

PERAET 2021**International Scientific Conference «PERISHABLE AND ETERNAL: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization-2021»****“CREEPYPASTA”: IMAGES OF WAITING FOR DEATH AND DANGER IN THE ONLINE SPACE**

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Abstract

The digital age generates a lot of new phenomena that are developing and affecting the current socio-cultural environment in a special way. The article examines the phenomenon of such a subspecies of the horror genre as the Internet folklore “creepypasta” from the point of view of the phenomenon’s influence on the formation of expectations of death and danger among consumers of this cultural product. Different approaches to the phenomenon are described, combined in the narratives of “creepypasta”, based on the specific capabilities of digital textuality and the unique properties of various platforms of the Internet space. The author comes to the conclusion that the specific features of “creepypastas”, as well as methods and platforms for their distribution, lead to the formation of fundamentally new fears, expectations of danger and death in a person, and also highlights the key features of “creepypastas”. The author also says that a person's expectation of danger, death or horror in the socio-cultural reality, on the one hand, forms images from “creepypastas”, when a person acts as a narrator, and on the other hand, it can partially be formed under the influence of these very images, when a person acts as a listener. In conclusion, the author summarizes that the terrible images of “creepypastas” reinforce new expectations about death and danger, which spread through real users across platforms and between them using the same means of textual and visual representation, appearing real and hidden and violating our sincere readings of these spaces.

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1. Introduction

In any era, at any stage of human and social development, one of the main fears is the fear of death. Ontological questions refer not only to the fullness of human existence, but also to its apparent finiteness. In the XXI century, we are witnessing the processes of deformation and transformation of the fundamental foundations of human social life, an aggravation of the sense of loss of a stable and habitual socio-cultural existence. The rapidly and spontaneously developing technological sphere often does not even leave a person the opportunity to adapt to their mechanisms and laws.

The Internet space and the cultural codes born within it are not only formed according to their own laws, but also affect the socio-cultural sphere, bringing their own elements through mass distribution. It is not surprising that in these conditions, the topic of horror is becoming more relevant than ever before, and there are also more and more expectations associated with danger and death. The sublimation of such expectations in cultural forms is not a product exclusively of the “digital age” – “horrors” (or particular “horror” images) have long existed as a separate genre in cinema, literature, and fine art.

Researchers, when studying the phenomenon of “creepypasta” as a set of “horror images and code” in the Internet space, may face a lack of a fundamental understanding of the nature of digital technologies. To eliminate this gap, a clear taxonomy of digital technologies is required, which must be formulated taking into account how human expectations from interaction with the digital environment relate to the real processes of this environment (Paris, 2020). However, it would not be quite right to consider the images of death and danger that arise in the Internet space only from the point of view of their digital nature, since most of them, united by the general term “creepypasta”, show similar signs with folklore narratives and myths. The peculiarity of broadcasting images of waiting for death and danger in the Internet space (Xie, 2020) is the inability to maintain linear subject-object relations with this image. “Creepypasta”, as a special kind of narrative and a set of “terrible images and codes” in the Internet space, has a kind of compulsive force that forces a person to lose the usual position of the subject, depriving him of the ability to identify narratives and other people as objects.

There is no doubt that the Internet space, digital technologies, and new digital media are changing many aspects of the political, social, cultural, and economic life of people around the world. Digital technologies (e-mail, file sharing, mobile phones, online games, e-commerce, GPS systems) are becoming commonplace and are becoming part of our social and personal lives (Miller, 2020). In the conditions of such a rapidly and spontaneously changing space, the problem of expectations in general and expectations of danger and death in particular acquires a new sound, since the not fully studied nature of digital culture makes it difficult to predict its development.

2. Problem Statement

Images of horror, danger and death are important issues of philosophy of any period. Starting from an ancient myth, ending with extensive and diverse works of mass culture, images of death and danger circulated in the semantic field of culture, forming new and reinforcing old fears and expectations. A whole galaxy of philosophers and culturologists analyzed and studied the problem of death, for example, Martin Heidegger speaks about the nature of human thinking to think about death in the future tense, and

for Epicurus, life and death are practically unrelated concepts, and people are more often afraid of diseases, injuries and suffering than death. The “digital” environment, the development of which marked the proclamation of the era of the same name, is characterized by unique characteristics and specific features. A person who exists in a “digital environment” perceives its images and meanings transmitted through social networks, platforms, etc. In the context of “digital culture”, the semantic potential of “creepypasta” is revealed from a new side in the metamodernist discourse of Timofey Vermeulen and Robin van den Acker (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). Despite the fact that their metamodern approach clearly does not focus on “digital horror”, it explains the phenomenon of “digital sincerity” characteristic of the Internet space, due to which the development and dissemination of images of death and danger in the digital environment takes place. Also, this discourse provides an understanding of the phenomenon of “creepypasta”, and the relationship of this phenomenon with the horror genre as a whole.

