КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЯ И ИСКУССТВОВЕДЕНИЕ

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“SHADOW AND BONE”: NEGATIVE SPACES OF MEANING

Дебютный роман Ли Бардуго «Тень и кость» обещает волшебное путешествие по миру вымышленной страны Равка, вдохновленной Российской Империей 1800-х годов. В этой статье обсуждаются отрицательные моменты этого произведения, связанные с Россией. Это крайне негативные описания русской культуры, политики и истории, связанные отчасти с долгим отсутствием русского перевода романа. Имея в виду эту возможную интерпретацию, автор статьи предполагает, что Бардуго намеренно позволила основной части своей работы очертить и сформировать негативные черты России, рассматриваемые в этой статье. Возможности восприятия романа должны быть шире и разнообразнее, чем, возможно, предполагала сама Бардуго. Она пытается вернуть его к форме своих первоначальных намерений, вмешиваясь в процесс идейного наполнения текста для читателя. Навязывая свои идеи, писательница определенным образом реализует понятие «смерть автора». Используя этот дихотомический процесс, автор этой статьи предлагает отойти от искусственных намерений автора и проследить тонкие тенденции рынка, которые способствовали популярности Бардуго. Дискуссия, которую автор хочет начать в этой статье, заключается в той идее, что Бардуго создала книгу, которая целенаправленно эксплуатирует русскую культуру, не отдавая ей должного, намекая на новую холодную войну и разделяя мир на знакомые полюса Запада и Востока.

Ключевые слова: Русский стереотип, литературный перевод, мультимодальность, Ли Бардуго.

The debut novel Shadow and Bone by Leigh Bardugo promises the magical journey through the world of fictional country Ravka, which was inspired by the Russian Empire of the 1800s. In this article, I discuss three negative spaces outlined by Bardugo's text. These are negative spaces of Russian culture, politics and dynamics revealed by the long absence of Russian translation of the novel. Having this possible interpretation in mind, I cannot speculate that Bardugo deliberately chose to let the body of her work outline and shape the negative spaces discussed in this article. The reception potential of her work is wider and more diverse than the author intended. She tries to prune it back to the shape of her original intentions, interfering with the process of the reader's meaning-making. Thus, in a certain way, she pushes back against the concept of the "death of the author". With this dichotomic process, I suggest stepping away from the author's intentions and tracing the subtle trends of the market, that contributed to Bardugo's popularity. The discussion I want to open is not whether Bardugo intended to create a book that exploits Russian culture without doing justice to it, hinting towards a New Cold War, and separating the world to the familiar poles of the West and East.

Keywords: Russian stereotype; literary translation; multimodality; Leigh Bardugo.

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Shadow and Bone (2012) is a young adult novel by Jewish-American writer Leigh Bardugo. Shadow and Bone is the first book set in the so-called world of the Grishaverse. The story, unravelling on the pages of the novel, follows Alina Starkov – an orphaned girl serving as a cartographer in the army of Ravka, who finds out that she wields the rarest magic power in the world – the power to manipulate light. In the fictional country, torn in half by a magic

canyon of darkness called the Shadow Fold, or the Unsea, teeming with monsters called volcra, she has the potential to erase the Fold and to unify the land. She is ushered through the plot by her two love interests, a friend from her youth Mal, and the General of the magic army the Darkling, only to find out that the Darkling was scheming to take over the entire country using the Shadow Fold as a supreme weapon. *Shadow and Bone* was followed by two more books centered on Alina (the original trilogy). More recently, Bardugo has written two novels featuring other characters, expanding the Grishaverse. *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom* form the follow-up duology with Kaz Brekker and his crew concocting a heist plot.

In 2021 the streaming service Netflix released its own screen adaptation of *Shadow and Bone* in 8 episodes, reviving interest in the original text. While the book already had gained some popularity among young adult (YA) fiction genre lovers and was subsequently reprinted, translated into many languages, contributing to the growth of the fanbase of the author across multiple platforms, Netflix's TV show took its visibility much further. Ever since the text was chosen for adaptation, the book underwent a round of reprints with new covers featuring show-related imagery and characters.

This success brings to the fore a question of what makes the text stand out among the vast number of YA novels. A close reading of Bardugo's novels reveals a comfortable and familiar plot composition abiding by Propp's (1928) morphological elements of the Fairy Tale. It takes the heroine Alina Starkov through the parent alienation, journey, encounter with a mentor figure and a magical animal helper as an assistant. The uncovering of a nemesis leads to the main hero's escape, wandering, wielding of a supernatural weapon, which is followed by a second revelation of a nemesis, chase, concluding with a metaphorical wedding. In the terms of western scholarship, the same plot can be interpreted through the lens of the monomyth and wanderings of the hero. While Propp's interpretation offers a wider interpretative toolkit, and also is immediately relevant to the re-construction of the Russian "Tale of the Firebird" in the text of the novel – in the conclusive book of the series Alina acts as an impersonation of the fire wielding beautiful creature, shedding the feathers of her power as a self-sacrificial act -- Bardugo is relying mostly on Campbell (Mason, Bardugo, 2016) to construct her work. Thus, the plot suggests a degree of predictability and the characters are inevitably adherent to tropes. Therefore, this might be interpreted in the way that the plot and character arcs alone can hardly explain the success the novel had. In this sense, Bardugo's work is not much different from other popular products of the genre¹ charted by *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games*².

