

# WASTELAND as A TEXT OF CULTURE

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This paper deals with a specific sort of urban landscape which is highly typical of the 20th century Russian (=Soviet) urban environment. The issue under consideration can be called waste (or vacant/neglected/abandoned) land in English, given it is a rough translation of the Russian *пустырь*. In Russian it is derived from *пустота* ('emptiness') and has a number of other suggestive meanings (like *пустяк* – 'trifft,' *пустой человек* – 'nobody,' etc). Wasteland is considered to be a wasted piece of land or a destroyed area in the midst of urban built-up areas. A special feature of this sort of landscape is that it is impossible to demonstrate it in a visual form in art (=painting). In this essay I undertake an attempt to discuss the issue of wasteland as a sort of visual reality (or a visual "text") that generates a non-visual message. A wasteland as a subject of a paradoxical (non)visual presentation should be considered in the context of the whole of 20th century Russian culture. The latter shows an inclination towards the absurd, and wasteland as a non-visual feature of a visual reality can be treated as one of the manifestations of this absurdity. But before discussing this question in detail, let me make some preliminary observations concerning the historical background of an urban landscape.

An urban landscape belongs to a subset of landscapes. In art history it can be traced back to very ancient times. In each historical period it was determined by the concepts of scenery presentation dominating a particular type of culture. The problem of landscape typology in the history of civilisation seems to be a very significant issue for culture studies; however, as a subject deserving much more profound research, it exceeds the limits of the present essay. I should only point out that generally, culture determines some universal language metaphors, which we use to describe a town – a town is being born, it grows, flourishes and dies. In its metaphorical meaning, the city contains "jungles," at times it imitates some organic forms (for instance, it is usually compared to an ant hill), and in many

aspects it can be identified with a natural landscape with its own urban "mountains," "canyons," "valleys" and "deserts."

In ancient art, a visual image of the town appears as a pictogram (see, for instance, some ancient images of Jerusalem). It is an iconic symbol and a sign of a continuous type. It is still not an urban landscape in a modern sense, but rather a sign-index of the town as such. This ancient presentation of the town as a part of scenery does not contrast the town and nature. It conveys a positive spatiality, meaning that it is considered as a plastic entity resembling a classic sculpture: it is supposed to be perfect, without any cavities or devastated areas inside it. It is a national image of the Universe, which defines the visual presentation of wilderness, and to the same extent, determines the model of urban visualisation.

20th century urban landscape brings some new features into the visual presentation of the town: an urban pictogram is being replaced by a city implying a negative spatiality. An image of the city and the city as such both contain destroyed areas. They assume gaps – blank space – in an urban environment, which can be conceived as a kind of discrete sign. The 20th century urban environment is withdrawn from the scenery of a natural landscape. In this way it is contrasted to it, as far as natural scenery does not presume any hiatus. However, despite conveying quite a special meaning, 20th century urban landscape is still determined to a great extent by the national image of the Universe, as well as by the concepts of natural landscape predominating the particular culture.

A wasteland in an urban landscape is highly typical for the 20th century Russian city, and it reflects some significant features of Russian culture. It acquired a special significance during the transitional period between the late Avant-Gardist and early totalitarian culture of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as during the post-war period, and it refers to some basic concepts in the Russian image of the Universe in general. As a sort of a destroyed area it brings to light a negative essence of urbanism as such, and Russian urbanism in particular, having been brought about by well-known social cataclysms and the depression in national economy. Visualisation of wasteland brings along the problem of how a catastrophe could be visualised at all.

Discussing the issue of wasteland, one should distinguish between wasteland as a concept, and wasteland as a text of reality.

As a text of reality, the urban wasteland of the 20th century can be considered as a model of a border-zone in urban society. It simultaneously refers to

nature (as a symbol of entropy in civilisation urbanism), as well as to culture (as a negative outcome of human activities). As to the problem of spatiality, wasteland can be regarded as a negative location, representing a sort of a distracted and spontaneously emerged artificial environment. In this sense, wasteland comes into being as a counterpart to a garden, which is also located in a so-called border-zone of culture. The above mentioned features of wasteland have repeatedly been acknowledged in recent history. For instance, in the 1930s the persecutions undertaken by the state against the Orthodox Church in Russia were followed by the mass destruction of church buildings. At that time the speculative counterposition wasteland–garden turned into reality in Moscow, because wasteland appeared as a result of churches being demolished: the authorities used to replace the churches with small public gardens, some green grass and a couple of benches. In this way a concealed wasteland became a part of some downtown areas.