To understand the problem of forming new images of expectations of death and danger in the Internet space, it should be noted that the culture, within which the image of horror is formed, was previously represented primarily as a way of value development of *social reality*, megastructure and the system-forming basis of society, and now reveals an increasingly aggravated massization of all its phenomena. At the beginning of the twentieth century, due to the widespread commercialization of culture, the concept of “mass culture” (Xin, 2020) began to be considered primarily as a special type of cultural product produced annually in large circulations, and requiring effective management mechanisms.

For example, Jung (1991) noted that the “non-directed thinking” of the masses is always turned to mythological attitudes, it is a series of images and reactions focused on “the possibility of some even broader, higher meaning beyond our momentary perception ability and a hint of such a meaning” (p. 278). The Internet space, as a special, specific part of mass culture, reveals its traditions, images, codes and processes of myth-making, and this is of fundamental importance, since “the core of human life and society was and remains its mythical foundation” (Malenko & Nekita, n.d., p. 222). It is not surprising that the proclamation of the “digital age” has created platforms not only for communication, information exchange, work, etc., but also the opportunity to use these spaces to spread an absolutely new type of “horror”.

Many researchers turn to the study of “creepypasta” as a special phenomenon of digital culture. The works of L. Henriksen and J. Ondrak are of interest. L. Henriksen and J. Ondrak reveal similar features of “creepypasta” with urban legends and folklore. The importance of Henriksen’s (2014) approach lies in the emphasis on the etymology of the word and the connection with the root slang concept of “copypaste”, by which the researcher means short passages of the text intended for copying and distribution in the Internet space. Nevertheless, a distinctive feature of “creepypasta”, regardless of the approach to the study of the phenomenon, is the goal-setting of the author, which is always associated with the desire to cause the reader or viewer a sense of fear, danger, and anxiety.

3. Research Questions

- 1) How are the images of waiting for death formed in the Internet space?

- 2) What is the role of the Internet folklore “creepypasta” in the formation of images of waiting for death and danger?
- 3) How do the features of the Internet space platforms contribute to the spread of “creepypastas”?
- 4) Why do the images of waiting for death and danger in “creepypastas” affect a person?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze the images of waiting for death and danger in the Internet space and their impact on modern human.

5. Research Methods

Studying the phenomenon of “creepypasta” from the point of view of its ability to form new images of death and danger, the author relies on a number of specific methods, such as phenomenological and semiotic, which allow us to describe in detail the structure of “creepypasta” as a cultural text. They also use the possibilities of an interdisciplinary cultural and axiological approach, as well as a group of general scientific methods – analysis and synthesis, comparative analysis.

Interesting for this study were the discursive practices of metamodernism, such authors as Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), which allowed us to identify the reasons for the active spread of “creepypastas” in the Internet space. Despite the fact that the practices of metamodernism are not explicitly aimed at studying digital media, in a specific aspect of human expectations, they can provide an understanding of the sincerity necessary for the functioning of the Internet space, as well as an understanding of the modern relations of “creepypasta” with the genre of “horror”.

6. Findings

Currently the “horrors” of the Internet space, as a genre, visual, auditory, as well as individual “terrible images” or characters can be combined with one term “creepypasta” (from the English “creepy” and colloquial English copypaste, that means “copied text”). The term itself allows us to highlight the main characteristics of this Internet folklore: “creepy”, the text that is copied from time to time and massively distributed in the digital environment. The word "text" initially means a language work of unlimited length, however, over time, “creepypastas” have moved away from using only the written form of presentation and have become a cultural text. The spread of the narrative across the platforms of the Internet space, especially in the “creepypastas”, which go beyond the constant copying and distribution, provokes the fact that the “creepypasta” then begins to take the structure and form of the platform, whether it is video, sound or text (Uppal et al., 2019).

Many researchers of the “digital environment” note such a feature of “creepypastas” as an imitation of the “folk” style of narration, which is usually used in urban legends and folk tales. Another point of view is that “creepypasta” has an exclusively digital, new nature, since the space between the sent and received message is a gap in which the process of myth-making is actively taking place. However, folklore images of horror and death, like others, have always been formed in the space between

the words of the narrator and the consciousness of the listener (who can then become the next narrator) (Ondrak, 2018).

However, it is necessary to distinguish between those "terrible" images that simply use external codes of "documentary" for the effect of involving the listener "viewer" in the aesthetics of documentary films and those that are presented without irony as real events. The peculiarity of "creepypastas" is precisely the proclamation of the authenticity of events, characters, images. Expectations of danger, death, war, and paranormal phenomena acquire a visual and often auditory form in the images from "creepypastas", and due to the broadcasting of the idea of "reality of what is happening - expectations are "lived" by a person and pass into the category of a *fait accompli* experience (Humphreys, 2019). Living the horror of death and danger in the Internet space turns a collective experience into a personal one due to a sense of belonging to a "closed" community, and the expectation of danger broadcast in "creepypasta" loses its connection with its "digital nature" and begins to seem real.

