

## Crosscultural Aspects in Modern Literary Fiction: Daniel Kehlmann

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**Abstract:** The study deals with the interpretation of some dominant features of reality in the novels by the famous Austrian writer of the XXI century Daniel Kehlmann and the famous Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov. Using the aesthetical types of analysis, the reseacher explores the crosscultural aspects of the novel and the peculiarities of the writer's style. Special attention is paid to the virtual reality and the phenomenon of artistic reality in the novel which is to the reseacher's mind not unlike one of the style of Vladimir Nabokov. One of the main advantages of the novel pointed out by the reseacher of the article is that the reader is enabled to judge the values for himself, to interpret the text in his own way and decode the reseacher's message according to his personal competence and knowledge of the world.

**Key words:** Daniel kehlmann, vladimir nabokov, virtual reality, crosscultural aspects, modern literary fiction

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### INTRODUCTION

The most noticeable tendency in the development of modern literary fiction prose of the turn of the XX and the XXI centuries is ample use of crosscultural aspects by most modern writers. The period is marked by active search of the new aesthetical forms as the main demand due to contemporary global social and historical changes. Prose works of many modern writers remind of the multileveled mosaic which subtly combines polyphony of voices, genres and language receptions, skillfully processing elements of melodrama, fantasy, boulevard thrillers, philosophical mysticism and virtual reality, the latter being extremely popular in modern cultural context.

Absolutely consciously revised by postmodernism, all the literary heritage with the existing cultural context of the mankind becomes today a huge cultural unwritten encyclopedia where all texts belong to each other as parts of some cross cultural intertext. As part of socio-cultural and historical development, modern literary fiction can be seen as a specific way of depiction of the modern life and culture. It shows a crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, sexual, social and cultural) and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society. This literary theme is now widely treated by many reseachers all over the world which gives us a possibility to consider this issue worth discussing. While writing the present study, we were guided by the principle of systematic approach to the phenomena of literature and culture. It leans on philosophical and aesthetic knowledge and gives a more profound multidimensional presentation of the literary research (Uhova and Elena, 2004). During research, we also used comparative-historical, biographic, typological

and the method of complete analysis of an artistic work. Two prominent writers who have both enjoyed crosscultural aspects in their works are the world-famous Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov and the Austrian writer Daniel Kehlmann. The main point of this manuscript is to show that literary features are not only common in both the writers' novels but play similar roles in the portrayal of reality. The conclusion will show that though the two writers pursue different ideological priorities, their fiction works have many crosscultural aspects to discuss. The texts by Nabokov and Kehlmann analyzed in the present study are rather unique in imaginatively engaging with questions of reality, namely virtual reality.

The novels of these reseachers are generally characterized by features such as: a mixing of styles; discontinuity of tone, point of view, register and logical sequence; apparently random unexpected intrusions and disruptions in the text; self-consciousness about language and literary technique, especially concerning the use of metaphor and symbol and the use of self-referential tropes. Even though these writers may deal with serious themes, their work often has absurd, playful or comic aspects and sometimes makes special use of parody and pastiche and of references to other texts and artifacts. For that reason the British critics highly estimate Kehlmann as an "attractive" writer of the new generation who doesn't look for inspiration to Mann or Grass and rather looks to the Spanish magic realism and Anglo-Saxon fiction, thus presenting complete contrast to standard "boring" German literature. Making it a dominating factor of perception of the German prose, the British literature critics emphasize that Kehlmann's creativity marks a revolutionary change in the post-war literary context of

