



## **ZIGMUND IN THE CAFE" BY V. PELEVIN: MAGICAL REALISM AS A GAME BETWEEN THE OBSERVER AND THE OBSERVED**

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Viktor Pelevin's short story "Sigmund in the Cafe" through the prism of magical realism poetics. The novelty of the study stems from the need to revise the established interpretation of the work exclusively within the framework of postmodern irony about psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Viktor Pelevin, magical realism, postmodernism, narrative strategy, Sigmund Freud, subjective perspective, chronotope, reader reception.

### **Introduction**

The work of Victor Pelevin, one of the most significant prose writers of the post-Soviet period, is traditionally viewed by researchers within the paradigm of postmodernism with its characteristic features: intertextuality, playfulness, and deconstruction of binary oppositions [1; 2]. The story "Sigmund in a Cafe," first published in 1993, is usually interpreted as a witty parody of the psychoanalytic method, where the reader, guided by the name of the title character, sees Freudian symbols in the characters' everyday actions, and the final revelation (Sigmund turns out to be a parrot) serves to debunk the method. led by the name of the title character, sees Freudian symbols, and the final revelation (Sigmund turns out to be a parrot) serves to debunk the intellectual "hermeneutics of suspicion" [3, p. 34].

However, as A. V. Urzha rightly notes, this text has a special "provocative" nature that builds a complex subjective perspective [4; 9]. This article offers a different perspective on "Sigmund in the Cafe" — as a work that embodies the principles of magical realism, but a special, "perceptual" type of realism. If classical magical realism (Garcia Marquez, Cortazar, late Bulgakov) introduces a fantastical assumption into the fabric of reality, Pelevin does something different: he creates a



situation in which the very perception of reality becomes a magical act.

The aim of this work is to prove that "Sigmund in the Cafe" functions within the paradigm of magical realism, where the role of the miracle is played by the inversion of the subject and object of observation. To achieve this goal, the following tasks must be accomplished: first, to examine the theoretical boundaries of magical realism as applied to Pelevin's poetics; second, to analyze the chronotope of the story as a space of "ontological instability"; third, to examine the figure of Sigmund the parrot as a magical aggregator of meanings; fourth, to identify the mechanism of the "reader trap" and its role in creating a magical effect.

### **Magical realism and postmodern optics: the problem of differentiation**

The question of Pelevin's affiliation with magical realism has been raised repeatedly in literary studies. As A. G. Silcheva notes in her fundamental study "The magical paradigm in the V. Pelevin," "the author includes mythological and folkloric reminiscences in the narrative, transferring recognizable literary, mythological, and folkloric characters and typical magical creatures into a different chronotopic pattern, while preserving their recognizability" [5, p. 2]. The researcher concludes that Pelevin should rightly be considered in the context of magical realism as a special type of artistic thinking [5, p. 8].

However, "Sigmund in the Cafe" occupies a special place in this series. Unlike the novels "The Sacred Book of the Werewolf" or "Empire V," where magic is represented through the existence of vampires and werewolves, there are no overtly fantastical assumptions in this story. Everything that happens is strictly realistic: a Viennese cafe, visitors, children, the hostess, the waiter, a parrot in a cage. Nevertheless, the "magical" effect arises — and arises precisely at the border between the text and its perception.

The key concept here seems to be "ontological instability," as formulated by researchers of magical realism. The world ceases to be reliable not because miracles happen in it, but because the observer's position is compromised. As D. V. Krotova writes, analyzing the modernist elements in Pelevin's artistic consciousness, "reality always has several layers for him, and the transition between them is achieved not through a fantastic event, but through a change of perspective" [6, p. 74]. It is this mechanism—a shift in perspective, rather than the introduction of a miracle—that becomes the basis of magical realism in "Sigmund in the Cafe."



### **The chronotope of the Viennese cafe: the space between**

The spatial-temporal organization of the story sets a double register of perception from the very first lines. The action takes place in Vienna, in a cafe, in winter. The details of the setting are excessively realistic: "frosty winter," "cloud of cold air," "coat rack with long wooden pegs," "half-deflated rubber ball," "cubes with colored patterns" [7][<sup>1</sup>]. This excessiveness, characteristic of the poetics of naturalism, creates an effect of absolute authenticity.

