

Mythogeography: region as a palimpsest of identities

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The conception of mythogeography belongs to the broad *multi-disciplinary scientific field* of *humanitarian geography* forming in Russia on the border of human geography & several humanities, such as semiotics, communication theory, mythologies theory, ethnography, local history. Humanitarian geography deals with all kinds of the interpretations & (re)presentations of space & place, that is with the systems of signs, symbols, archetypes, stereotypes, images, myths which individuals & social, cultural & ethnic groups use in order to “explore” their space. Russian humanitarian geography borrows much from the Anglo-American *humanistic geography*, but still differs a lot. It has a wider horizon of topics, since it is interconnected with semiotics & cultural anthropology. It has a specific methodological approach based on the *textual* interpretation of landscape, place, space & human behavior in it.

Mythogeography deals with geographical images, spatial myths & stereotypes, that is with what people think of the spaces they are surrounded with. Different individuals, diverse cultures (ethnic, regional, local etc.) living together form an endless variety of multiple spaces in every place. Mythogeography’s main peculiarity is in the *special vision of the “filling” of every place with constructed realities*, created with the help of mythological models of communication & the theory of the semiosis of modern myths. Different individuals, diverse cultures (ethnic, regional, local etc.) living together form an endless variety of multiple spaces in every place. Trying to analyze them we can come to the strategy of further local development, embracing the diverse cultural & other interests¹.

There are a lot of terms in humanitarian geography & the humanities, describing different kinds of spatial representations, for example, geographical (spatial) & national images², spatial & local myths³, spatial representations⁴, spatial phenomena⁵, local texts⁶, etc. Field research shows

¹ Mitin 2006.

² Gatchev 2000; Gold 1990; Lyhch 1982; Mihaylov 1948; Zamyatin 2003; Zamyatina 2001.

³ Grigoryeva 1998, Bell 2003, Blom, Nilsson 2001.

⁴ Mir 2003.

⁵ Burovsky 2003.

that the *difference* between these terms is more likely to be connected with the interpretations of the final “product” & its positioning in the systems of social worlds. Hence, mythogeography is not only *one of* the conceptions of humanitarian geography, but, more than that, it is an original approach to putting together multiple spatial interpretations.

Place as palimpsest

The main element of the conception of mythogeography is the *model of place as a palimpsest*. This model reflects the vision of multiple co-existing semiological systems specific for mythogeography. The model is based on the famous metaphor of palimpsest from postmodern cultural/humanistic geography reconstructed into a certain model.

The metaphor of “landscape as palimpsest” reflects co-existence of the elements with different time of origin & level of presence in the landscape. As M. Crang puts it, landscape turns into “a sum of erasures, accretions, anomalies and redundancies over time”⁷. Landscape turns from text to *intertext*⁸. The metaphor of palimpsest “provides the possibility for erasure and overwriting and the co-existence of several different scripts, implying not just different historical eras, but several historical and contemporary actors as well”⁹, but still the main idea of the metaphor was the existence of multiple layers originated from history¹⁰. All in all, the term “palimpsest” is used rather as a metaphor than a model. An exclusion may be found in the work of M. Urbanc & his colleagues on the Post-Soviet landscape transformation in the Balkan States. “What is valuable will be retained, what is not valuable will disappear”¹¹ – that’s the position of Urbanc concerning the palimpsest of ideological & architectural details. This vision is based on the model of the palimpsest suggested by J. Vervloet¹²:

Some landscape elements have remained the same through all the changing socio-economic formations. Some others have been forgotten or destroyed by the emerging formations. Some have been replaced by other objects. Yet others have retained their physical structure but the meanings have changed. Landscape is thus the collection of inscriptions by all formations, where one can still recognize the signs of different time periods¹³

⁶ Abashev 2000; Toporov 1995.

⁷ Crang 1998, 22.

⁸ Brockmeier 2001.

⁹ Schein 1997, 662.

¹⁰ McManus 2004.

¹¹ Urbanc et. al. 2004, 119.

¹² Vervloet 1986.

¹³ Quoted in: Urbanc et. al. 2004, 119.

The model of a palimpsest suggested by the author is originated from the vision of a place as a “fuzzy set” of *diverse interpretations*, not only historically different elements.

The model of palimpsest reflects the picture of multiple interpretations of one place. Each place is *not only* filled with elements, attributes, objects that we can see or touch. We shouldn't forget that each place is *perceived & thought over*. The creation of geographical descriptions, their following transformations, researchers' assessments, readers' perception are shown as an endless process of the *semiosis of spatial myths*¹⁴. In the process of endless semiosis of spatial myths there appears a *multiple set of realities of each place*. The essence of this process is in the endless interpretation (estimation, description, analysis, etc.) of space & place.

The *palimpsest* is a system of multiple realities of a place, each of which may in definite circumstances become dominant. The palimpsest is a *unite totality of layers with variable hierarchy*. Each of the layers of the palimpsest is in fact one of descriptions of place or one of spatial interpretations & myths, that is it is one of the *multiple contexts (realities) of a place*.