Germany, breaking all standard ideas of “gloomy” German literature. Born on January 13, 1975 Daniel Kehlmann is now one of the most popular Austrian researchers of contemporary postmodern trend. He is a German language researcher of both Austrian and German nationality. His work “Die Vermessung der Welt” (Translated into English by Carol Brown Janeway as *Measuring the World*, 2006) is the bestselling novel in the German language since Patrick Süskind’s “*The Perfumer*” (released in 1985). In his motherland Kehlmann, is awarded such epithets as “modern romantic novelist” and “story-teller philosopher” who follows Pynchon, Mann, Nabokov and Borges himself acknowledges Nabokov’s influence in one of the interviews: “Nehmen Sie den Roman, der mich am meisten geprägt hat, Nabokovs “*Fahles Feuer*”. One more brilliant example by Kehlmann, of crosscultural literature is the novel “*Measuring the world*” which successfully integrates many Austrian and Latin American literary and art traditions, forming a difficult semantic mosaic with a multiple-valued figurative row that completely corresponds to the current trend of updating prose its language and genre forms in modern European literature. In the novel Kehlmann reimagines the lives of the German mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss and the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt and their many groundbreaking ways of taking the world’s measure. The book is an example of fictionalized biography. Extrapolating from letters and contemporary reports, a novelist can help us project ourselves into the minds of real people who have played an important role in history. One great advantage of this kind of fiction is that the writer doesn’t have to invent any scientific research. On the other hand, dialogue frequently has to be invented for real people and it’s impossible to know for sure what is going through real people’s minds. Readers are at the mercy of the researcher’s ability to imagine these details. Both Gauss and Humboldt were notoriously quirky individuals, who rarely recorded their feelings. In fact, Humboldt’s diaries frustrate biographers because they are almost exclusively his objective observations and measurements, accompanied with relevant calculations. The genre of the novel can’t be given exact definition, it might be referred to as a scientific chronicle or a historical epic and even a fantastic parable with elements of literary parody. The novel fuses the scientific and inscientific real worlds which appear to the reader fantastic and true-to-life at the same time. The essence of Kehlmann’s poetics consists in connection of different worlds, real and fictional, made up of different temporary substances the past and the present. By the example of two well-known scientists of the Age of reason the writer creates the image of all scientific Europe from the first significant discoveries up to the present time.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is based on the principle of systematic approach to the phenomena of literature and culture. The principle develops philosophical and aesthetic knowledge and gives a more profound multidimensional presentation of the literary research. During research, we also used typological, comparative-historical and the method of complete analysis of fiction. In researches of modern writers reality is often created artificially, due to emergence of illusory meanings and values, forming virtual space. The virtuality interfaced to philosophical tradition of judgment of life and reality is a significant factor of cultural development, it isn't a simple means of transformation of objective reality but first of all, a source of new mythology in the modern world. Doubting reliability of the current of time and personal identity writers mix layers of valid and alternative reality.

Vladimir Nabokov’s poetic system possesses attractive force for writers as the numerous meanings ciphered by V. Nabokov, both in language matters of works, and in subject and composite structure of novels, allow his “followers” to present in Nabokov’s style to the reader an event model of any narration being realized in the opposition of the real to the unreal. And Kehlmann’s reception of Nabokov’s style in this case presents much interest. The most curious in this course is the problem of fiction and the concept of reality by Kehlmann which represents reflection of many metamorphoses of the traditional and innovative philosophical directions of the XX century. Being absolutely significant, Daniel Kehlmann’s virtual reality represents the key characteristic of the writer’s conception. He inexplicably manages to combine inexhaustibility and unattainability of thematic patterns and search of borders between reality and fiction.

In one of reviews to Kehlmann’s new novel “*F*” released in September, 2013, K. Kropotkin considers Kehlmann to be the brilliant founder of “the bright and cold games of chess stated with a liberty of a mature master” which comes natural for the writer as the modern philosopher in literature. The “chess” subject noted in Kehlmann’s novels is certainly recognized in literary criticism by many critics as Nabokov’s. Among the main typological signs of Nabokov’s world of reality E.P. Ukhov marks out the search of the truth, neomythologism, saturated intertexts and post-modernist imbalance both between the text and reality and between real and imagined. In the artistic paradigm of the writer’s works parody and irony, the researcher’s game with the reader, free transformation of elements of various cultures,

existence of quotation collages and a set of comments (Uhova and Elena, 2004) play a very important role.

Daniel Kehlmann by his own words, continues the creativity traditions set by the great Russian writer Nabokov (Vajc, 2004). Being not slightly confused by his open imitation of Nabokov, Kehlmann takes the quotation of the Russian classic as the epigraph to the novel "The Last Limit" (Der fernste Ort, 2001): "And he didn't breathe any more. He left for what dreams he wouldn't know" as the main motive of irreality. All events in the novel are so illusionary fictional that the plot seems a trivial dream not only to the reader but to the main character as well. The main character of the novel the insurance agent Yulian being on a serious business trip escapes from a responsible conference on which he is to make a report. He suddenly imagines himself absolutely superfluous in this world and imitates his own death, running into nowhere. The strange collision of hope for new life and hopelessness is born at this moment. It leaves him totally depressed regarding also the connection with his unhappy childhood and a final crash on the attempt at the mature age to find an interactive compromise with the outside world. Throughout the novel, the main character is pursued by his memories in the form of separate spontaneous episodes (his childhood, adolescence, etc.), masterfully inserted into the narration as part of plot composition. Yulian's memory constantly clings to his past. Breaking through the present, it is inseparable from consciousness and not simply perceives the world but also creates it. Here, the writer focuses the reader's attention on problems of human memory to which Nabokov at his time attached so enormous significance in each of his works (Uhova and Elena, 2003).