Moreover, the fact, that Netflix scriptwriters have changed the synopsis of the series, adding a completely new storyline based on the characters of the follow-up duology *Six of Crows*, might be seen as indirect evidence of the resistance against the simplistic composition of the plot. Intertwining and linking the interests of two rivalling parties create artificial tension and is taking the composition of the story away from the linear *hero's journey*.

Thus, the essential charm appeal and a component of novelty lies beyond the backbone of the plot – in the domain of superficial aesthetics with the gaps filled out with magical irrationality.

¹ Discussion on YA as a genre is an ongoing and controversial topic. Many scholars and writers agree that it is mostly a marketing device rather than a genre with its characteristic features. Bardugo has demonstrated opposite viewpoints over the years, in one instance (Wordpress blog, 27 June 2011) arguing that YA is an independent genre, and on other occasions (Tumblr, 13 June 2015) pointing out its marketing potential. Arguments in favour and against each position have been articulated by much abler scholars, and I will not focus on them here.

² All named books have been transformed into a marketing phenomenon rather than a work of literature per se. Harry Potter has created an independent pocket in the world of entertainment, featuring branded clothing and merchandise, large amusement parks, and follow-up movies not related to the core storyline. *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* have never gained a comparable scope of capitalization, but the marketing value of the franchise as a whole surpasses the books tremendously.

The setting of the novel harkens back, by the acknowledgement of the author, to the Russian Empire of the 1800s.

People always ask me why I chose Russia as the cultural touchstone for my world. The easy answer is that I wanted to build atop something other than the familiar high fantasy bedrock of Medieval England. But there's a bit more to it than that. I remember standing in a used bookstore, flipping through a Russian Imperial atlas, perusing trade routes and military campaigns. At the time, it felt like something just clicked. But looking back, the choice seems obvious: a kingdom on the brink of collapse, an incompetent monarchy squandering its resources, the failure to industrialize, an ill-equipped army of conscripted serfs [Scalzi, 2012].

From this citation, it proves hard to pinpoint an exact decade of Russian history that inspired the text. 'Failure to industrialize' points towards the 19th century, the age of the Industrial Revolution. Serfdom was abolished in 1861, setting the upper limit for the narrative. The weakness of the country and an overall apocalyptic tone of the phrase links to the period after the Decembrists uprising of 1825. We are most probably talking about the Russian Empire after the crushing defeat in the Crimean War against the joint forces of the Ottoman and British Empires and France.

This quotation, summarising the ideas of Otherness and the ultimate destruction and despair the Russian Empire faced is reminiscent of the gist of Said's *Orientalism*:

In Said's view, the discourse that has come to command thinking about the Orient is particularly jaundiced. The dominant mode of thought is deeply discriminatory, self-serving and patronising. [...] To be more specific, the literature classified by Said as Orientalist possesses three core characteristics: the exaggeration of difference, assumption of Western superiority and resort to clichéd forms of analysis.

First, the concept with which Said's model of Orientalism is most commonly associated is that of Otherness. Said proceeds from the view that identities are not simply given but constructed and reconstructed. A key element of this process is the definition of one's group in opposition to an Other. In the case of the West, this Other has traditionally been the Orient. As such, the persistence of the West as a concept is dependent upon the maintenance of a stark East–West divide. Reinforcing and perpetuating this divide has been one of the central functions of Orientalist literature. (Brown, 2010, p. 150)

We can see how *Shadow and Bone* can fit within the model of orientalising literature, especially in the context of Bardugo's interpretations and explanations of her own views on Russian culture.

Russian culture is presented by the author as the only source of inspiration for her fictional country Ravka, and she exploits its resources extensively. Promotional materials and visuals for the books are consistent in their reference to the 'Russian culture' as imagined by the illustrators. Addressing the alluring status of culture opens the first negative space of the novel – the negative space of Russianness.

It is counter-intuitive and hard to put a finger on, while being absorbed in a dynamic, fast-paced plotline, but upon careful post-factum reflection, it is noticeable that there is a cultural negative space in the narrative, outlined by culture-specific terms.

The author does not shy away from an extensive use of Russian loan words and names. The text of the first novel is adorned with the words kvas (15 times), samovar (3 times), balalaika, blini, and kutya (1 time each). Russian verb 'otkazats'ya' and a noun 'troika' are used twice. The word kefta, derived from kaftan / caftan, is used 70 times. However these numbers wane compared to the use of the Russian-specific proper names: Grisha – 218, Alina – 97, Genya – 206.

As Bardugo explains herself in her blog post "Tongue Twister",

[...] the world of *Shadow and Bone* was clearly inspired by Russia and I didn't want to violate the reader's sense of place by throwing some random language into the text. My goal was to use language to reinforce the reader's experience of the world rather than undermine it. (Bardugo, 2018)

I argue, that even though Russian and Russian-inspired words are sprinkled across the text, the attempt to present a coherent aesthetic essence of the Russian culture is missing. It sounds appropriate to digress here to acknowledge that cultural studies scholars are skeptical of such an entity as the essence of the culture. While there is probably nothing in the cultural landscape of either the multinational body of the Russian Empire or the Russian Federation that can be summarized under this term, the philosophers of the 1860s nevertheless made a sustained effort to establish the notion of Russianness – a social construct specific to the conscience of a specific class of educated Russian nobility – yet even this artificial superstructure is remarkably absent.

Bardugo's acknowledgement of the extent of her expertise in Russian history and culture can be seen on several accounts. In 2013, in the communication with the readers in the comment section on *Goodreads* website, she posts:

I did quite a bit of research for *Shadow and Bone* and I cite just a few of my sources in the acknowledgments. They include cultural histories, folklore, original source material like old recipe and prayer books, and the rather vibrant Russian expat community just north of me in Los Angeles. [Bardugo, 2013/11/20].