However, Vienna in cultural memory is not just a city, but a topos associated with the emergence of psychoanalysis. As Zhang Yu notes in his article on the precedent name "Sigmund Freud," "the title of the work is semantically significant. It sets the initial perspective for the perception of the plot events and forms the program of semantic perception of what is depicted" [3, p. 2]. The Viennese cafe becomes a space where everyday life is inevitably read through the prism of the Freudian code.

It is telling that almost all of the characters' actions can be interpreted in this light:

- The gentleman drops his hat and "fussily stands behind the lady, helping her take off her coat" [7] — a scene that provokes thoughts of confusion caused by feminine charms.
- The lady places her umbrella "handle down" — a detail that, if desired, can be interpreted as a phallic symbol.
- The cafe owner "put a light bulb in her mouth" (clamping it between her lips by the base) in order to unscrew the burnt-out one [7] — an image that evokes direct associations with oral fixation.
- Cream squeezed out of a cake falls into the gentleman's palm, and he "licks" it [7].

Each of these descriptions, being absolutely realistic, acquires an additional, symbolic dimension in the context of the name "Sigmund." This is the mechanism of magical realism according to Pelevin: reality does not change, but the way it is perceived endows it with magical properties. The cafe turns into a space "between" — between the everyday and the symbolic, between the observed and the imagined.

### **Subject structure: "Aha!" as a magic word**

The central element that creates the magical effect is the figure of the observer, marked by his line "Aha!". The reader, who does not yet know who Sigmund is, is forced to guess at this character. The line "Aha!" is uttered every time something happens that can be interpreted as symbolic [7].



As noted in Wikipedia, "after several such repetitions, only the most naive reader, who has never heard of Dr. Sigmund Freud and his theories, may not understand that we are talking about Freudian interpretations of episodes of everyday life" [8]. Thus, the word "Aha!" functions as a signal marker, indicating the deeper, hidden meaning of what is happening.

It is important to trace the gradation of this exclamation. At the beginning of the story: "Aha," Sigmund said quietly and shook his head [7]. Then, as the "symbolic" intensity of the scenes increases: "Aha!" said Sigmund and looked at the man with sideburns. Further: "Aha! Aha!" said Sigmund loudly and stared at the couple at the table. And finally: "Aha!" Sigmund shouted with all his might. "Aha! Aha!! Aha!!!" [7].

This gradation is not just a stylistic device. It creates the impression in the reader that some omniscient observer (Freud?) is capturing ever deeper layers of symbolic meaning. What happens is what A. V. Urzha calls "provoking the reader": the text forces us to adopt a certain interpretive strategy, compelling us to see the "secret language of the unconscious" behind everyday details [4; 9]. The reader finds himself in the position of a sorcerer's apprentice who has been given a magical view of reality.

### **The finale as a magical inversion: the parrot and the mirror**

The final revelation—that Sigmund is a parrot in a cage—has an effect that goes far beyond parodic laughter. It is a moment of magical inversion that radically reconstructs the entire worldview created in the story.

**The parrot** is a deeply symbolic figure. It is a creature that can imitate human speech without understanding its meaning. In the context of the story, the parrot uttering "Aha!" becomes the perfect metaphor for the interpreter himself: he makes sounds to which those around him (and the reader) attach deep meaning, but behind these sounds there is no "secret knowledge."

Magical realism reaches its climax here: it turns out that the "magician" who deciphers the secret signs of existence is just a bird repeating a memorized word. But this bird is placed in a cage—and the cage becomes a metaphor for the very hermeneutic prison in which the reader has imprisoned himself by trusting the name "Sigmund."

The final dialogue is telling:

"What a beautiful parrot you have," said the gentleman with sideburns to the hostess.

"What other words does it know?"

"Many," replied the hostess. "Come on, Sigmund, tell us something else." She raised



her hand and slipped the tip of her thick finger between the bars.

