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The cultural mechanics of mystery: structures of emotional attraction in competing interpretations of the Dyatlov pass tragedy

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Abstract   Mystery plays a fundamental though not fully acknowledged role in modernity, serving as an important means for the re-enchantment of social life. Thus, under certain conditions, seemingly unimportant events can attract enormous attention and emotional involvement. One of those cases is the Dyatlov Pass Tragedy that occurred in 1959 in the Northern Urals, where nine hikers died under mysterious and still unknown circumstances. Nowadays, a half-century later, there are thousands of lay researchers searching for the truth and constructing competing explanatory accounts. In this paper, I propose the 'trigger-narrative model,' explaining the relation between mystery, governing narratives, and forms of sacrality, and apply it to the Dyatlov case. I argue that mystery is a 'complex emotional attractor'—a symbolic mechanism shaped by the configuration of 'elementary attractors'—'strange' things, symbols, or events, challenging commonsense narratives, which eventually maintains uncertainty and emotional tension. Every pattern of perception concerning mystery can be characterized by the tie between a trigger and its corresponding narrative; this tie is based on the transgression of the narrative by a trigger event. This model allows us to understand the cultural construction of mystery, which is crucially important for explaining how deep cultural structures energize people's urges, concerns, and fascinations.

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Introduction: relevance of mystery for social theory and cultural sociology

At the very general level, the basic question of cultural sociology concerns how culture invokes human emotion and action. How do certain meanings and meaningful complexes attain plausibility, affect people's minds, and energize their urges and concerns? Why do people leave their families and follow their gods, prophets, and heroes? Why do people sometimes readily sacrifice their lives for their beliefs and the symbols they adhere to? These are just some of the boldest and salient examples of the power of culture, but they vividly represent its primary role in the understanding of human action and social life.

It is not accidental, then, that the theory of the sacred, however it seemingly deals with a very limited part of human experience, in fact, lies at the very core of cultural sociology. Phenomena concerned with the sacred are recognized first of all due to a deep and intensive effect they exert on people's behavior, perception, and institutions. However, as Jeffrey Alexander has asserted, '[E]ducation, politics, professional organization, morality and the law… should be studied in terms of symbolic classifications,' which are 'structured by the tensions between the fields of the sacred and the profane' (Alexander 1992a, p. 3). Consequently, in order to understand both major and minor everyday matters such as people's concerns, attractions, and the broad scope of the meaning-making activities within their cultural contexts, one should consider the structuring power of the sacred/profane oppositions within their concrete orchestrations.

The attraction of *mystery* is one such everyday matter. Driven by pure interest, non-utilitarian, and having nothing to do with the actual circumstances of people's lives, these abstract riddles nevertheless often heavily occupy people's minds. The great success of fiction genres concerned with a mystery, such as detective and spy novels, science-fiction, and others represented by books, movies, and serials such as 'The X-Files' and 'Fringe,' depends on the impact that the semantic figure of mystery has on the public's imagination. More specifically, some non-fiction, real-life mysteries attract the interest of the general public, becoming a matter of popular articles in newspapers, books, and movies, even turning hundreds and thousands of people into lay researchers.[1]

Some examples of such mysteries are the Kennedy assassination, the disappearance of the Mary Celeste, some of the stories about the Bermuda Triangle, and last, but not least, the Dyatlov pass tragedy. These and many other events attract people's attention to such an extent that they spend days, months, and years trying to find

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[1] There is a connection between fictional and real-life mysteries both at the fundamental and empirical levels. Thus, Paul Ricoeur shows that the interweaving reference between history and fiction makes historical narratives borrow the imaginative power from fictional narratives, and fictional narratives borrow referential dynamics from historical narratives (Ricoeur 1984, p. 82). Empirically, these interpenetrations are sometimes truly impressive. Thus, for example, the plot of the Agatha Christie novel, 'The A.B.C. Murders,' has most likely influenced both an American serial killer in the 1970 s, who killed several girls with their names, surnames, and the location where the corpse had been found started with the same letter, and official and lay investigators of the so called 'Alphabet Murders' case.

the perhaps-hidden truth of such events. For instance, contemporaries of the Mary Celeste mystery[2] were so attracted by the story that several impostors were able to gather large audiences across the United States pretending to be surviving members of the ghost-ship's crew. Arthur Conan Doyle, who was known to be especially sensitive to the newest modern sources of public excitement, wrote a novel based on the story of the Mary Celeste. Nowadays, the interest of mysteries has grown as the scope and accessibility of media platforms has substantially increased.