The acknowledgements section of the novel and FAQ on the website *The Grishaverse* lists some of the sources³:

Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia by Orlando Figes
Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia by Suzanne Massie
Russian Folk Belief by Linda J. Ivanits (The Grishaverse)

The list features three publications by three non-Russian scholars; Suzanne Massie's and Linda Ivanits' works were published in the 1980s, still during the Cold War. The scope of the research in each of the books is a matter of utmost interest.

Massie writes in her preface, that she has always been mesmerised by Russian culture, introduced to her in her formative years by her mother, not a resident of Russia herself. Since then, Massie has learned the language and visited the Soviet Union multiple times. "Led by the feathers of the Firebird, beyond the stories of cruelty, beyond the grey monotony of the land of today, I always found beauty" (1982, p. 13). While preparing her lectures for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1976, she made a discovery: "There was no single volume that gave a sense of the whole, now-vanished culture of Old Russia. It is for this reason that I have tried to introduce in this book so many different facets" (p. 14) Further she mentions in passing that her objective was to focus on the beauty of Russian art and folklore and glossing over the injustice that is abundant in the history of every culture.

So, the limitations of Massie's research are established by the author herself. It is a selective representation of the vanished culture of "Old Russia". Metaphorically, it is a dirge, a lamentation in front of a dull concrete gravestone of Soviet reality. "Old Russia" is something rendered as missing, disappearing, dying. The period she researches, however, is far less defined. The text opens with a chronicle account of the Christening of Rus, which happened in 988. So, we are facing a 500-pages account on a millennium in the life of dozens of millions of people (300 of these are focusing on the XIX century alone).

Ivanits, better known as a literary scholar, researcher of Dostoevsky, defines the limits of her work much more narrowly: "*Russian Folk Belief* is a basic survey of Great Russian (not Ukrainian or Belarusian) folk superstition, intended for a broad audience. For its material it draws heavily on ethnographic data collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and on a number of excellent Soviet studies of this data" (Ivanits, 1989, p. xiii). She admits that she tried to keep her presence in the text to a minimum. The text reads as a dry compilation of the facts and indeed, the author allows little emotion to slip in.

Both books are written by female non-Russian scholars and published during the Cold War. Their topic is mostly cultural, and both seem to focus primarily on the Russian imperial legacy ra-

³ In multiple interviews, Bardugo discusses her sources of inspiration, and links fairy tales and recipe books along with these academic publications.

ther than on the contemporary political struggles of the collapsing Soviet Union. The problem of the Western and Eastern bloc confrontation seems to be beyond the scope of interest of the authors.

The third source is very different. Firstly, it is overtly political: “Russia invites the cultural historian to probe below the surface of artistic appearance. For the past two hundred years, the arts in Russia have served as an arena for political, philosophical and religious debate in the absence of the parliament or a free press” [Figes, 2002, p. xxvii]. The focus of the book is on the political controversy and struggle within Russia: “What did it mean to be a Russian? [...] And where was the true Russia? In Europe or in Asia? St Petersburg or Moscow? The Tsar’s Empire or the muddy one-street village where Natasha’s ‘Uncle’ lived?” [ibid].

Figes confines his period of study to the 200 years of 1800--1900s. While he commences the narration with the foundation of St Petersburg (1703), as a prelude to the ever-present Russian identity crisis, the bulk of the text focuses on later periods. Massie’s book, while promising a comprehensive overview of “Old Russia” is limited to roughly the same time and space – with just over 180 pages out of 500 taken up by the pre-1800s history.

It appears impressive for a YA author to take pains in perusing proper academic publications for the sake of a 200-page novel targeted towards a non-Slavic juvenile audience. However, if we compare the extent of her research on 1000 years of history of the largest country in the world to the research on Yale secret societies for the book *Ninth House* (2019), the contrast is striking:

Many books helped build the world of *Ninth House*: Yale in New Haven: Architecture and Urbanism by Vincent Scully; Patrick Pinnell’s Yale University: An Architectural Tour; Loomis Havemeyer’s Go To Your Room: A story of undergraduate Societies and Fraternities at Yale; Brooks Mathner Kelley’s Yale: A History; Joseph A. Soares’s The Power of Privilege: Yale and America’s Elite Colleges; David Alan Richards’s Scull and Keys: The Hidden History of Yale’s Secret Societies; Craig Steven Wilder’s *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*; Carriages and Clocks, Corsets and Locks: The Rise and Fall of an Industrial City by Preston Maynard and Marjorie B. Noyes; New Haven: A Guide to Architecture and Urban Design by Elizabeth Mills Brown; Model City Blues: Urban Space and Organized Resistance in New Haven by Frederic Law Olmsted and Cass Gilbert. (*Ninth House*, 2019, p.458)

With a list of three academic publications, all of them explicitly selective, Bardugo creates a country with multiple locations, while the single city of New Haven seems to have taken much deeper research, even though Bardugo is an alumnus of Yale and has first-hand experience on the subject.

Moreover, all three books on Russia share a similar approach to the idea of Russianness, embedded in the text. It is the idea of duality and controversy. Ivanits focuses on *dvoeverie* – double belief as a staple of Russian folklore. Paganism and folk Christianity cohabited in the same space of Russian peasant village, and the tension and reconciliation between the two is what drives her narrative. Figes and Massie, researching the culture of nobility and peasants, outline the border dividing Russian society into “Western” and “Oriental” – St Petersburg and Moscow – civilized and savage parts. While Bardugo creates artificial tension between the West and the East of Ravka by the physical space of the Shadow Fold, the societal breach and cultural dichotomy is not addressed in the book⁴.