The place as a palimpsest would most probably be a sum of various elements connected with their own *dominants* (main attributes). Each of these would in definite contexts cover all the rest. The palimpsest remains the united totality of layers, but in order to solve some definite problems we need to change the hierarchy of its layers.

Geographical space made of places-palimpsests is no longer a bidimensional picture, it turns into a *multidimensional* system that may be “read” from diverse viewpoints. Palimpsest is a number of impressive images that can be used by every “reader” to construct his/her own vision of a place.

Here are the *main principal attributes* of the model of place as palimpsest:

- *co-existence of multiple realities of one place*;
- *autonomy* of each of these realities as one of the layers of the united palimpsest;
- the possibility to establish definite *rules* of the creation of *each* of these layers-realities;
- the possibility of revealing definite *rules* used to make *connections between* these layers-realities;
- existence of a certain *hierarchy* of these layers-realities in every *definite* moment in time for every *definite* person and/or (social) group;
- variability of this hierarchy, its non-uniqueness.

We have revealed the idea of the palimpsest as the main model of mythogeographical vision of space & place. We need to explain what the essence of *each of its layers* in such a

¹⁴ Barthes 2000.

vision is, because basically these layers are the very realities that we live in & that we need to research, preserve & transform if we want to change the image of territory.

Complex geographical descriptions

It is important for mythogeography to present various interpretations of a place as *definite attributes* (elements). Complicated systems of spatial representations, senses, understandings should be turned into *contexts*, i.e. the sets of attributes. Such informational approach is based on the idea that every spatial interpretation is in fact a system of attributes connected with each other.

How to construct a unite layer of a palimpsest out of a list of attributes? Our analysis shows that most appropriate for mythogeography are the rules of the creation of complex geographical descriptions, on the one hand, and the laws of the existence & construction (semiosis) of spatial myths, on the other hand.

The creation of complex geographical descriptions is the initial task of geography known since antiquity¹⁵. The *historico-geographical & methodological analysis* of multi-volume editions of the “golden age” geographical descriptions (the edge of the XIX-XX centuries), conducted by the author¹⁶, together with the *theoretical generalizations* of the problem by Russian & European geographers of the same period¹⁷ lead us to the establishment of the following rules of the creation of genuine complex geographical descriptions:

1. Creating a description, one should research a place as a definite *set of attributes* (elements, properties, etc.), the very revealing of which is in fact the semiological & structural inventory of the place.

2. One shouldn't try to find *all* the attributes of a place. It's necessary to pick out those attributes that are *more important*. More than that, it's extremely necessary to synthesize the most important attributes (features) of the place – *its dominants*.

3. It's important that *unity but not fullness* should be the main objective which regulates the contents of a geographical description. That means, first of all, one needs to concentrate on the *connections* between the attributes – it's necessary to work out the hierarchy of the attributes of the place: from the dominant to the secondary ones.

¹⁵ Darby 1962, Davis 1915, Finch 1934, Hart 1982, Lewis 1985, Paterson 1974, etc.

¹⁶ Mitin 2004.

¹⁷ Baransky 1980; Hettner 1930.

4. The dominants shouldn't be simply the basis of the description; picking the dominant features shouldn't turn into "naked" nomination of the main data about the place. The dominants should be *connected* with the other selected attributes of the place; they may explain them, put them together, illustrate and/or generalize them.

5. The process of selection of attributes & picking the dominants is in fact *subjective* for any researcher & *individual* for any place, but that doesn't prevent these geographical descriptions from being scientific. These subjectivity & individuality are the demands of the method used & they form the uniqueness & the success of the approach described.

6. The structure of attributes & dominants of the complex geographical descriptions is to be organized in such a manner that one could be able to *transform* it, for example, with the aim of solution of definite applied problem. That may be provided by precise structure, accurately picked connections in the hierarchy.

To put it briefly, on the basis of the methodology of complex geographical descriptions we state that *genuine complex geographical descriptions should be based on picking the dominant features of place & adopting the secondary features to the dominant with the usage of internal & external textual interconnections*. There should be no unified way of creating geographical descriptions. We can only formulate possible researchers' positions on the places, some uncertain scientific patterns.

Spatial myths

What is spatial myth as a layer of a palimpsest? What kind of *reality* is it?

Speaking about myths in geographical space we can't but mention *mythical spaces*, in particular, studied by Yi-Fu Tuan, who explains how they may appear.

Tuan describes two principal kinds of mythical space. "In the one, mythical space is a fuzzy area of detective knowledge surrounding the empirical known; it frames pragmatic space. In the other it is the spatial component of a world view, a conception of localized values within which people carry on their practical activities"¹⁸.

Yi-Fu Tuan, as it is typical of Anglo-Saxon geography, is more interested in the very *process* in the conscience that forms mythical space and conventional status of myth in the geographical world. Mythical spaces are initially created by the power of *imagination*. The world we live in, our spatial concepts are not merely based on the perception, but also on the imagination. They are formed as mythical spaces.

¹⁸ Tuan 2002, 86.

Thus, research in mythical spaces is mainly directed towards the cognition of the *subject* & the justification of their existence in conscience. It is another matter which is in our opinion more important for mythogeography – *the object & its correlation with the “real” space*.