In this paper, I argue that mystery is a 'complex emotional attractor'—a symbolic mechanism, shaped by elementary attractors—'strange' things, symbols, or events, challenging commonsense narratives, and taking on a certain configuration, which eventually maintains uncertainty and emotional tension. The effects of mystery are thus shaped both by the effects of its elements, 'elementary emotional attractors' coupled with the narratives they challenge and eventually trigger,[3] and by their configuration.

The Dyatlov pass tragedy, which I have chosen as a case study, occurred in the winter of 1959 in the Northern Urals of the Soviet Union. A group of experienced ski-hikers, most of whom were students or recent graduates of the Urals Institute of Technology in Sverdlovsk and led by Igor Dyatlov (who gave the name to the tragedy and, later, to the pass), chose a route with the highest category of difficulty. The group, passing through almost-uninhabited land, never returned. Their half-dressed and unshod bodies were later found at distances from a half-mile to a mile from their tent. The tent was cut from the inside in a direction opposite from the entrance. Some of the corpses were severely injured while some were not. Some of the group had seemingly tried to return to the tent and some had not. It is unclear why the hikers left the tent in such a strange way, being partly undressed, which, given the cold winter night, would have led to certain death. The cause of their deaths remains uncertain. In addition, many details seem to be highly confusing, reinforcing the uncertainty. The criminal case launched by the authorities was later closed with a no-less-confusing conclusion that the hikers died due to an encounter with an 'unknown compelling force.'

Public interest in the case was high in the region as well as among Soviet hikers (hiking was an extremely popular hobby among intellectuals), in spite of the attempts by the authorities to keep the incident quiet. During the decades after the case, there have been a number of researchers who have tried to ascertain the truth, and their articles have been published in newspapers from time to time. However, a large wave of the interest in the case started in the 1990s, when a part of the official materials of the criminal case, including photos, protocols, interviews, and the reports of the forensic pathologist, were declassified and published on the Internet.

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[2] The Mary Celeste was a ship found in 1872 in the ocean 400 miles from the shore with no people on board and the cargo undisturbed. There are arguably no exhaustive plausible explanations of what might have happened.

[3] The effect of the emotional attractor is fundamentally coupled with the narrative it challenges, in the same way as clues are coupled with the genres they trigger in Philip Smith's model of 'genre guess' (Smith 2006). I will develop this parallel in more detail below.

In addition, the diaries of the hikers, and six 36-cadre photographic tapes from their cameras were uploaded to the Internet. This gave the broader public much more reliable information than ever before, offering a rich source for hypotheses building.

The burst of interest has been sustained to this day. The number of lay researchers has increased, and their geographical area has widened to the whole of Russia and abroad. More than a dozen books in Russian and two books in English have been published (Eichar 2013; McCloskey 2013), along with hundreds of articles in newspapers and journals. Close to a dozen documentaries and one fictional movie[4] have been produced. The case's Wikipedia web-page has been translated into 26 foreign languages. However, in spite of a number of special expeditions to the Dyatlov Pass, experiments and reconstructions, and several attempts by especially impressive and scrupulous analyses having the quality and volume of a good doctoral dissertation, there is still no single plausible version of the events that would not face serious problems in light of the known facts. Moreover, the circumstances of the case, as chance would have it, enable a number of different versions.

In spite of how intriguing the case sounds, there are still fundamental questions that should be posed concerning its effects (as well as those of other similar cases). Records show that in Russia (and earlier in the Soviet Union), a number of hikers die on the route every year, due to the natural dangers it involves. In addition, the Dyatlov tragedy occurred more than a half-century ago and the victims did not include any politically or socially remarkable people, as was the case, for example, in the Kennedy assassination. Why does this case continue to have such great resonance? What drives people's perceptions, and what energizes interest in cases such as the Dyatlov tragedy?

In the absence of obvious, or seemingly obvious, answers connecting this resonance to some acknowledged drivers of interest (such as political/economic implications, an immediate influence on people's lives, etc.), the case becomes a perfect laboratory for discovering a deeper understanding of the cultural mechanisms of perception and emotional involvement. In analyzing this case, I hope to advance the cultural sociological explanation of the complicated cultural mechanisms that give culture the power to energize social life.

Compositionally, this paper partly borrows the structure of a mystery story, which necessarily begins with an extensive 'lay' description of a situation and the introduction of relevant contexts. Thus, I start with a brief allocation of the research problem within a theoretical landscape, and a primary description of the Dyatlov case. Then, there follows a section revealing the strategic role of mystery for cultural theory. These steps serve for setting the stage. Unlike an actual mystery story, I focus here not on solving a mystery, but on studying the fascination it produces; however, epistemologically, the two tasks are confusingly similar.

After these preliminary steps, in the section entitled 'Deciphering the charisma of mystery,' I focus on developing a cultural sociological theory of mystery, and introduce the notions of complex and elementary emotional attractors and the

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[4] 'The Devil's Pass' is a 2013 US–Russian–British movie by Renny Harlin.

trigger-narrative model. I then distinguish and discuss two general features of mystery—uncertainty and tension.