Apart from the decorative use of Russian words, cultural specificity is reduced to the sporadic appearance of anecdotes and vignettes from Russian history. A passing notice on the royal

⁴ The problem of class is never directly tackled in the novel either. While serfs are mentioned twice, it is unclear whether the protagonists belong to a specific class. They are not serfs, but they undergo the conscription that puts them in an underprivileged position. At this instance, using the interpretative framework of Russian Formal School, it seems that the literary fact of the oblique social status of the characters is influenced by the reality of the capitalist society of the U.S. with the promise of social mobility, rather than Russian society of the mid-1800s.

heir's appreciation of shipbuilding and tsar's amusement with dwarfs harkens back to Peter the Great (also, probably to Derzhavin, as described by Figes, 2002, p. 166). Description of the Little Palace ('the ugliest building' the Darkling has ever seen) is largely reminiscent of Tsarskoye Selo. A stereotypical Russian predilection to alcohol does not slip the author's attention, as she uses kvas as a substitute for vodka ("Kvas is, in fact, a semi-fermented beverage popular in Russia, but in *Shadow and Bone* it's an obvious stand-in for vodka. For me, "vodka" places us instantly in our world and time. It's simply too common" Bardugo, 2018).

It is interesting how she swaps one Russian word for another for the sake of exoticising the Russian drinking habits that come across as 'too common'. It is quite characteristic of the exoticising and orientaling narratives striving to capitalize on the cultural specificity and decadence of the foreign culture. It can be seen as an endeavour to squeeze the exotic culture into the fixed compartments of cultural stereotyping.

In the definition by Michael Pickering (2001, p. 47): 'stereotyping – characterisations of others, and as a general process, stereotyping is a unilinear mode of representing them. While they occur in all sorts of discourse and can draw on various ideological assumptions, stereotypes operate as a means of evaluatively placing, and attempting to fix in place, other people or cultures from a particular and privileged perspective'. This problem is not rare or unnoticed in the YA literature.

Stereotyping, caricature, and marginalization of people of color, poor and working-class children and families, gender and sexual minorities, immigrants, and other minoritized groups have been persistent problems in children's literature. Additionally, the Cooperative Children's Book Center's annual reports show a troubling trend of books that feature diverse characters not being written by authors from that background, leading to questions about who has the right to tell diverse stories [Thomas, 2019, p. 7].

It should not come across as a surprise to Bardugo's readers, as the author articulates: "Let's be honest: I chose to use Russia as my inspiration, but my goal was never authenticity" (Bardugo, 2018). The disclaimer of authenticity is jarring, especially since the book is allegedly rooted in academic research, and more so in light of the author's commitment to stay authentic to the portrayal of other characters' experiences in her later works. Talking about sexual assault, Bardugo says: "[...] I did not want to trivialize it. [...] I spoke to three girls who had been trafficked from various backgrounds and in different situations" [Mason, Bardugo, 2016]. Conscientiousness applied in one instance is missing when addressing the topic of Russian culture.

Of course, Bardugo is not the only author who exploits Russian stereotypical characters in her work. Another work that featured a stereotypical Russian, a heavy drinker growing up in Siberia with an abusive father, was *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt (2013). Even though the persona of Boris was met critically in Russia, the overall impression was far more plausible. *The Goldfinch* adopted the figure of a highly controversial teenager of Russian descent to introduce a whole semantic layer of Russian literature. Tartt brings Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* to the text as an interpretative device and makes the reader re-appreciate the entirety of her work in the light of it [Turyshcheva, 2020]. Theodor (equivalent to the Russian name Fedor, as in Fedor Dostoyevsky) is impersonating Prince Myshkin, and Boris takes on a sinister disguise of Parfen Rogozhin. A stereotype was used as a springboard for the author to suggest another semiotic grid for the interpretation of her work.

Deliberately devoid of the specificity of the 1850-1860s, Russian reference in *Shadow and Bone* seems to add no semiotic value to the text. Paired with the familiarity of the plot, it hardly explains the scale of success the book gained on the international market. However, the charm of the story can be seen in the magical component carried out by the order of wizards called Grisha. In the author's words,

I chose the name Grisha for the magical elite because it is the Russian diminutive of Gregory which means "watchful" and derives from the biblical Grigori (which a lot of paranormal

fans will recognize from fallen angel tales). It also evokes the word “geisha,” which reinforces the sense of beauty, secrecy, and the elite. (Bardugo, 2018)⁵

It might be a big stretch, but I would assume that for each reader associating the name Grigori with a biblical character, there will be at least one person who remembers the notorious figure of the sinister monk Grigori Rasputin first. His presence marked, indeed, the period in Russian history when the empire was brought to the brink of collapse by the incompetent actions of the ruling dynasty and resulted in the downfall of the large empire into the havoc of civil war (although it happened 60 years after the emancipation of serfs).

