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Political myth: shaping the chronotope of reality

What is political myth? Among the miscellaneous conceptions there are some most representative. Henry Tudor, speaking on the study of political myth, underlines the difference between the terms ‘myth’ and ‘illusion’[[1]](#footnote-1). Thus, myth is definitely not illusion. Nevertheless, it bears some illusory features, because a distortion of reality is one of the consequences of myth-making. Moreover, the main question is how to distinguish “beliefs which are myths from beliefs which are not”[[2]](#footnote-2).

It is obvious that political discourse is based upon myth – but what kind of myth? This kind of myth is definitely connected with profound cultural (and political) crisis. After the end of the Soviet Union the society founds itself in the situation of the deficiency of meanings. Moreover, there was the lack of the means of their expression as well. After the end of dual global ideology “Communism // Anticommunism” there appeared an obvious ideological gap which can be filled in only by local movements. But no local ideology can provide society with universal ideas.

So myth comes forward not as narrative or mere delusion of masses (in a way suggested by Georges Sorel) but as a universal code and – moreover – as universal social-cultural matrix which contains ethic patterns that are to be installed into the society.

One of the most important structural elements of myth is chronotope. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept can be used as a clue to a great number of political schemes, plots and structures. Dimensions of time and space can be transformed and transfigured in accordance with actual political aims and by means of semiotics. Contrariwise, those schemes and plots need a special communicative field where the process of shaping the public mind would be most effective. And mass culture is exactly the nutrient environment for all these elements. Sometimes this phenomenon is called “political entertainment”, or “politainment”.

First of all, it is necessary to define the frames of the political myth. There is an established tradition of understanding political myth in terms of narration and plot. Nevertheless, myth (and political myth as well) is rather a sing than a narrative. According to Roland Barthes, myth is sing that has already been transfigured (and even corrupted) by the current ideology. In his work “Myth today” Barthes stresses the point of the political component of the process of mythologisation. Thus, the whole reality is not penetrated by myths, that are, in their turn, are political matrixes. The whole process would have been impossible without media. Moreover, the media can be considered as a primal condition of the existence of any myth.

Barthes’ attitude to the phenomenon of political myth is based upon both semiology and post-structuralism. So the idea of deconstruction provides a steady methodological instrument. In other words political myth can be detected and deconstructed by means of semiotics. According to Barth, myth itself is a sign once transfigured and transformed by ideology. To put it another way, myth is ideologically corrupted sign and at the same time special system of such signs.

From the other point view system of sings is considered in Yuri Lotman’s “On the Semiosphere”. And of the most important ideas is the parallel between semiosphere and biosphere: “all semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism)”[[3]](#footnote-3).

Lotman postulates that the categories of time and space are of outstanding importance. Actually, categories of time and space are the parts of the global reference frame (system) that, in its turn, organizes the processes inside semiosphere. Moreover, this frame may influence the real world, which lies outside it[[4]](#footnote-4).

Here semiosphere starts resembling myth in Barthes interpretation. So there are two significant features that belongs both to semiophere and myth – their semiotic nature and their ability to change the reality.

If Lotman speaks on the Semiosphere, nowadays we should speak about “Mythosphere” (myth + o + sphere), where sings are replaced with myths (according to Barth’s conception).

The system of signs has the power over the human mind and thus over the perception of the reality. So does myth. Therefore, myth is a structure based upon not the category of belief but the category of shaping the reality in which people may believe.

Now let’s turn to the description of this – new – kind of myth. First of all, it is based upon main cultural models and these models could be understood in terms of nuclear elements (or semiotic mediations) of time and space according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of chronotope. Secondly, these based components need some narrative details (or mythologems) which have their source either in traditional culture or in postmodern mass-culture. And thirdly, political myth uses new media as communication channel for viral-like expansion of memes.

It is highly significant that meme is closely connected with belief. “actively contagious ideas are now called memes”[[5]](#footnote-5). Memes have rather curious structure – it is semiotic, narrative and digital at the same time. So present-day myths that form mythosphere also have meme-like features.

Russian political discourse nowadays is a reflection of mythosphere, where myths transmit the new version of political reality by means of memes. And the myth about the song “Hymn to Polite People in Crimea” (2014) provides us with one of the most relevant examples. As process of establishing of a myth had just started, the important point was to use the sphere of mass culture as a special communication field. In the refrain of “Hymn to Polite People” the whole vector of temporal frame has irregular direction – not from the Present to the Future, but from the Present to the Past. So the idea of any kind of future life in Russia is either absent or replaced with the “sacred past”.

1. Tudor, Henry. Political Myth. P. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lotman, Yuri M. On the Semiosphere.(Translated by Wilma Clark). Sign Systems Studies, 33.I., 2005. P. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Лотман Ю.М. Понятие границы // Лотман Ю.М. Семиосфера. СПб., 2000. С. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)