Having developed a theory that allows for a cultural–sociological understanding of mystery, I turn in the section 'Mystery, narrative, and interpretation' to the question of why the Dyatlov tragedy provokes such an enormous emotional response, and which symbolic mechanisms are responsible for this effect. Firstly, I focus on versions as wholes and show that emotional tension in the Dyatlov case is based on the equiplausibility of competing versions. I then turn to the inner construction of the versions and the dynamics of fascination. Following the trigger-narrative model, I consequentially pose several questions (what is challenged, what challenges, and how does this challenging work?), moving from the dominant narratives involved with the Dyatlov case to their triggers. Observing the challenged narratives, I propose a model of the hierarchy of narratives and offer a suggestion about the dynamics of attraction within mystery in a direction moving from general to specific narratives. I then analyze trigger-narrative pairs and mechanisms of challenging and state the problem of how the attraction of mystery is related to version-building.

Theoretical resources

Cultural sociology has rich theoretical resources at its disposal for solving this task, first of all, represented by the Durkheimian legacy. Emile Durkheim and his immediate disciples constructed explanations of how myths, attached to core sacred/profane binaries, shape social life, and how far this deep influence can go (Durkheim 1995; Hertz 2009; Mauss 1979). The Durkheimian influence heavily informed important branches of a scholarship on myth, such as Levi-Straussian structuralism, and the school of 'College de Sociologie.' Later on, a number of researchers, beginning with Parsons and his followers, successfully constructed explanations of modern life by means of revealing the mythological cores of many contemporary phenomena, such as civic religion, political imagery, esoteric movements, and many others (Bellah 1967; Shils and Young 1953; Tiryakian 1974).

Anthropologists, such as Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz, working under Durkheim's strong influence, have gone much further in developing detailed explanations of how culture shapes perception and invokes emotions. To mention several important achievements highly relevant to the current study, one could note Douglas' theorizing on the connection between the impurity and the uncertainties within symbolic classifications (Douglas 1966), her research on how certain ideas obtain their plausibility and credibility, and essays on the cultural mechanisms of perception (Douglas 1975; Douglas and Gross 1981). Turner's works on rituals, myths, and metaphors (Turner 1975) have paved the way for a number of concrete studies on the ways culture operates, and his fundamental theorizing on liminality and the rituals of transition has facilitated much interdisciplinary scholarship. These and many other works are crucial for cultural sociology, which, in turn, has moved even further in developing detailed accounts for the widest range of complex phenomena [see, for example, (Alexander 1992b, 2002; Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. 2012; Smith 2006, 2008)].

I follow this research tradition, but in addition, there is another important, rarely used theoretical resource compatible with Durkheimian cultural sociology that I rely on—the theorizing of Rene Girard. His groundbreaking work on the fundamental relation between the sacred and (widely understood) violence allows for the acknowledgment of the power of the impure sacred in social life. As I have mentioned elsewhere (Kurakin 2015), I find explanatory models based on the 'dark side of the sacred,' i.e., the impure and the transgression, to be extremely applicable for building a cultural explanation of the widest range of phenomena of modern life, which moves far beyond traditionally understood 'evil' and is often unrelated with it.[5]

Even more importantly, Girard has constructed a conceptual apparatus that allows for the understanding of how the vacuum of meanings, created by the symbolic violence against cultural structures (represented by a dominant narrative), transforms into a new powerful narration based on the renewed sacred, a symbolic process Girard calls 'mythical elaboration.' I use this research to theorize the connections between narrative and uncertainty, and narrative and the trigger event that thematizes it. This allows for a reconstruction of the cultural mechanics of mystery, with an illustration from the Dyatlov case.

There is no established body of sociological literature on mysteries. However, many related fields may contribute to formulating a cultural–sociological approach to the problem. First, there are sociological and literary criticism works on literature genres built around mystery.[6] One of the most recognized among the former is the recent book by Luc Boltanski about mystery and conspiracy in detective and spy novels (Boltanski 2014). In the context of this study, I rely only on a part of that scholarship, focusing instead on constructing a Durkheimian line of reasoning, though future research must take these and other sources more seriously.

Description of the Dyatlov case

In January 1959, a group of ten ski-hikers, eight men and two women, went on an expedition, taking the route with the highest category of difficulty at that time. All were well-trained and highly experienced, and they had been on many trips of comparable difficulty, successfully overcoming severities and dangerous accidents. All known information shows that they were in perfect physical condition, and

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[5] In the cited work, I constructed a model of the ambivalent sacred and transgression, mainly based on the works of Girard, Douglas, Caillois, and Turner, which aimed to reinforce the Durkheimian cultural sociological approach developed by Alexander, Smith, and others.