Brian Moynahan’s book *Rasputin: The Saint Who Sinned* (1997) is an example of how Rasputin’s life was seen in the English-speaking world in the 1990s. The chapter named “Grischa” describes Rasputin’s birthplace in the terms, evocative of Bardugo’s novel: “Its monotony reminded Western travellers of the ‘sadness of the sea’, a waste across which dirt tracks wound like the wakes of ships” [Moynahan, 1997]. Rasputin was born in Siberia in a little workers’ settlement *Pokrovskoye* on the bank of Tura river. In the novel, the Fold stretches aligned with the Tula valley and on its banks are the towns of Kribirsk and Novokribirsk – derivatives of Simbirsk and Novosibirsk. It is noteworthy that in Russian literature, Siberia is a liminal space. It often acts as Hell or as Other World, the land of the dead. It is hard to look past Tsibea – a frozen wasteland of the novel – and the city of Novokribirsk as anything different from the Siberian allegory.

Rasputin’s alleged ‘powers’ lay in healing and calming people down and he is described as wickedly attractive to women, wearing only native Russian clothing, and burning people with his black eyes shining above his black beard. The moment of Grischa’s revelation in Moynahan is described in the following way: “nearer and nearer, brightening as it came, until what had been a soft golden glow suddenly erupted in a blinding white flash” [Moynahan, 1997]. Compared to Bardugo’s writing: “then in a flash I let the light bloom around me and the Darkling, wrapping us in a glowing sphere that surrounded us like a flowing, golden halo.[...] [T]hen I slammed my hands together and a loud rumble shook the ballroom. Brilliant white light exploded through the crowd” [Bardugo, 2012].

It is impossible to know whether Bardugo had a chance to familiarize herself with Moynahan’s biography of Rasputin, but there is a chance that the readers would exploit the similarity of the personal name and link the image of the Russian malefic with the magic world of Ravka, which could have invited more provocative parallels as in Tartt’s rendering. The rhetoric of supernatural light as an ultimate weapon is abstracted from the shadows of Siberia into a superficial “aesthetic appearance” restricted to “beauty, secrecy and the elite.”

This alleged connection of magic to the collapse of the Empire brings me to the next part of the discussion: a negative space of politics in Bardugo’s novel.

There is very little attention paid to the politics of the magical transmedia world of Grisha-verse. It is given that Ravka was once a unified country torn in two by the Shadow Fold. Bordering countries Shu-Han and Fjerda act as devices to hinder the possibilities of circling said Fold. Other books shed some light on the countries of Novy Zem (“New World” inspired by the British colonies [Bardugo, 2012/10/02]) and Kerch. Maps are a big part of the worldbuilding toolkit – every book is supported with visual referencing material nailing the existing toponyms and glimpsing other places of the same world, and it is hardly seen as a coincidence that the protagonist Alina is a cartographer. In some instances, maps are supplemented with detailed drafts of the cities (the Ice Court – an architectural complex accommodating an Embassy, Prison and a sect HQ within the

⁵ I will not further elaborate on this phrase that sounds as if quoted directly from Said: “As Said elaborates, the ‘cultural, temporal, and geographical distance was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise’” (Brown, 2010, p. 151). I discuss the problem of Japanese stereotypes, some of their origins, and influence in the article “A. B. Mitford as a cultural diplomat and the image of Japan in Victorian England” (Gubinskaya, 2020) It is closely related to the Orientalizing ‘sense of beauty, secrecy, and elite’ in the descriptions of the Orient represented by Japan.

same walls – is one of the examples). It is noteworthy, however, that Ravka and Novy Zem are shapeless entities with uncharted territories that stretch beyond the layout of the page. It is not addressed what lies beyond the oikumene of the written universe.

Meanwhile, if we return to the initial inspiration of Bardugo lying in 1860s Russia, we most likely expect to see Ravka stretching as far as the West of Novy Zem and occupying at least a portion of the continent. It was not until 1867 – six years after the liberation of serfs that has not yet happened in the Grishaverse – when Alexander II sold Alaska to the US.

The Fold setting a clear-cut border between the East and the West also invites a discussion on the nature of the cultural difference between Orient and Occident, and the place of Russia in the world of polarities. In the world of Ravka, “the skiffs were loaded with grain, timber, and raw cotton, but on the trip back they would be stocked with sugar, rifles, and all manner of finished goods that passed through the seaports of West Ravka” (Bardugo, 2012). The watershed lies not on the shores of the Unsea – Shadow Fold – but much further to the West – on the shores of the True Sea.

As Kipling said,

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat
[Kipling, 1889].*

As much as the author insists, that the world of Grishaverse has little in common with the real countries, a discussion around the Western or Eastern origin of Russia is a real and prominent struggle for generations of Russian thinkers. As the concept of the bipolar world solidified in Western discourse, any new player in the global political arena was immediately assigned to one camp or another. The ideology of this clear-cut division of the world can be illustrated by lively debates of the late XIX century around Russia. Pan-Slavist philosopher Nikolay Danilevskii ironically summarised predominant views of the West-European thinkers:

West and East, Europe and Asia are imagined in our mind as some opposites, polarities. The West, Europe is the pole of progress, relentless improvement, continuous movement forward; East, Asia is the pole of stagnation and ossification, abhorrent to a modern man. These are historical and geographical dogmas that are never doubted, and every Russian faithful follower of modern science trembles at the thought of the possibility of being assigned to the sphere of stagnation and inhibition. For if not the West, so the East; not Europe, so Asia - there is no middle ground; there is no Euro-Asia, West-East, and even if there was such a thing, then the middle position between two ways of thinking is also unbearable [Danilevskii, 1871].

“No middle ground” in the metaphorical account by Danilevskii turns into a literal ‘no man’s land’ of the dark terrain of the Shadow Fold teeming with monsters. Figes devoted much attention to the construction of the concept of Russianness, trying to reconcile the two polarities of the cultivated gentlefolk and peasantry. I would assume, Bardugo is well aware of this dichotomy in Figes’s interpretation and models the conflict in her text after it.

