

# Tamara Hundorova. The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s

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Volume 9, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088684ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus719>

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## Éditeur(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

## ISSN

2292-7956 (numérique)

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## Citer ce compte rendu

Lutsyshyna, O. (2022). Compte rendu de [Tamara Hundorova. The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s]. *East/West*, 9(1), 261–263. <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus719>



**Tamara Hundorova.** *The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s.* Translated by Sergiy Yakovenko, Academic Studies Press, 2019. Ukrainian Studies, edited by Vitaly Chernetsky. xvi, 320 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$42.00, paper.

**R**enowned literary scholar Tamara Hundorova explores the post-Chornobyl condition and its treatment in and by Ukrainian literature in *The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s*. This English-language edition, translated from the Ukrainian by Sergiy Yakovenko, was recently released by Academic Studies Press, and it is under review here. Hundorova's monograph is a sophisticated piece of literary scholarship that is groundbreaking for its interdisciplinary approach. The author addresses the "*postapocalyptic postmodern narrative*" (xiv) of post-Chornobyl Ukrainian literature via an innovative framework that rests not only on theories of postmodernism as applied to Ukrainian letters but also on concepts stemming from the field of disaster studies. Her goal is to offer readers a novel and original work providing a penetrating analysis of postmodernist Ukrainian literature (and, broadly speaking, the Ukrainian postmodernist condition) and inscribing the Chornobyl catastrophe and reactions to it into a more global epistemic paradigm.

This book is divided into five parts. In part 1, "Chornobyl and Postmodernism" (comprising eight chapters [1–47]), Hundorova sets forth the conceptual premises of her study, discussing what the Chornobyl catastrophe represents ontologically. In order to situate the issue within a theoretical construct, Hundorova elaborates on the frameworks utilized in the book. One of the most significant theoretical assumptions that we find falls within Frank Kermode's understanding of the modernist apocalyptic narrative. Kermode contends that every story is potentially the story of the "end of the world," and to inscribe apocalypse into a narrative matrix, paradoxically, means to humanize it. In this way, literature becomes more than just a tool for examining and understanding the Chornobyl discourse—it is, in fact, an active co-constructor of this discourse. Ukrainian postmodernism, Hundorova asserts, is first and foremost a post-Chornobyl text that is rich in the combination, fragmentation, re-evaluation, and redefinition of meanings. Hundorova also touches on the socialist realist and anti-totalitarian understanding of Chornobyl.

In part 2, "Post-Totalitarian Trauma and Ukrainian Postmodernism" (comprising six chapters [49–100]), Hundorova briefly returns to the classic definitions of postmodernism that rest on Jean-François Lyotard's critiques of master narratives, Jean Baudrillard's simulacra theory, and Jacques Derrida's theories. She postulates that Chornobyl is "a postmodernist narrative" (53) and discusses Ukrainian postmodernism within a historical

model. According to Hundorova, one important thing to keep in mind about Ukrainian postmodernism is that its canon is informed by “the meeting of two geo-cultural paradigms” (58)—the Western one and the national one—as well as by various ideologies (for instance, post-totalitarian and global). The fact that this canon also comprises both socialist realist and modernist artistic practices as well as “high and popular culture” (58) adds to the complexity of the issue. Hundorova explains that in order to adequately grasp the essence of Ukrainian postmodernism, one needs to expand or revise the existing paradigms to account for all of the divergences from the classical understanding of the topic. Chornobyl, both as an event and as text, is an indispensable part of the ontology and epistemology of the Ukrainian postmodernist condition.

Part 3, “The Postmodern Carnival” (comprising four chapters [101–54]), is specifically dedicated to the artistic experience and production of the group Bu-Ba-Bu and Iurii Andrukhovych. This group (Andrukhovych, Viktor Neborak, and Oleksandr Irvanets') at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s produced a highly ironic and carnivalesque version of literature complemented by stage performances. They created a particular type of hybrid text that allowed for the “relics of Soviet ideology” to be showcased (in an ironic context) alongside baroque motifs, newspaper style, and “bohemian-artistic slang” (109). This version of postmodernism turned out to be at odds with what Hundorova calls “the ideology of the organicism of Ukrainian culture” (107), that is, with specific traditional and, as Frantz Fanon could have said, already fossilized elements of (post-colonial) national identity. Hundorova confirms what Bu-Ba-Bu has offered not only to literature but also to the cultural critique of existing ideologies and, to use Antonio Gramsci's term,<sup>1</sup> to cultural hegemonies and what Bu-Ba-Bu has contributed—at times through the use of kitsch—to post-totalitarian awareness.

In part 4, “Faces and Topoi of Ukrainian Postmodernism” (comprising nine chapters [155–265]), Hundorova discusses authors such as Taras Prokhas'ko, Iurii Izdryk, Bohdan Zholdak, Oksana Zabuzhko, Ievhen Pashkovs'kyi, V"iacheslav Medvid', Serhii Zhadan, Halyna Pahutiak, Vasyl' Kozheliianko, Volodymyr Tsybul'ko, and others, pointing out distinct postmodernist features in their respective oeuvres. This substantial, and yet succinct, overview gives the reader a clear idea of the chief postmodern-oriented Ukrainian authors, whose texts range from feminist to pop postmodernism.

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<sup>1</sup> Gramsci's famous notebooks outlining his theories and ideas, known in Italian as *Quaderni del carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*), were written between 1929 and 1935 and published in varied editions.

The volume concludes with part 5, “Postscript” (267–301), comprising two chapters—“A Comment from the ‘End of Postmodernism’” (269–89) and “A Commentary on the ‘End of Ukrainian Postmodernism’” (290–301)—where the author continues her exploration of theoretical issues and the historical context. In particular, Hundorova deals with “post-Soviet” postmodernism, the role of “grand narratives,” and the literature of trauma. She returns to Ukrainian postmodernism, its emergence and development, arguing that postmodernism brought forth new forms of “cultural behavior, new modes of constructing identity . . . , and new kinds of cultural consumption” (294–95). In her opinion, Ukrainian literature has gone through the period of postmodernism and entered a period of post-postmodernism. Toward the end of the chapter, Hundorova discusses the ideas of Oksana Pakhl'ovs'ka, a writer and cultural critic who finds that catastrophism—a sense of the “Catastrophe”—counters postmodernism in Ukrainian literature (298–99).

Hundorova’s study will be useful to any reader who is interested in Ukraine—and specifically in its literature. However, the volume will be of greatest assistance to those working in an academic setting on Chornobyl or in the fields of Ukrainian literature and history. Hundorova boasts a vast background in philosophy, cultural theory, post-colonial theory, Ukrainian literature, the post-Soviet condition, and Eastern European literatures. And her theoretical framework is highly sophisticated and diverse. It is important to note that Hundorova’s book will be illuminating for scholars in Russian and Eastern European literatures and histories. The very fact that in the book’s title and text, the toponym *Chornobyl* is spelled according to its Ukrainian pronunciation—in opposition to its Russian counterpart, *Chernobyl*, which was previously widely used—signifies a paradigm shift toward a more post-colonial approach in practice and in scholarship.

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