At the same time, the essence of marginality is much more typical of the spatial characteristics of wasteland. Wasteland is understood to be a border zone, and it is often located in suburbs or in some other marginal parts of a town. It is often associated with criminals and other marginal social groups.

Regarding time, wasteland manifests itself as negative time and carries the meaning of a border zone between the past and the future, a sort of a blank space in the present. As a negative location and negative time, wasteland implies a negative sanctity (holiness). The language data are of particular importance in the case of this term. The semantics of emptiness in Russian refers both to the most sacred issues (*пустынь* – 'hermitage') as well as to the opposite pole (e.g. Russian proverb *свято место пусто не бывает* – 'the sacred place is never empty'). Wasteland as a text of reality elicits this semantic duality and develops a borderline meaning as an existential border between life and death.

In this sense (as an issue equally referring to life and death), wasteland can also be regarded as related to a cemetery. Implying some funeral meanings, wasteland corresponds to the funeral code in the Russian culture of the 1920s and 1930s. To make a brief detour, it should be pointed out that the funeral code comes into evidence at the turning point between the late Avant-Gardist and totalitarian society in Russia. It becomes highly relevant to the basic semantics of the époque, manifesting itself in the iconography of the underworld and the semantics of death. In this connection I should mention some artefacts of the 1930s: iconography of the false classicism in Soviet architecture, funeral

symbols in the interiors of the Moscow subway, Lenin's mausoleum and numerous monuments. In addition to that, some features of funeral semantics should also be taken into account, such as an inclination towards duality and mirror symmetry in paintings (see, for example, works by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin). The funeral symbols of the 1930s imply the idea of devastation through which the phenomenon of wasteland can be comprehended.

Meanwhile, urban wasteland based on the model of destruction and irregularity and embodying chaos maintains its own morphology. Among its obligatory attributes are blank walls and foundations of the surrounding buildings and other structures, debris (such as broken bricks, debris of reinforcements – structures – garbage, dust, etc.) and more or less undeveloped plots of land. As already mentioned above, the syntax of wasteland in an urban environment is usually defined by the marginal inhabitants of the area – the homeless, drug addicts and criminals.

I have given an outlook of a wasteland as the "text of reality." Let me now turn to the problem of wasteland as a concept.

As a concept, wasteland derives from the second part of opposition: full–empty, since it refers to the universal oppositions used for describing the image of the Universe, such as space–time, life–death, cosmos–chaos, part–entity, sacred–secular. Wasteland is a symbol of entropy and conveys the meanings of a participated space, conversed time, inverted sanctity (profanity), and death and chaos.

Having originated from the 20th century urban civilisation, wasteland as a concept can be traced in history. It goes back to the Baroque poetics corresponding to the Baroque principle of *vanitas vanitatum* and to the sign process, which presumes the models of entropy. In the 20th century negative aesthetics, wasteland can be regarded in line with a number of other negative motifs, such as garbage, war, disease, insects, etc. In European Romanticism, *wasteland* as a concept can be observed in the aesthetics of ruins.

The 20th century concept of wasteland conveys the meaning of catastrophe and disaster. It is highly frequent in Russian literature from the beginning of the 20th century up to the present day. Thus, in an implicit way, wasteland as a concept of emptiness appears in Symbolist's poetry in such motifs as *пустой* ('empty'), *пустота* ('emptiness'), *пустыня* ('desert'), *пустынно́сть* ('desolate area'), *пустынный* ('devastated') – these are all cognate words in Russian. Being the zero level of discourse, it makes up a basic constituent of Avant-Gardist poetics, which owes a lot to Symbolism (for instance, "The Poem of the End," by

Kruchonych, which represents a black sheet of paper; Kasimir Malevich's fabulous painting, *Black Square*, with its suggestive sense of minimising can also be regarded as a derivation from the Nietzschean Nothing).

