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**SPLENDOURS AND MISERIES OF TOTAL PLAY  
IN AKUNIN’S LITERARY OEUVRE**

**(Book Review: Snigireva T. A. Boris Akunin i ego igrovoy mir [Tekst] :  
monografiya / T.A. Snigireva, A.V. Podchinenov, A.V. Snigirev. –  
Saint Petersburg : Aleteya, 2017. – 178 p.)**

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**БЛЕСК И НИЩЕТА ТОТАЛЬНОЙ ИГРЫ**

**(Рец. на кн.: Снигирева, Т. А. Борис Акунин и его игровой мир [Текст] :  
монография / Т. А. Снигирева, А. В. Подчиненов, А. В. Снигирев. –  
СПб. : Алетейя, 2017. – 178 с.)**

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The monograph written by Ural researchers T. A. Snigireva, A. V. Podchinenov and A. V. Snigirev presents a systematic study of the literary phenomenon of Boris Akunin-Grigol Chkhartishvili. The authors apply the principle of play as a conceptual framework for analysis, which seems a justified (if not the only possible) research approach. This approach determines a strategy for interpreting the diverse literary material produced by the famous contemporary novelist both in terms of its form and content. Akunin himself prioritizes the principle of play not only as all-encompassing and embracing diverse aspects of the functioning and development of literary activity, but also as determining the specific nature of the worlds that

he designs /constructs /creates. In a powerful concluding section of the study, this approach is stressed in a cascade of Akunin-Chkhartishvili’s expressions that the authors of the monograph cite in lieu of conclusion.

However, the researchers move away from such clearly defined concepts, deepening their methodology to include their research subject into the paradigm of the so-called “scriptization of existence”. In these terms, Akunin’s art is no longer viewed from the conventional standpoint of the “detectivization” of contemporary literature (see: [Prascheruk, 2009]), but rather in a more complex ontological context in which humankind is seen to “increasingly transfer its being into

scripts (records) of various formats”. This approach allows the researchers to establish a context in which the unity and diversity of creative roles that are invariably imprinted in a written discourse may be depicted. Creative roles that people play continue to unfold here and now; moreover, play is likely to be an eternal phenomenon, as follows from the concluding phrase of the monograph – “*the play is going on...*” (p. 167). Therefore, the first chapter (*Roles*) is of a particular research interest. It perfectly illustrates how Akunin plays with readers’ expectations and their desire to identify the author’s personality. Would you like to “grab hold” of the author by understanding his comforting position? It never happens: the author discloses himself to the reader through at least three primary roles – as novelist, writer and blogger – as revealed or concealed behind an uncountable number of masks.

Nonetheless, possibilities for play are not unlimited and roles are not always performed brilliantly. If the roles of a writer – the creator of the Fandorin and other provincial series – and a blogger, in general, seem quite convincing, the role of the author of a positivistic utopia raises many questions, thus failing to satisfy a discerning reader involved in the play. This criticism may justly apply to Akunin’s works *Aristonomy* and *The Other Way*. On the one hand, both of these novels confirm post-structuralist ideas – in particular, J. Derrida’s view that the “centre simply closes off play” [Derrida, 2000, p. 446]. After all, Akunin’s recipe for transforming the world by helping people to develop a feeling of self-respect and dignity is nothing else but a centre, an attempt to engage in “a valid play based on fundamental immobility and soothing credibility”, thus perverting the idea of play as the phenomenon of freedom. On the other hand, the abovementioned novels might even more profoundly demonstrate that the positivist position is useless for solving the problem of establishing a “positively beautiful person” or a “positively beautiful” society. Indeed, one cannot but be surprised with Akunin’s naive statements (who not only has a degree in philology, but is undoubtedly also a sophisticated literary personage), such as the following: “...*Dostoevsky’s panic-stricken slogan ‘if there is no God, everything is permitted’ no longer seems to represent an indisputable truth to humanity.*

*The word ‘God’ is no longer used either in the UN Declaration or in the constitutions of the majority of democratic states. It turns out that, even in the absence of faith in the Last Judgment, we have come to an understanding that it is necessary to live in a civilized manner, respecting ourselves and others, self-educating ourselves – that is, according to the laws of Aristonomy. Not out of the fear of punishment in the afterlife, but out of inner conviction”* (p. 39). Is he is not aware of that, in his worldwide famous aphorism, F. Dostoevsky implied not the disappearance of the fear of afterlife punishment (“if there is no God”) but rather that every ‘aristonom’ created by human infirmity would always be followed by an uncountable legion of similar ideas? Because, ‘if there is no God’, there is no absolute value system: everything becomes relative and every ethical system (due to its imperfection) will be amended by subsequent systems. And what kind of play is this, if, without leaving the role of writer, Chkhartishvili non-ironically offers the reader a completely predictable list of modern aristonoms issued by politically engaged personalities? The authors of the monograph, therefore, accurately identify the most vulnerable components of Akunin’s play, while allowing the writer / novelist / blogger to speak freely and comprehensively.

The second chapter (*National Repertoire*) of the monograph is devoted to Akunin’s play in the context of a national discourse. It is impressive how carefully and comprehensively the authors of the monograph examine this phenomenon. They show how, in carrying and trying to get rid of the complex of the “absorbed” (by virtue of his origin), Akunin is attempting to play in the world arena on behalf of Russians, to whom the authors of the monograph delicately refer as a “titular nation”. Again, such play cannot be considered successful if, firstly, it is in many respects conducted according to stereotypical and far-from-always-functioning rules, and, secondly, when playing on behalf of Russians, one does not take into consideration the religious, i.e. Orthodox, constituency.