A person's expectation of danger, death or horror in the socio-cultural reality, on the one hand, forms images from "creepypastas", when a person acts as a narrator, and on the other hand, it can sometimes be formed under the influence of these very images (Stuart, 2014), when a person acts as a listener. The influence of "creepypasta" can form an absolutely new expectation of danger through the use of a new image, for example, the image of the character "Slenderman" first appeared in the Internet space, and subsequently became a full-fledged part of mass culture. Most contemporary opinions on the phenomenon of "creepypastas" prefer a folklore analysis of the distribution and variability of these narratives-mainly with an emphasis on "Slenderman" – emphasizing how the place of their appearance suggests that they are an example of "transformed folklore" (Trevor & Blank, 2018). The emotional influence of such an image often exceeds even the influence of already established cultural codes. This is due to the deliberate sincerity and truthfulness of the narrative, which are the striking features of all narratives in the Internet space, and the assumption that this digital text, image, or video, consumed via the network (Over, 2020), is rooted in the thoughts and experience of a "real" person. Thanks to the sincerity necessary for the functioning of social networks and Internet space platforms, the narratives of "creepypasta" isolate from the vast field of general images of horror not (from a postmodern point of view) to use an obviously fragmented and deconstructed way of telling stories.

During the analysis, it was revealed that "creepypastas" can form new expectations of danger by using already existing, familiar, codes and images of culture (Wilken, 2019). For example, there would be an unreleased episode of the animated series "SpongeBob SquarePants" called "Squidward's Suicide". In this "creepypasta" the narration is conducted allegedly on behalf of the direct participant of the event. The plot of "creepypasta" is that the trainee animators who worked at the animation studio were given the task to view and edit a new episode of the animated series. However, instead of the stated story, they were shown another one, filled with creepy visual scenes, sounds, statements unusual for the characters, off-screen sounds. The "episode" of the animated series ended with the fact that the character named Squidward commits suicide. The author of "creepypasta" observes the logic of the presentation, uses many epithets designed to create a stable image of an entity close to committing suicide in the reader. The visual part is described – the color scheme, storyboard, description of terrifying frames with images of internal organs, etc. It becomes obvious that the well-known work of mass culture - the animated series

“SpongeBob SquarePants”, and the specific image of the Squidward character here act as “donors” for the creator of “creepypasta”. So, familiar images are deliberately filled with new codes and meanings, provoking the appearance of new fears and expectations of danger.

The expectation of death, fear is provoked here through the endowment of familiar characters with dangerous knowledge. The nature of the Internet space does not allow us to confidently declare the origin of a particular "crypto-paste", since almost never the time of the first appearance, the author, or even the site is reliably known. The main reason why digital network spaces function is “conscious naivety” (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, p.5) in relation to the apparent reality that they present to us. A person whose expectations of danger are formed due to the images of “creepypasta” assumes that the cultural text that he sees represents the thoughts and actions of another real person behind the screen. It is thanks to this sincere perception that the terrible images of “creepypastas” reinforce new expectations about death and danger, which spread through real users across platforms and between them using the same means of textual and visual representation, appearing real and hidden and violating our sincere readings of these spaces. If “panic is making” (Deleuze & Guattari, p. 122), then “creepypasta” is an unobvious mechanism for creating new expectations that do not necessarily remain in social networks, but, more importantly, are spread further through oral retelling and written copying.

7. Conclusion

Thus, it becomes obvious that, although creepypasta follows the tradition of broadcasting mythical and paranormal images in the “intermediate” spaces between technology and reason, it departs from oral folklore narration and later begins to use graphic materials. The possibilities of digital textuality democratize the effect of technologies for creating terrible images, while the network spaces of social networks in which these stories are posted promote sincere interaction with myths and monsters that they cause. It is this combination of sincere reader participation, ontological ambiguity and digital textuality that distinguishes the narrative of “creepypasta” as a unique form of “horror” that forms new expectations of danger, death and horror in a person. The key difference of “creepypasta” here is the indissoluble connection between its sign system and the medium on which it is reproduced. The technological factor is of fundamental importance, since any “creepypasta” message would lose its potential for direct impact on a person if it were presented outside of a digital medium.

The interaction of a person with the existing platforms of the Internet space, on which “creepypastas” also appear, also allows us to talk about the numerous modal opportunities that are provided by different platforms – long text messages (blogs), videos, other visual content, user interaction, as well as taking advantage of the various ways in which users work, read and interact with content on each platform. Thus, the narratives of “creepypasta” secretly and quickly change their discursive features between platforms, are embedded in the socio-cultural context, integrating into the flow of messages of “real” people. “Creepypasta”, the text of which is broadcast on the VKontakte social network, will correspond to the discursive conventions of this network, the text of “creepypasta” in the form of a video on the YouTube service will reveal the predominance of visual and audio effects, which is obvious, and the narrative about “creepypasta”, broadcast in a written blog, will be read more like a full-fledged literary work, and not just as a short horror story in this text space.

The specific features of “creepypastas”, as well as the features of methods and platforms for their dissemination, metatextuality and the way they move away from postmodern images, maintaining a dialogue with them, lead to the formation of fundamentally new fears, expectations of danger and death in a person.

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