"Sigmund is a good boy," said Sigmund coquettishly, moving along the perch to the far corner of the cage, just in case. "Sigmund is a clever boy."

"He's clever, all right," said the mistress, "but he's dirtied his whole cage. There's not a clean spot left."

"Don't be so hard on the poor animal. It's his cage, not yours," said the man with the sideburns, smoothing his hair. "He has to live in it." [7]

This scene is ambiguous. On the one hand, it reduces the pathos of the preceding narrative. On the other hand, it creates a new, deeper level of symbolism. The gentleman with the sideburns, who himself had just been the subject of a "Freudian" analysis, now acts as the animal's defender. His line, "It's his cage, not yours," can be read as a metaphor for human consciousness: everyone lives in their own "cage" of interpretations, and it is pointless to judge them for it.

As one reader on the LiveLib portal wittily remarks, "Pelevin has shown us the amazing magic of perception. Make Sigmund Freud the main character of the story, and every seemingly ordinary human action will have some kind of subtext. Bravo. The most annoying thing is that I fell for it" [10].

### **Irony and magic: the boundaries of interaction**

It is important to note that Pelevin's magical realism in this story is inextricably linked to irony. Some researchers and reviewers tend to see "Sigmund in a Cafe" as nothing more than a parody, "a scathing satire on the masses of nonpsychologists who look for sexual subtext everywhere" [10]. However, this interpretation seems simplistic.

As noted by a reviewer under the pseudonym neo smile, "the story is much more sarcastic and profound in its essence than it seems at first glance. It's almost a social commentary, to my discerning taste" [1]. Indeed, Pelevin does not so much ridicule Freud (whose teachings, as experts show, he treats with deep knowledge) as problematize the very act of interpretation.

Magical realism in this context acts as an instrument of deconstruction. If classical magical realism asserts that "the world is wonderful in itself," Pelevin's version asserts the opposite: "we ourselves make the world wonderful by endowing it with meanings that do not exist in it." The miracle here is not the intrusion of the otherworldly, but the work of the consciousness, which projects its symbolic grids onto reality.

The scene with the smoke rings blown by the man with the sideburns takes on special



significance in this context. He blows rings, passes one through another, creates complex figures—and the lady applauds [7]. This is pure art, devoid of utilitarian meaning, but beautiful nonetheless. Perhaps this is the model of attitude towards reality that Pelevin contrasts with "Freudian suspicion": the ability to see the beauty of form without trying to find a "deeper meaning" behind it.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis conducted allows us to assert that Viktor Pelevin's story "Sigmund in a Cafe" is an original example of magical realism, but realism built not on the introduction of fantastical assumptions, but on playing with the subjectivity of perception. The magical here arises at the intersection of the text and the reader's hermeneutic activity.

### **Key mechanisms for creating a magical effect in the story:**

1. The use of a precedent name (Sigmund) to activate a certain interpretive strategy in the reader.
2. The construction of the chronotope of a Viennese cafe as a liminal space between the real and the symbolic.
3. The introduction of the figure of the observer, whose remarks ("Aha!") serve as a signal of "hidden meaning."
4. The final inversion, exposing the observer as a parrot and thus creating an effect of ontological instability.
5. Multi-layered irony that maintains a balance between the magical and parodic registers.

Thus, "Zigmund in the Cafe" can be seen as a work that expands the boundaries of magical realism and demonstrates its ability to adapt to the postmodern cultural space. Pelevin creates a text that challenges the reader's competence, forcing them to reflect on their own interpretive strategies and realize their conventionality.

Prospects for further research can be seen in a comparative analysis of "Sigmund in the Cafe" with other "short" texts by Pelevin ("The Blue Lantern," "The Problem of the Werewolf in the Middle Belt"), as well as in the context of studying the phenomenon of "perceptual magical realism" in world literature.



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[<sup>1</sup>]: Here and further, the story is quoted from the provided file: Pelevin, V. O. Sigmund in the Cafe / Electronic edition. All references to the text are given according to this source.