[6] Literary criticism provides a wide scope of literature highly relevant for cultural sociology, from Northrop Frye's 'Anatomy of Criticism' (Frye 2000), to the already-mentioned radical approach of Rene Girard (Girard 2008). The works on the sociological and cultural construction of explanation, such as Charles Tilly's 'Why?' (Tilly 2006), Carlo Ginzburg's 'Clues, Myths and the Historical Method' (Ginzburg 1992), studies of 'forbidden science,' and STS exercises, though dealing with other segments of rationality than mystery, nevertheless might be partly relevant. Last, but not least, parts of the widening field of conspiracy theories are closely related to this case.

were psychologically persistent. Nine of the ten were old friends who had traveled together extensively.

Nine of the ten were students or recent graduates of the Urals Institute of Technology, a prominent university[7] situated in Sverdlovsk, a large industrial city in the Urals region in the middle of the USSR. Their ages varied from 20 to 24 years old. Igor Dyatlov, a student from the fifth course, was the leader of the expedition. The tenth member of the group was Semyon Zolotarev, a 37-year-old instructor at a tourist camp who joined the group at the very last moment. He knew some of the members of the group, but only recently; it is not particularly clear why the group accepted his participation. One of the students, Yury Yudin, developed radiculitis at the beginning of the trip, and decided to return before the active part of the route had started. He, thus, was the only survivor, and was the last one who had seen the other members alive. He died in 2013 and, following his will, was buried with the other members of the group.

The route ran through almost-uninhabited land, although several families of the *Mansi,* an indigenous ethnic group of reindeer-breeders, lived in the area. The group was supposed to travel 350 km during 16 days, including the ascent of a couple of mountains. The diaries of the hikers show that after the farewell with Yudin, they had been moving without accident from January 28 until February 1, the date of the last records.[8] The group did not return in time. Several days later, the authorities organized rescue groups that were later augmented by army and police forces, performing a large-scale search operation.

The first five corpses and the tent were found during the first days of the rescue expedition. The tent was situated near the hillside pass that later was named after the Dyatlov group. The hillside had around 15 degrees of incline combined with horizontal grounds. Down the hillside, a mile away, there was a tall cedar tree. Two corpses were found next to each other close to the cedar near the fire pit; they were in their underwear and unshod. Three other bodies, including the body of Igor Dyatlov, were found separately from each other; all of them were partly undressed and unshod. All the bodies were situated in a line between the tent and the cedar.

All five corpses had multiple, non-fatal injuries such as hematomas, scratch marks, and burns (found only on the first two bodies), and the forensic pathologist's report determined the deaths had resulted from hypothermia. One of the bodies was injured more substantially than the others, and had a more-than-two-inch-long fracture of the skull.

The tent was cut from the inside in the direction of the cedar (i.e., opposite to the direction of the exit). It was partially torn down and had a 2–4 inch layer of snow on it. All known valuables were found, including money, documents, spirits, and food. The majority of clothes and shoes were also in the tent. There was also a ski pole somebody had apparently tried to shorten with a knife found in the tent, which is

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[7] Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russia, was a graduate of this university.

[8] Following tradition, every hiker carried a diary in addition to one common diary. Almost all of the diaries were found after the tragedy, except for one, which had evidently existed but disappeared.

puzzling considering that the hikers didn't have extra ski poles. The rescue groups found four or five[9] hikers' photo cameras.

The bodies of the other four hikers were found within 2 months. They were found in a ravine 200 feet from the cedar, near a small stream, and under deep snow. There was a covering made of small trees near the corpses, with several belongings of the hikers in it. Three of the four bodies were severely injured, one having fatal skull damage, and the other two having fatal multiple chest fractures. The forensic pathologist determined that these injuries were the causes of their deaths. In contrast to all the others, two of the damaged bodies, including the body of Semyon Zolotarev, were almost completely dressed. The tongue was absent from the third severely injured body, a female.

There are surprisingly many strange or suspicious circumstances involved, which have become the source of a wide range of interpretations (at this point, there are more than 60 or 70 versions, many of them considered within the official criminal investigation in 1959). I will mention only several of the strange circumstances here, with a brief mention of the versions inspired by each.

• A couple of the hikers' belongings, such as a sweater and a pair of pants, were radioactively contaminated, although the rest of their things were not. The straightforward versions imply the testing of nuclear missiles. One of the less obvious versions suggests that the radioactive clothing, as a part of a secret service operation, must have been transferred by some member of the group (apparently a secret agent) to the foreign spies who searched for information about Soviet nuclear weaponry development, and who ended up killing the hikers.