This seems rather short-sighted, as eventually it results in serious errors. This primarily concerns Akunin’s generalizations, be it a question of a particular Slavic pride as the source of slavophilism, the ‘breadth’ of the Russian

character interpreted purely in the psychological / mental sense without metaphysical overtones, or the androgynous fusion of the West and the East. Here, Akunin's witty statements not only fail to conceal a lack of depth in understanding the aforementioned problems, but even serve to make them more conspicuous. In the Fandorin series, this fact is mitigated by a poetic element whose floodwaters occasionally break the dam of the rational project discourse: "*A truly Russian, absolutely non-Confucian maxim flashed in his head – 'come what may!', and Fandorin rushed to meet the riskiest adventure of his life*" (p. 66). (It should be noted that irritatingly exploited "commonplaces" can be found even in this example). When investigating Akunin's perspective on the national discourse, the researchers draw attention to the fact that representatives of one culture tend to perceive other cultures through the mirror of their own patterns, which frequently results in persistent stereotypes (which Akunin reveals and constantly repeats to the reader), and it might extremely impoverish our understanding of the specifics of a certain culture. In this way, the mirror experiment undertaken by Akunin is considered to be very instructive for the attentive reader.

Akunin's series about Sister Pelagia deserves special treatment. In these books, the author's ideological construe is partly revised (especially at the beginning) by the vivid charm of provincial Russia emanating from the pages of Akunin's prose. This charm is supported by a masterfully performed intertextual play: all these elusive recognised elements from familiar literature masterpieces, with which every educated reader – as well as the writer – has obviously once had their own romance. The subtle interweaving of hidden references from *Demons*, *The Precipice*, *The Cathedral Clergy*, *The Black Monk* and other works of Russian classics, which can be recognized both in the twists of the plot and descriptions of characters, does complicate the play, making it highly varied and complex not only in terms of sense, but also in terms of content output. Another thing, which the authors of the monograph justly note, is that Akunin, being tired of endless correlations and references, ultimately undertakes a conscious exposure of intertextual links, thereby "ending" the intertextual play. Moreover, and this is crucial, such a play with

classics, which has by now acquired a large-scale character (in fact, Akunin was partly a pioneer of this process), raises the question of trends in contemporary culture as a whole. This relates, for example, to transformations in the status of mystery. In Russian classic literature, mystery almost always possesses an ontological nature, even in works structured around a conspiracy: these are puzzles of existence and the human soul, which can be understood through familiarization and self-identification, i.e. the self-disclosure of these secrets [Smirnov, 1996, pp. 27–34]. Akunin's prose is one of the most striking examples of how an ontological mystery turns into a charade, rebus and logical task. In order for this task to be resolved, only a key provided by a sophisticated postmodern intellect is required. It all leads to a number of questions to be considered: How does the author assess his own involvement in the processes of the deontologization and simplification of mystery (processes that became so widespread at the beginning of the century)? What proportion of this can be seen in terms of self-irony and / or whether Akunin himself can be treated as an active participant of this phenomenon?

The third chapter deals with Akunin-Chkhartishvili's play on and with history. With some justice, the authors of the monograph raise the issue of dialogue and show how Akunin relies on the principle of converse relations with historical realities and characters. This seems to be the optimal approach in the sense of empowering the author to make his adventurous narrations from the past fascinating to the reader. However, the researchers consider that history has not become a "strong player" on Akunin's "playing ground". Conversely, a genuine dialogue is replaced by its simulacrum. It seems that, using special narrative techniques underpinned by a pervasive irony, Akunin brings the interlocutor into the reader's "circle" (a domesticated version of a historical character); however, in reality, the image of the interlocutor is adjusted to suit Akunin's needs without any attempt to imbue the interlocutor with his own truth, allowing him to look at a situation through his own eyes. Otherwise, such psychological characteristics as the following are hard to explain: "*Alexander Yaroslavich was endowed with that rare and difficult kind of courage that motivates a statesman to sacrifice personal feelings, a good name and*

*even honour for the sake of the good of his country*” (p. 127). History in Akunin’s constructions is by no means a subject of dialogue; rather, it becomes an object, a field for his manipulations and experiments. For some reason, in this connection, Gogol comes to mind with his inquiries addressed to the positivist historian: “*You, armed with the contemporary short-sighted view, dare to think that you are right about events! Your conclusions are rotten. They are made without God. Why do you refer to history? History is dead to you; for you, it is only a closed book. Without God, no great conclusions can be derived from history; rather, only negligible and insignificant ones*”.<sup>1</sup> And this, naturally, does not concern the personal religious preferences of the author, but rather his ability/inability to look at Russian history from a converse perspective, i.e. in the context of the fateful spiritual choice of the nation.

Concluding my reflections on the published monograph by T. A. Snigireva, A. V. Podchinenov, A. V. Snigirev, I would like to note that this serious and instructive book was read from the beginning to the end with unflagging attention. One reason for this is the full realization of the authors’ goal – by involving Boris Akunin, the creator of a play on worlds, to carry on communication that would demonstrate their desire to perceive the other as

the representation of co-being. It seems a pity, that the play of the hero with whom the dialogue is being conducted “is not ended ...”. The reader would like to see his real life, his “complete death in earnest”. However, this must be the mystery that every creator would solve themselves.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Gogol N.V., 1990. To a Short-Sighted Friend. *Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druz'yami*. Moscow, Sovetskaya Rossia Publ., p. 185.

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