Returning to the novel "Measuring the world" we should mention that here the researcher depicts real-life and imaginary pictures of culture and life of the people of Latin America being at his best in the description of the travel of the main characters Humboldt and Bonplan across the Amazon, e.g. in the chapter "The River". The freakish texture of events and words characterizing local peculiarities helps the reader visualize the magic charms and prophetic dreams associated with this culture. The researcher succeeds here in a very plausible imitation of Garcia Marquez's narration, constantly balancing between reality and fantasy. Credit must be given to the researcher for being extremely resourceful in moulding the portrait of man in his eternal search for the truth. In his peculiar manner of blending minute psychological analysis and abstract reasoning both intricate and individual, the researcher focuses on the subjects characteristic of Latin American prose that is search of the meaning of life, true value of it and a "happiness formula". The message is

conveyed to the reader through the prism of natural sciences with their exact angles and dimensions (Oort and Frans, 2008). The world of natural sciences and ingenious scientists is skillfully bound and intervened with the world of simple inhabitants with their indistinct ideas of logic and reality. The plot is constructed on the contrast of perception of the world by different people which nevertheless doesn't give the reader a feeling of dissonance and chaos. It rather forces the reader to the unwilling self-reflection of the context to the wish to compare and estimate actions, to try on various masks of the protagonists. The researcher is always concerned with the process of decoding the meaning and the message which is greatly influenced by the reader's individual competence and knowledge.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The novel of Daniel Kelman "The last limit", defined by critics as the philosophical thriller, adjusts the reader to the wave of Nabokov's "Ultima Thule" the mention about which is given in the text of the novel where the teacher of German explained to the children what Thule stood for. Earlier people called so the most remote part of the earth. Ultima Thule stands in the novel for the last limit, compared in the novel with Norway, a far-away country, marked on maps with the inscription "Hic sunt dracones" which means "There live dragons". But at present time nobody believes this any more, dragons don't exist and all lands are investigated. The idea is very similar to Nabokov's Russian novels in which the researcher quite often builds the novel rather as an expanded short story, than a novel and the action frequently centers round the key character.

Kehlmann's focus on Nabokov, especially on his early works published in Russian is not only noticeable in "The last limit". In the novel "Mahler's Time" the action is also concentrated round the central hero in this case the scientist who unexpectedly in a dream finds the solution to the eternal issue of time. He gets its physical essence and this universe riddle becomes uncovered. F. Dvinyatin comments on the narrator's ideas in the book "N Empire. Nabokov and his successors", underlining reflexion of Nabokov's creative methods in modern literature. Dvinyatin points out Kehlmann's novel "Mahler's Time". Besides high literary advantages of the novel distinguishing the text from a standard mimicry, the researcher finds similarity of Kehlmann's novel to Nabokov's "Luzhin's Defence" or "The Waltz Invention: A Play in Three Acts" "both in the structure of the name of the work and Nabokov's general "deceptive" principle. The title "Mahler's Time" brings to the reader the sense

of time in its physical or even metaphysical aspect and it tells actually of an ordinary citizen Mahler, rather than the famous composer Gustav Mahler as it can initially seem to the reader. Moreover, the reader can't help noticing the Method of doubled narration when one plot line goes into the childhood and the youth of the hero (copying such Nabokov's novelized biographies as "Luzhin's Defense", "Glory", "The Gift") and the other sends the reader to the present time to the character's unsuccessful attempts to make at least somebody acknowledge his genius discovery. To characterize Nabokov's Method in Kehlmann's novel the researcher gives such additional arguments of imitation as pure similarity of novels not only on the level of various repetitions (coincidence of dreams of the hero and his friend, flying in mysterious circumstances insects, the broken lamp etc.) but also on the level of the plot [2, p. 442].

One more aspect of paramount importance for carrying out parallels between Nabokov and Kehlmann is the plot constructed as already above-mentioned in the best typological traditions of Nabokov's style. Conceived as a story of failure based on a detective intrigue, the novel is arranged with the whole set of characteristic of Nabokov destructive and false coincidences. There is one more question actual for researchers that is the problem of share balance of fiction and reality in Kehlmann's work. This also indicates the researcher's engagement with Nabokov's Method. The main character experiences during the novel sharp feelings of *deja vu*. It causes the reader's dizziness often covered with the feeling of unreality. Unsteadiness of the events, irreality of events and reliability of dreams don't let the reader know unambiguously which part of the world the main action develops in. Identification and restoration of the intertextual frame in D. Kehlmann's novel "Measuring the world" opens a new way of interpreting the novel. The researcher creates a certain network of allusions and associations by inserting into the novel the names of well known scientists and outstanding persons of the Enlightenment era. The names of Napoleon, the Mongolfye brothers, Goethe, Galvani, Marco Polo, Leibniz and many others let the reader visualize different stories and provoke further development of new and not less fascinating plots. Written in the best literary tradition of the Latin American novel, namely Gabriel Garcia Marquez's cult work "One Hundred Years of Solitude", the novel "Measuring the World" represents a freakish mix of comedy and melancholy on the universal issues, attitudes, meaning of life and true values. A play upon contrasts and contradictions and affirming the very opposite of the obvious truth lies at the basis of the researcher's Sarcastic Method in portraying his characters.