• During the period of the trip, the people in the area had seen strange fireballs in the sky. There is documented evidence based on the reports of observers and several articles in local newspapers. The fireballs inspired a number of esoteric versions, such as a UFO attack, but also fit several other versions, such as the testing of new weapons that might have injured the hikers, and the attack of the spies who landed from a warplane under the support of photoflash bombs.

• Some of the corpses had a strange deep-orange tan to their skin. This fact supported a wide range of technologically informed versions, including the testing of new weapons or the fall of a stage of a ballistic missile.

• Semyon Zolotarev, the strange companion, had faked his name for some reason and presented himself to the students as 'Alexander.' He had participated in WWII, and some people suggest that he had been an agent of the Soviet military's counterintelligence. Acting behind German lines, Semyon might have dealt with many Nazi collaborators who unwillingly shared secrets of life-and-death importance with him (considering that after the war, the Soviet authorities were extremely suspicious of those who might have collaborated

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[9] The official investigation materials report that four cameras were found in March, 1959. However, there seems to be a fifth one, which is clearly seen in the photo of one of the corpses found later, in May. It is not mentioned, however, in the published parts of the official materials. Some researchers argue that there may have been up to six cameras in the group, some of which disappeared.

with the Nazis; for example, every official questionnaire contained a question about whether the applicant's relatives had lived in the occupied territories). After the war, he had worked as an instructor at a tourist camp, but since the middle of the 1950s, he had moved from place to place, changing jobs, and sometimes covering thousands of kilometers, as if he was being chased. This led to the 'war echo' version, which argues that the Dyatlov group was killed by Semyon's personal enemies known from war times who probably had been sent to prison and released after the amnesty of 1953. The supporters of this version also attach significance to a strange fabric band with saber knots at the ends, which following some witnesses, was found near the corpses. They argue that the band might have been used as a hidden waist pack and contained something extremely valuable, and that Semyon, who had just quit from his last place of employment before joining the group, must have taken it with him to transfer to a new, safer place.

- During the last day of their expedition, February 1, the hikers had traveled only two kilometers before putting up the tent in the location where it was found. They left the part of the forest that would have been much more comfortable and reached the hillside near the pass, choosing an uncomfortable place to stay. This fact, which the official crime investigator has called 'Dyatlov's mistake' in his records, reinforced the suspicions of the followers of almost all of the criminal versions that the hikers were killed by people whom they might have previously met and believed that the hikers might have affected their plans.

Many of the criminal versions propose a similar scenario. According to these, the attackers expelled the hikers from the tent, threatened them with guns, forced them to leave their clothes and shoes, and then chased them away. Some of the hikers attempted a counterattack, but were severely beaten up by apparently highly skilled wrestlers. After the hikers had gone and started a fire, the attackers realized the hikers might survive and followed them to make sure that their mission was completed. Thus, they arguably killed those who hadn't died of the cold. One of the investigators, himself an expert in battle wrestling, performed a detailed investigation of the documented injuries, and argued that the injuries were highly typical of combat wrestling methods. Following his calculations, up to 90 percent of the injuries described in the official reports were situated on the left parts of the bodies, which corresponds to the idea of right-handed attackers.

Apart from criminal versions of the events, there are also several other major types, including natural, esoteric, and technological versions. The most popular natural version involves avalanche damage, or, in particular, damage caused by a slab avalanche. Although the hillside incline was small and avalanches are not typical for that area, a slab could have caused damage to the tent as a result of the disruption of the snowpack during the putting up of the tent. Esoteric versions include a wide range of possibilities, from a UFO encounter, to an encounter with a Yeti, or *Mansi* magic. Technological versions have been popular since 1959, and basically revolve around secret super-weapons being tested in the area, and are supported by the suspicions that Soviet authorities disguised the consequences or even ordered the killing of unwitting witnesses of the secret testing.

The available information is extraordinarily rich, and includes: hundreds of pages of the official investigation report, published on the Internet (including multiple protocols of inspections and interviews, forensic medical reports, photos, formal orders, telegrams, and other documents); hundreds of photos taken by the members of the Dyatlov group during their last trip; a number of official and private documents of the hikers, including their trip diaries; numerous interviews with relatives, friends of the tourists and people they might have met, conducted by lay researchers; descriptions of many special expeditions to the Dyatlov pass, experiments and reconstructions; and a vast amount of other contextual information. In spite of that impressive body of knowledge, none of the existing versions are free from contradictions with the known facts, so that even today, in spite of activities encompassing a massive scale, researchers of the case have little to add to the laconic official report from 1959, which stated that the hikers died because of an 'unknown compelling force.'

Mystery and the cultural insensitivity of common sense: why is mystery important for cultural theory?