She, however, pushes back against the attempts to interpret the Shadow Fold in the context of the fall of the Berlin wall and the advent of Glasnost, marking the reconciliation of the West and the East in Russian and world history. In the YouTube recording of the Q&A with Bardugo, she comes clean about her strategies of dealing with Russian history and politics:

Here's the thing that Russia of the mid-1800s was a point of departure for me. It was a cultural touchstone, and you can see that I can get some of the deep themes of the story. But already there's a break with that. I mean, you could, if you wanted to, write a paper and how'd it talk about the fall of the Fold. There's like, you know, the breaking of the Iron Curtain and Glasnost. [...] But really, that's not what it is. This is me, really, just deviating from history entirely and there [are] the dynamics that exist culturally. You know, there is no United States for Instance, so there really cannot be a Cold War [Bardugo, 2019, 13:59 – 14:35].

Albeit the quotation begs for further analysis (and the author herself acknowledges in the same talk, that there is enough material for a course paper), at this instance I would let the author

govern the scope of interpretations of her text and will follow her direction to omit the Cold War interpretations of the text of *Shadow and Bone*.

The talk was happening in Denver, and the author has lived most of her life in the US, so the equation “no US = no Cold War” sounds warranted in the context (moreover, keeping in mind that the talk was not scripted, so the speaker might have had scarce time to ponder on the implications of the claim). However, it brings to the fore a keyword of the recent development of the U.S.-Russian Federation relationships.

New Cold War is a term quite familiar to the International Relationships scholars. In the world of Glasnost and market economy, the USSR has sunk into oblivion, and none of the CIS countries is pursuing the path towards communism anymore, but the possibility of hostile confrontation, nevertheless, did not cease⁶.

The U.S.-Russia relationships are currently at their worst since the end of the Cold War (Newlin et al, 2020, p. 1). In the span of the last 30 years, Russia caused displeasure to its trans-Atlantic partner on many occasions. The military operation in Ossetia (2008), the Crimean crisis (2014) followed by the erection of the Crimean (Kerchensky) bridge (2016--2020), complex negotiations around Donetsk and Lugansk (2014-ongoing) aggravated by the alleged interference of Russian intelligence with the U.S. elections (2016). Secret operations assigned to Russian FSB by the Western press include the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko (2006), attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripals (2018) and Alexei Navalny (2020), and military operations in Syria (2015) complicated Russian relationships with the partners from the NATO bloc. In the U.S., a triumphant narrative of the country that has won the Cold War changed with outbreaks of hostile attitude towards Russia and their government in print, and in foreign policy as well – sanctions remain in place since 2014, in 2021 Russia and the U.S. mutually expelled the diplomatic corps.

This timeline coincides with the publication and consumption of Bardugo's novels: *Shadow and Bone* (2012), *Siege and Storm* (2013), *Ruin and Rising* (2014) set in Ravka, *Six of Crows* (2015) and *Crooked Kingdom* (2016) with the events starting in Kerch. *King of Scars* (2019), *Rule of Wolves* (2021), *The Language of Thorns* (2017) and *The Lives of Saints* (2020) appeared while the relationships of the U.S. with Russia were gradually deteriorating. Meanwhile, the exploitation of the Russian indigenous content by Bardugo was seemingly deepening. *The Lives of Saints* (2020) is a rewriting of the Russian folk tales, most of which are translated in Ivanits's research. On one occasion the story is heavily inspired by Massie's retelling of the *Tale of the Firebird*.

At the same time, specialists observe Russophobia being used in the US mass media as leverage to channel the public dissatisfaction with the international policy towards Russia and to advocate for support of the US external policy (Smeltz et al, 2018, p. 7). Russia has been promoted as a weak country on the brink of collapse, a sick nation economically incapacitated. ‘A country, that is falling apart’ [Starobin, 2014, p. 21]. The New Republic magazine curtly reported on the Opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Sochi (in 2014, months before the Crimean crisis, while the relationships were on the stage of “reloading” before nosediving):

One glaring omission throughout the parade of Russian culture was any pretense of cultural diversity. The announcers importantly declared how big Russia is—“the biggest country in the world, as big as the ocean”—and that it contains multitudes, “180 nations, each with their own culture and language,” but we saw only one of them: the ethnic Russians. The world saw only traditional Slavic garb, with its lush brocade and big head pieces (kokoshniki) (Ioffe, 2014).

While being praised for diversity and representation of characters of different ethnicities (Inej and Jesper are people of colour), class (Dregs are outcasts while Wylan is a descendant of a wealthy merchant, Mal and Alina are placed enigmatically between classes as orphans of an un-

⁶ Smith (2020) discusses and disapproves of the term, while acknowledging its existence. In Smith's interpretation, Cold War was a conflict of ideologies, not countries. Still, there can be an ideological dichotomy in the world of Bardugo's novels if the ideological component would have been written into the book. An absence of the U.S. does not exclude the possibility.

known origin) and looks (Nina is famously plus-sized), Bardugo unifies the entirety of the population of the Russian Empire under an aesthetics of Great Russia, overlooking culture of other nations, even such big and prominent ones, moreover, presently independent, as nations of Ukraine and Belorussia – the very sin Putin's Russia was accused of in the U.S. press.