Both Humboldt and Gauss were concerned with the measurement of the world with the displacement between one part of space and another and the relation of that gap to temporal intervals and theoretical absolutes (Foden, 2007). Humboldt constantly took readings during his vast journey the height of every mountain, the line of the equator, the exact number of lice on the head of a servant while Gauss stayed at home and conceived space as a mathematical reality in which even lines were merely an abstraction; yet his space was in its way as full of life as Humboldt's. Kehlmann has the contemporary novelist's fascination with territorial politics and the poetics of space. Measuring the World's power is all the more acute in the reassessment of the geographical perspectives and spatial assumptions because it harnesses to this spatial turn the sense of history in process which is key to the best historical novels.

For that reason the British critics highly estimate Kehlmann as an "attractive" writer of the new generation who doesn't look for inspiration to Mann or Grass and rather looks to the Spanish magic realism and Anglo-Saxon fiction, thus presenting complete contrast to standard "boring" German literature. Making it a dominating factor of perception of the German prose, the British literature critics emphasize that Kehlmann's creativity marks a revolutionary change in the post-war literary context of Germany, breaking all standard ideas of "gloomy" German literature.

Literary critics all around the world admit Kehlmann's mingled with fantasy reality truly Nabokov's. The writer embodies in his novels one of Nabokov's main semantic systems, so characteristic for culture and science of the XX century the idea of possible existence of other worlds and the relativity of the objective truth. Kehlmann skillfully interlaces present and historical realities and legends. Reinterpreting classical literary forms in a satirical manner, the writer masterfully combines extraordinary philosophic and impetuous adventurism in artistic images of his characters. The combination of wit and ease with which Kehlmann decorates each novel, forces the reader to admire the ability of the researcher to create reality bordering on illusion. Grace with which Kehlmann's characters balance on the border of fictional and real worlds naturally follows the conception of virtual reality chosen by the researcher as continuation of artistic ideas of Vladimir Nabokov.

The most important aspect of Kehlmann's reality is polarity consisting first of all in the validity of all the things happening in his stories. As E.M. Shastina indicates, the world literature is considerably enriched with great works thanks to "spiritual synthesis of the West and the East" in this case, we witness the synergetic effect of Russian and Austrian literary

traditions to which at the moment lots of examples can be given in the West European literature (Shastina, 2012).

Assimilating features of serious and mass art, Kehlmann offers his alternative, Austrian analogical variant of mythological realism which is brightly embodied in the Latin American prose of the XX century. Following the strategy of remythologization of modern Austrian novel, Daniel Kehlmann absorbs not only Nabokov's creativity and manner but also the most prominent features of German-language narration of the turn of the XX-XXI centuries.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we should make it a special point that many modern European prose works absorb and transform traditional strategies of virtual realism combining fascinating plots and deep philosophical problems and thus remythologizing modern literary context. Judging European reality from the aspect of saturated cultural and mythological context, involvement of elements of folklore, categories of the supernatural and wonderful gives us a chance to reveal individual characteristics of the European contemporary literature and acknowledge the latter as one of the main trends of the appointed literary context. Being an important component of novelistic creativity of many modern writers, virtual realism clearly dominates modern literary traditions and considerably enriches European literature of the turn of XX-XXI centuries. Consequently, the newly inaugurated German literature style of the 21st century has increasingly come to support historical and biographical approaches to fiction as not only celebrification of "Germanness" but also as part of a global, market-focused approach to literature as fundamental reevaluation of the role of tradition and the construction of cultural figureheads in the German cultural sphere.

A reader as well as a researcher gets a possibility to find intertexts throughout the novel at different levels

which allows the reader to independently establish his individual semantic connections. Turning the reader to cultural experience by means of his emotional and intellectual fiction, the researcher, thereby, promotes intellectualization of the reader's consciousness. This also serves a dominant feature of Kehlmann's literary work and makes his writing different from other literary trends. His novels successfully integrate many literary and art traditions, forming a difficult semantic mosaic with a multiple-valued figurative row that completely corresponds to the current trend of updating world prose.

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