Eng. wilfulness.

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