Basic statement for mythogeography is that of viewing *myth as reality*; this principle was borrowed from the theory of archaic mythologies. The actual spatial myth is the *world* in which people live & act. However, there is constantly an idea of “*another reality*” which arises in the theories of modern mythologies. Roland Barthes explains the way mythological knowledge creates one reality out of another. “The main principle of a myth is turning history into nature. It’s clear why from the point of view of the myth consumers, its intention and the message of the concept can remain obvious and seem unintentional: the interest for the sake of which the mythical word is declared, is expressed quite openly, but immediately freezes in naturalness; it is read not as a stimulus, but as a reason”¹⁹.

Myth constantly synthesizes new realities & consequently the *spatial myth creates multiple realities of every place*. The *deformation* of reality, while retaining its authenticity – that is the conventional status of the constructed layers of the palimpsest.

It’s now the time to define what the spatial myth *is* & how it could be differentiated from the other types of spatial interpretations. The well-known Barthes’s quotation “myth is a word”²⁰ is shared by most of the researchers. According to R. Barthes, *anything can become a myth*; at any rate, it turns into it as soon as achieves *social function*.

For geography it means that spatial myth has to be the *basis* of a layer of the palimpsest of multiple realities of a place. So, the spatial myth in this interpretation is not just a word about space, but such a word that be the centre of a *context* of attributes of a place & thus form a *discourse* – a fixed view of a certain place.

We have now made a general description of the essence & reality of spatial myth as a layer of the palimpsest. Taking into accordance the ideas of the deformation of reality in the myth, it would also be important for us to attempt to find the *mechanism* of constructing new realities in the theories of modern mythologies.

Let us now turn to the theory of myth semiosis.

According to R. Barthes, myth is a *secondary semiological system* where the *sense* of a language sign is turned into the *form* of a myth. And at the same time the sense is

¹⁹ Barthes 2000, 255.

²⁰ Ibid.

impoverished²¹. For mythogeography it means that the *sense of the dominant also becomes poorer*, because its context is only insufficiently expressed.

Having taken its form from the language myth constructs *a new sense (meaning)*. Spatial myth being a model of reality reflects traditional attributes of a place included into complex geographical description. But *the reality of myth transforms these attributes by giving them a new sense*. While a classical description required a detailed description (its aim was in the cognition of a place), a spatial myth demands the use of these attributes for the *further* explanation of a certain idea, image, phenomenon.

Spatial myth is *simpler* than a complex geographical description, but at the same time paradoxically it contains *more sense*. It is a kind of *quintessence* of a description, only the dominant attributes of a place brought together.

The transformation of sense into form can be *endlessly* repeated, which means that there *cannot be any final version of a spatial myth*, formed as a result of semiosis. The same mechanism will be used every time to create a new interpretation.

So, the application of the concepts of mythologies to geographical objects allows us to formulate both the rules of creating *any* of the separate layers-realities & their *connections*. They are as follows:

1. Spatial myth is a reflection of genuine reality.
2. While viewing reality as a basis of a myth we need not forget about the reality constructed by people – the *perceptive stereotypes*.
3. The reality in myth is *deformed*, but remains genuine in the sense that myth is to a less extent oriented towards carrying maximal amount of information about a place & to a greater extent it can pass on the inclination to *reflect the form of the idea (dominant) in this place*.
4. When creating a spatial myth we are to keep in mind its *potential consumers* & their peculiarities.
5. The creation of a spatial myth is a way to *impoverish* the contexts of attributes of a place, but at the same time they are made *more conscious*. It supposes the *selection from among the previously selected* attributes.
6. In the process of selecting attributes for the spatial myth it's necessary to provide *transformability* of the myth. Every attribute of the form is to get as many meanings as possible; and vice versa, every idea (meaning, dominant) is to be justified by as many attributes of a place as possible.

²¹ Ibid., 239-242.

Regional identities

Thus we have described the concept of mythogeography together with its main model – “place (region/area/territory) as palimpsest”. What is the place of regional identities in this model? How can mythogeography help to study regional, local & other territorial identities in the Russian North?

The experience of field research in Karelia shows that it is useful to consider regional & local identities of town inhabitants as a specific autonomous layer of a palimpsest of the town. That’s a kind of “internal image” of a place constructed in the minds of people who percept this place as theirs own.

Such approach provides us with three perspectives of mythogeographical research of identities. In fact, the concept of mythogeography enables us:

- 1) to study the *construction of regional identity* as a semiotic process of mental transformation of the geographical ‘reality’ of the region;
- 2) to *compare* regional identity as a special kind of internal local myth (belonging to the local inhabitants) with other external mythologies of the region;
- 3) to help to *influence the construction/transformation* of regional identity on the basis of the mythogeographical semiosis.

Surely, all these three topics are topical & challenging for Russian North, so the implementation of the theoretical framework described above has been already started by the author in the town of Olonets, Karelia & its rural surroundings²². The suggestions concerning the continuation of such projects are welcome!

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²² Mitin 2004, 110-139.

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