In the same way that philosophy, following Plato, begins in wonder, culture often enters the stage by virtue of mystery as a source of epistemic surprise. The emotion of surprise indicates both a mystery in itself and its inherent demand for an explanation more sophisticated than common sense can offer. This makes mystery what Robert Merton called 'Strategic Research Material' (SRM)—the empirical case best suited for building an explanation and for the advancement of theory (Merton 1987). Thus, the unexpected, counter-intuitive, and, one could even say, over-proportionate emotional attractiveness of certain objects or events is a classical riddle for cultural theory, because it promises to reveal a surprising role for culture that is normally hidden by the cover of rational-choice thinking. When people are hyper-excited about certain things, and the causes of that excitement do not fit typically expected motives and corresponding standard commonsense explanations, the active role of cultural meanings in social life can be acknowledged.

A problem of cultural explanation is that it is rarely parsimonious, so more simple and habitual explanations are coming to the fore in accordance with the principle of Occam's razor. When, for instance, people are striving to get better jobs, we readily agree that it is a maximization of utility that drives them, and the reasoning about the historically specific cultural roots of their worldview enabling both preferred goals and suitable means sounds excessive. Merton points at the role of 'unexpected facts' for building a theory, exemplifying this statement with Freud's explanation on slips of the tongue (Merton 1987, p. 16). Likewise, to be plausible, cultural theories often must seek special cases that obviously undermine rational-choice schemes, and use these special cases as an excuse to think more deeply and more carefully about how culture, perception, and imagination operate. These cases reveal the prominence of culture in the same way as blackouts reveal the normally neglected prominence of electricity in everyday life. The Dyatlov tragedy is exactly such a special case—representing strategic research material for the advancement of cultural sociological explanation.

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Luc Boltanski, in his book on mystery and the origin of detective novels (Boltanski 2014), shows that mystery manifests itself as a singular anomaly within a stable social world, which paves the way for narrative and excitement. In the absence of obvious reasons, something must go wrong. The emotional effect of detective stories exploits this anomaly to create a place for mysterious causality, fear, and (normally suppressed) curiosity, which temporarily squeezes common sense.

It is not surprising that historically cultural sensitivity grows simultaneously and interconnectedly with the growth of the genre of the novel (Chaney 2012). Both processes must deal with the growing role of the masses, cultural diversity, and the decoupling of the link between social position and the cultural symbols of status. In turn, following Luc Boltanski, detective and spy novels, literary genres built on mystery, are enabled by the development of the same social and political institutions which have enabled sociology, as well as by sociology itself. The argument is that the construction of mystery is critically dependent on the stability of 'social reality,' seen almost as reliable and intelligible as physical reality, and known by statistics, political economy, and sociology (Boltanski 2014, p. 11).

The essay of Roger Caillois on children's secret treasures is a typical illustration of mystery as strategic research material, which reveals the hidden role of culture (Caillois 2003). Caillois directs our attention to the strange phenomenon of children creating treasures every now and then, treating them with great worship, cherishing them, and hiding them. Neither the 'objective' values of those treasures nor the reasons why children do so are clear. Commonsense accounts of these phenomena are helpless. Caillois shows that children's treasures represent early experiences of encounters with the sacred, both perceived (worship and imagined or real danger, associated with those things) and performed (treasures are either being stolen from the world of adults, or miraculously acquired, which often implies overcoming dangers). In creating the treasure, children establish their own autonomous personalities[10] by means of strengthening the sacred dimension of themselves. Here, the Durkheimian principle of homo-duplex (Durkheim 1973), far from being just a pure theoretical abstraction, allows an explanation of something that is otherwise hard to explain, and reveals the role of culture at the core of social life. In these and other cases, it is a 'disproportion' of emotional excitement that serves as a first clue to the cultural insensitivity of common sense.

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[10] Similarly, Eduard Nadtochiy shows how the figure of mystery creates the dimension of internal life and autonomous personality in literature (Надточий 2014, pp. 92–93). He even goes so far as to assert that the early Soviet anthropological construction of childhood, created by means of literature based on mystery, became the 'prosthesis' of social solidarity and an island of human dignity in the symbolic universe of the Stalin era (Надточий 2014, p. 96).

Deciphering the charisma of mystery: toward a theory of emotional attractors

Emotional attractors and triggers of narratives

I argue that mystery is one of the basic forms of what could be called '*emotional attractors*.' I define emotional attractors as symbols or cultural complexes, which for certain reasons, engender people's emotionally charged involvement. In much the same way that attractors are defined in physics as limiting the infinity of the random trajectories of objects to certain, more-probable locations and trajectories, emotional attractors shape the gravity of the landscapes of meanings, and energize behavioral patterns.