The motifs of emptiness and devastation both as a feature and a process become especially significant in late Avant-Gardist prose. For instance, Daniil Kharms described the disappearance of a human being by means of the gradual obliteration of the features of his face and the parts of his body. In Expressionism, the motif of catastrophe (disaster) becomes the essence of the universe, so the implicit concept of wasteland as devastation and destruction is articulated as the most significant existential issue.

In Andrey Platonov's prose, which cannot be classified as a representative of any particular trend, the motif of emptiness is endowed with a sacred entity. It is a wasted space that determines the specifics of Platonov's town (or world), and the motif of body (especially a female body). The motif of wasteland becomes very significant, particularly in Platonov's prose. It appears as a symbol of existence inside an urban landscape. Platonov's wasteland refers to the basic opposition of life and death and brings into evidence an archetypal duality of Babylon–Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Many examples from a lot of other authors could be cited, especially from the 20th century Russian poets who widely used an image of wasteland – from Anna Akhmatova, Ossip Mandelstam and Boris Pasternak to Novella Matveeva and Joseph Brodsky.

Due to its conceptual essence, wasteland is easy to verbalise, but for the same reason, it is hard to present it as a visual image. The air of destruction can be perceived in an image of an area of old Moscow by Boris Yakovlev.<sup>2</sup> In a more expressive form it could be observed in a Malevich painting of his later period.<sup>3</sup> Negative semantics of wasteland appear in Alexandr Tyshler's paintings from the late 1920s, especially in his pictures depicting a town. Drastic visions of Tyshler's town reflect his resistance to the demands of the time and the leading artistic trend – socialist-realist trend. In an implicit form this corresponds to the

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<sup>1</sup> "Профуполномоченный, уже знакомый Вощеву, вошел в рабочее помещение и попросил всю артель пройти один раз поперек старого города, чтобы увидеть значение того труда, который начнется на выкошенном пустыре после шествия." "На выкошенном пустыре пахло умершей травой и сыростью обнаженных мест, отчего яснее чувствовалась общая грусть жизни и тоска тщетности." К-448.

<sup>2</sup> *Old Moscow*, 1918. The State Russian Museum.

<sup>3</sup> *Landscape with five houses*, 1928–1932. The State Russian Museum.

funeral code of the époque. After the war, wasteland as a subject for visual presentation can mainly be found in cinema, providing a realistic picture of the post-war demolitions; later – in the 1970s – it appears as a metaphor of the social depression of the Brezhnev period of stagnation (see, for instance, a film by Aleksei German, *My friend Ivan Lapshin*).

Though a motif of wasteland as such can be observed only fragmentarily in the 20th century art, it can, however, be seen as an apocalyptic landscape. The apocalyptic theme matches very much the concept of the 20th century wasteland in the urban environment. In other words, the motif of wasteland in 20th century landscape corresponds to the apocalyptic motif of a destroyed town. The Apocalyptic vision in the form of wasteland or a town in ruins can be seen in the work of a German painter of the 1930s, Hans Grundig's *Sign of the future*.<sup>4</sup> A large-scale of similarity between German and Soviet official art of the 1930s allows us to use this example as a representative model both for German and Russian painting.

The theme of Apocalypse continues all throughout the 20th century in Russian culture. Various events in the realm of artistic life can be regarded in this term. The archetypal opposition of Babylon–Jerusalem defines the mainstream topics of the 20th century art and fiction. The motif of Babylon, embodying a motif of devastation and destruction, thus represents in an implicit way the concept of wasteland. By an issue of destruction, wasteland manifests itself as an iconic sign. Its sign process, and its forms of visualisation, referring to the Apocalypse, elicit the semantics of sacred emptiness which is so significant to the 20th century Russian culture.

Meanwhile, the visual presentation of this motif acquires the form of a significant absence: it is an absent structure and a negative landscape. The environment formed by such places turns up in its reverse, negative appearance, meaning that it appears in a paradoxical way as a location created by non-existing places.

In present-day Moscow we can hardly find any wastelands just as there are no empty shelves in the stores. Land is expensive in the city: it cannot stay undeveloped. But the concept of wasteland still continues to exist in the Russian mentality. It manifests itself in numerous disasters and inevitable catastrophes, which accompany the advancement towards a better future and civil society.

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<sup>4</sup> 1935. The State Russian Museum.