The transmodality of the screen adaptation brings more diversity to the ethnic profile of the visuals. It might seem unusual because the screen adaptations tend to simplify the problems posed in the book, rather than amplifying them on the visual register. The first season was produced in Hungary – the only non-Slavic country in that region of Eastern Europe – featuring some recognizable landmarks. On the poster, a daring eye could spot the bulb-shaped domes of the Cathedral of Assumption in Kazan Kremlin in Tatarstan – a non-Slavic region of Russia. It might not be registered by the target audience as meaningful, but the inclusion of the non-Slavic features to the repertoire can be interpreted as elevating the flatness of the ethnic profile of the book characters.

The movement across media and the intervention of translation is discussed further in the final part of my article.

It should be noted, that the book received severe criticism from the Russian-speaking community on the inaccuracies in the Russian names, especially on the misused gendered surnames. It prompted Bardugo to write an article “Tongue Twister” (2018) explaining her word choices in the first place. She does not mention there that the very first proper noun of the book – Ana Kuya – is notoriously homophonic to a Russian euphemism for an obscene expression meaning “Why?” or “For what purpose?”. However, she acknowledges that she received no help from any Russian translator or a professional. It begs the question, what was the approach of the Russian translator?. In the reply to the accusations of inconsistencies in Russian terms and names, Bardugo wrote:

It's been suggested that no one with a knowledge of Slavic language or culture could enjoy this series, but that hasn't been my experience. I've certainly encountered critics, but I've also had Russian fans at my signings here in the US, received kind emails from readers in Russia and Ukraine who have read the book in English, and most recently the book was published in Bulgaria and received a favorable response [Bardugo, 2014/01/07].

One can only speculate on the age and upbringing of the enthusiastic fans that are fluent in English and have access to the US literary market in Russia and Ukraine. By the time Bardugo wrote about Russian speakers enjoying her work in 2014, there was no Russian translation available. It was not until 2018, the year of the publication of *Six of Crows* duology in Russian when *Shadow and Bone* trilogy finally made it to the Russian literary market. It was only months before Bardugo publicly announced that negotiations with Netflix were successful and the production of the adaptation is going to be launched⁷. The first book cover pertains to the promotional leverage. The novel was advertised as “a book by the author of *Six of Crows*”.

In 2018, the book was translated by the same person as *Six of Crows*, Anastasiya Kharchenko [Bardugo, Kharchenko, 2018]⁸. Unfortunately, her choices were not considered at the stage of the show dubbing, and some of her finds were lost in the process of multimodal translation.

While Bardugo emphasizes that every choice considering Russian terms and names was deliberate – such as gender-bending names Alina Starkov and Ilya Morozova – translation did not preserve this specific trait. The translator opted for conventional female surnames for female characters, male surnames for males. She slightly retouched the scenes that come across as inaccurate to the native Russians. For instance, where Bardugo's characters are pouring tea from a samovar, in the Russian translation tea is replaced with boiling water to avoid confusion. In every instance, a

⁷ Bardugo announced that *Shadow and Bone* will be adapted for screen in January, 2019. Meanwhile, AST Publishing House released the news of the TV series production on 31.10.2018 (AST, 2018) – two months earlier, and close to the publication of the translations of the first trilogy.

⁸ A novel *Ninth House* (2019) was translated by a different translator and is not set in the Grishaverse, so Kharchenko is not the only professional voicing Bardugo's work for the Russophone audience.

kefta is translated as caftan. Even the world-building choices underwent serious correction. Where the author emphasizes: “Deciding not to go this route meant agonizing over much smaller decisions—from how to construct a plural (“Corporalki” over “Corporalniki”)” (Bardugo, 2018). Kharchenko replaces the Russian suffix *-lki* that is used either in derogatory meaning or for utensils and instruments with the suffix *-nik*, which points towards a person and has no pejorative connotation. In the following case:

Otkazat'sya: “The abandoned.” This is the word Grisha use to refer to people unable to practice the Small Science. In Russian, this is a verb form and not a noun. But because I liked the look and sound of the word, I adopted the “-sya” suffix for other constructions later in the series. (Bardugo, 2018)

Kharchenko replaces the verb with the noun ‘otkaznik’ (the abandoned one), choosing a better sounding choice for the Russian reader over the author’s intention⁹.

Probably, the biggest change – and by far the most meaningful – happened to the term Grisha. As it is a diminutive form of the name Grigorii, it had the potential of creating a comical effect for the Russian reader. The translator preserved the plural form and put the stress on the last vowel, alienating the word for the reader to the extent that it is not recorded as Russian anymore. This tampering of the formative word essential for worldbuilding is fascinating.

With Netflix engaged in production, the visual references of the book underwent a serious change. In 2012, the book was published with a cover featuring a reference to Russian five-domed churches with bulb-shaped domes (traditionally interpreted as churches devoted to Maria). A spiral ornament on the bulbs hinted towards one of the best-known landmarks of Russia, a symbol of Moscow in many Hollywood products, St. Basil’s Cathedral on the Red Square¹⁰. The same building with the domes appeared in the second book of the series. Later, simultaneously with the interference of Netflix, overt Russian visuals were replaced with more neutral zoomorphic designs featuring a stag, a serpent and a firebird. After the production of the screen adaptation was complete, the book cover changed to cropped pictures of the lead actors focusing on their weapon of choice in the TV show. So, Alina is summoning a swirl of light, Kaz Brekker is caressing his cane, Jesper is portrayed with a revolver. One can argue that the specificity of the Russian cultural imagery was replaced by the more relatable and targeted at the wider audience animistic motif, and descended to the level of morbid and visceral imagery of the instrument of power, war, death.