The theoretical background of this definition is the Durkheimian theory of collective emotions (Durkheim 1995), which describes how culture condenses socially created emotions, and, in turn, energizes collective and individual action. The sacred symbol, such as the *churinga*, is a classic example of an emotional attractor. People can behave differently toward it, with worship or with anger, but they act respectively; even neglect becomes a meaningful gesture. The fear of the impure is another elementary form of emotional attractor, though in this case, the attraction might be negative. Striving for a reward and fear of punishment are the other essential examples of emotional attractors, which, combined with meanings and circumstances, energize people's actions.

I will distinguish, further, between *elementary* and *complex* emotional attractors. The *elementary emotional attractor* cannot be further divided into elements without losing its specificity both in terms of its effect, which is the ability to invoke emotionally charged involvement, and in terms of the mechanism underlying this effect. The *complex emotional attractor* consists of several elementary attractors, and its effects might be caused not only by a sum of the effects of the elementary attractors it contains, but also by configuration of its elements (plot twist, double binds, etc.).

The elementary emotional attractor, whether a symbol, object, or event, doesn't exist in itself—its effectiveness is rooted in relations with existing and possible cultural structures. It is the relation between an attractor and a cultural structure that invokes emotions. In this paper, I limit myself to only one type of such a relation, prominent and widespread but not unique. This is the challenging of a dominant narrative by means of its *transgression*—a symbolic mechanism known by its ability to invoke intensive emotions (Bataille 1986).

Indeed, there are special elements in culture, which we call emotional attractors, which are *potentially* able to transgress existing symbolic structures, such as dominant narratives. If such a transgression occurs in actual discursive interactions, I call this actualized emotional attractor a *trigger*, meaning that it thematizes a narrative by challenging it. The emotional effect caused by this is thus rooted in a trigger-narrative relation. I call this explanation the *'trigger-narrative model'*.'

The crucial part of the trigger-narrative model is that neither facts, things, or events recognized as 'strange,' nor the narrative they challenge, cannot by

themselves cause an emotional effect of mystery. It is their combination, a trigger-narrative pair that produces the effect. Indeed, it is those triggers that 'turn on' or 'highlight' particular narratives, but the triggers themselves gain such emotional responses only because they are seen through the optics of these narratives. The most precise term to describe this relation is the Kantian *'Affizierung.'*

The described dynamic connection between a challenged narrative and a trigger is much like the connection between a genre and a clue in the process of the 'genre guess,' conceptualized by Philip Smith in his book 'Why War?' (Smith 2006). Following his model, clues, such as remarkable events or widely discussed facts, under certain conditions effectively switch public perception to a particular genre, and thus, powerfully affect interpretation and even political decision making. For example, low mimetic genres determine peaceful conflict resolution, whereas apocalyptic narratives push countries toward war.

The very choice of the term is telling, and points to an implicit affinity between Smith's scheme and the model of mystery as a paradigm of the event-interpretation link. Sure enough, 'clues' directly refer to detective novels—a basic literary genre representing a mystery. The basic difference between clues and triggers is that the latter refers to more specific entities; a genre can include multiple narratives. Thus, the trigger-narrative model aims to develop and specify the cultural sociological explanation introduced by Smith.

In addition to elementary emotional attractors, there are *complex emotional attractors*, such as entire conceptions, artistic maneuvers, and narrative moves. For example, the dogma of predestination toward salvation that energized Weber's Protestants in their this-worldly activities, constitutes a complicated set of impetuses and incentives (elementary emotional attractors), motivating them to act in a seemingly illogical way (Weber 2003). Another example is certain plot twists, such as those used in horror movies, which strongly affect our imagination. Those movies do not frighten the spectators merely with the use of scary symbols (elementary emotional attractors), but rather by building more complex combinations of meanings, such as anxiety in the face of vague danger, or the erosion of common sense. Philip Smith describes several similar mechanisms, such as Gothic imagery in popular discourse and the attraction of uncertainty, which maintains the tension of lack of resolution (Smith 2008, pp. 133–143). This tension is able to cause not only intellectual, but also aesthetic riddles, like the miraculous attraction of the sculpture of Moses, which Freud tried to solve in a 'Sherlock Holmes-like' way (138–9). Mystery is one such cultural complex, based on the particular cultural mechanism of emotional attraction.

General features of mystery: uncertainty and tension

The first general feature of mystery is uncertainty: mystery is built around the unknown. However, not everything that is unknown can be a sufficient basis for a mystery. We are tolerant of the lack of knowledge about some issues, whereas in other cases, it drives us crazy. One might suggest it only works with what is immediately important to our lives. However, this is not the case. For example, we often

don't care how exactly the bank where we keep our savings operates, or what is riskier today, going on vacation by train or by car, but for some reason, we might *need* to know who was behind the John F. Kennedy assassination more than a half-century ago. Similarly, (almost) none of the investigators from the Dyatlov case has anything to do with the story personally; however, it does not affect their need to discover the reasons behind the mystery.