On-screen, the Russianness of the book’s aesthetics is hardly ever emphasized. It is difficult to put a finger on a specifically Russian cultural tradition or element. Even the bulb-shaped domes, added to the Little Palace on the stage of post-production – though probably used to cue to the Russian architecture – add nothing of Russian specificity. It should be noted that the palace of Keszthely in Hungary, used as a filming location, already has one bulb-shaped dome. Moreover, Russian palaces have no domes unless there is a chapel in the wing. The keftas, which were supposed to be a major nod to the Slavic characters dressed *a la Russe*, are executed in a way that reads as a Hussar uniform in the setting of Budapest. Even a Cyrillic script is nowhere to be seen, replaced by a fantasy font.

The plot of the TV series – along the same lines as the Russian translation – was leaned heavily on the success of the book *Six of Crows*. The scriptwriters deliberately took the well-loved characters of the duology and wrote their story from scratch, catering to the fan-base and at the same time enhancing the sujet of the novel.

In the plane of translatability and multimodality, the show relies on the familiarity of the audience with the world. The pilot episode, though entirely consisting of exposition, does not suf-

⁹ Matlock (2018, p.98) devotes much attention to the portmanteau qualities of the word “otkazat'sya” in her work. In the light of this research on posthuman qualities of the characters of the narrative, the translator’s decision has much deeper effect.

¹⁰ This reference is further supported by an alternative cover design, that is saved in Leigh Bardugo’s Pinterest board ‘Early Comp Covers’, attributed to Jen Wang.

fice in providing a background story and motivation for all main characters. Unless the viewer had the experience of closely reading the text of the trilogy and duology, most of the visually pleasing but chaotic references to background characters (the sinister antagonist Pekka Rollins, the threatening owner of Menagerie Tante Heleen and others) are distracting from the main events. Moreover, the writers – clearly building up for the second season – take liberties with the line of the characters of the duology, making it impossible to return to their story after the events of the trilogy are finished. Thus, the TV show turns a whole duology into a device used to augment the trilogy, recycling the focal characters as they see fit.

The author was an executive producer of the show, so she still maintained her agency as a creator. However, the coherence of the duology was irreversibly interrupted with the endorsement of Bardugo herself, which raises further questions. It is not uncommon to see the screen adaptation as a way to project and promote the author's idea to a wider audience by making it more accessible. Different devices are employed to ensure accessibility – including shorter time to consume, improved consumer's experience, simplified plot. In the case of Bardugo's work, the team of producers took another approach. The book *Shadow and Bone* is a short novel. With just over 200 pages it takes less time to read than to watch a show. Even the audiobook of 9 h 21 m [Audible 'Shadow and Bone', 2012] is only one hour longer than the series¹¹. The plot is complicated with the infusion of additional conflict. A racial component is layered, as well as a political struggle of the West Ravka for autonomy. Conclusively, the show creates a more complex network of mutual relationships between the elements of the plot, and external relations with the books, increasing the complexity of the product.

An act of creation: is it driven by external forces, or is it a manifestation of the author's inner motifs and beliefs? Is it performed deliberately and consciously? Amanda R. Smith (2016), an ethnographer, experiments with two different theories to analyse the data she collected studying a young author (who, coincidentally, happens to be a fan of Bardugo's work). In the conclusion, she emphasizes that in the world of multimedia and wider possibilities for self-expression, the authors resort to multiple platforms to create a holistic view of their work. The act of creation transcends the conscious effort made at the desk in the act of writing and bleeds into social media, Pinterest boards, pictures of daily activities. "Embodied domain" (p. 125) of writing is something deeply thrilling.

Following Bardugo's Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr blog (currently deleted) and Pinterest boards, one can most definitely find parallels with the subject of Smith's study. Bardugo resorts to using branded houseware, matches nail polish to the covers of her books and cosplays her work. Even when the post has no overt promotional potential (not related to publishing, advertising campaigns, merchandise, or press conferences), she plants references to her characters anyway. Bardugo has a disability and is forced to use a cane, so she adopts it to bond with another character of the Grishaverse – Kaz Brekker, who has a similar condition. This interrelation between the author's personal life and her work, within a nonrepresentational theory, is interpreted as a sign of the subsurface, subconscious process of writing, streaming from 'bare life'¹².

Having this possible interpretation in mind, I cannot speculate that Bardugo deliberately chose to let the body of her work outline and shape the negative spaces discussed in this article. The reception potential of her work is wider and more diverse than the author intended. She tries to prune it back to the shape of her original intentions, interfering with the process of the reader's meaning-making. Thus, in a certain way, she pushes back against the concept of the "death of the author".

¹¹ If the argument does not sound compelling, the *Lord of the Rings* was 54 hours of audiobook adapted into 9-hour movie saga, *Harry Potter* – a 117-hour narration squeezed in puny 19 hours of screen time. Almost 10-fold compression.

¹² Smith references Thrift's theory and summarises it contrasting against New London Group theory, which attributes meaning making agency to the human, and interprets the text as a result of conscious activity.

With this dichotomic process, I suggest stepping away from the author's intentions and tracing the subtle trends of the market, that contributed to Bardugo's popularity. The discussion I want to open is not whether Bardugo intended to create a book that exploits Russian culture without doing justice to it, hinting towards a New Cold War, and separating the world to the familiar poles of the West and East. I want to finish my article by posing a question – is it the market that is thirsty for products that are stereotyping and alienating, demarcating, polarizing, and offer only magical explanation stripped of rational cause to explain the politics within the text?

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