Mystery is not about knowing or not knowing something. Neither is it about keeping a secret, which has a stronger social and cultural effect the more valuable the object of the disguise. It is not equal to a secret, even if the desirable knowledge within a mystery is actually kept by somebody, and not just unknown. Importantly, this distinguishes mystery from the notion of secrecy sociologically conceptualized by Georg Simmel (Simmel 1906), and, correspondingly, from the wide scope of related problems such as the interplay of governmental secret activities and leaks (Bail 2015). Again, a lack of important knowledge is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of mystery. This also distinguishes mystery as a sociological problem apart from the studies of *conspiracies*, namely, those conspiracy theory studies that aim to analyze the social and organizational construction of conspiracies themselves, and not the discourse about them. The effect of mystery reaches far beyond rational value and the utility of the missing knowledge, and it gains power from a different source than the distribution of information. The uncertainty established by mystery is based on the challenging of commonsense cultural structures by means of the mechanism of emotional attraction described above.

Luc Boltanski defines mystery as an anomaly, a singularity and an abnormality that takes place within the context of a stable, ordinary, and coherent reality of the-taken-for-granted, tied in with clear cause-and-effect relationships. Mystery, thus, provides a singular exception from this picture and, because of this, substantially challenges the entire construction of reality. The central idea of Boltanski's book on mystery is that mystery and the literature genres based on it, detective and spy novels, are only possible because of institutional and cultural settings, providing such a worldview could be efficiently challenged. Partly sharing in this vision,[11] I argue further that the scheme he proposes, if translated into cultural sociological terms, is not unlike the symbolic mechanism of a desecration (or, more generally, a transgression). Thus, the local violation of the logical order works in the same way as when a violation of an even seemingly minor taboo, such as a dietary one, threatens the whole symbolic universum, and provokes intensive collective emotions.

This scenario brings us to another specific feature of mystery. It maintains tension unless (and because) release is not likely to happen soon. In other words, mystery depends on temporality. This factor distinguishes mystery from other types of emotional attractors, such as the attractiveness of gambling games, or the drawing power of investment in business, both of which are also built around the unknown. Mystery is built around the unknown, which persists in time. For example, at this point,

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[11] Following the argument of Boltanski about the close relationship between a worldview and the suitable construction of a challenge to this worldview, I do not share his belief that mystery can only challenge the rational sci-tech paradigm.

there is no clear evidence for any version of the Dyatlov case, and there is little hope of obtaining new, decisive information. However, people continue to be fascinated by the enchantment of the mystery; they think about it, look at the materials, and discuss the details of the case again and again. I have argued elsewhere (Kurakin 2015) that the impure is a fundamentally unstable mode of the sacred, and it tends to resolve 'as musical dissonance resolves to consonance' (Kurakin 2015, p. 389). However, this instability can be limited by the purposed and pre-scripted release/closure (which must happen more or less in time) or it can last for an indefinite period. Mystery represents the latter type of 'stable instability.'

Based on this understanding of mystery, I will try in the next section to ascertain why the Dyatlov tragedy, which is seemingly not outstanding and which happened long ago, continues to attract such enormous attention. To accomplish this task, I will begin by asking which features of the Dyatlov case and the surrounding discourse allow for the creation and the maintenance of the aforementioned two basic components of the mystery—uncertainty and tension.

Mystery, narrative, and interpretation: the structure and dynamics of attraction in the Dyatlov tragedy

The effects of inter-versional configurations: The equiplausibility of the versions of the Dyatlov case

One of the most remarkable and extraordinary facts characterizing the discourse about the Dyatlov case is the relative 'equiplausibility' of the versions attempting to solve its riddle. In addition to the minor ones built on rather exotic arguments, there are several major versions supported by hundreds and sometimes thousands of followers, attracting at least hundreds of thousands of commentaries on Internet forums, and acting as the basis for books and films. It is important that there is no single most probable and most popular version. It is no less important that all versions have been the targets of substantial criticism; every version has inconvenient facts among the major and well-documented facts of the tragedy. That is the single most important way of maintaining the tension in the discourse about the case.

It is sufficient to say, as an illustration, that one of the most popular versions (based on one of the Internet forum polls) argues that the hikers were killed by spies who landed in the middle of the USSR from a warplane to orchestrate a seemingly accidental encounter with the agent among the hikers. The agent was supposed to deliver the sweater that was radioactively contaminated beforehand at one of the Soviet secret factories producing nuclear weaponry to the spies. Following this version, it was important for Western intelligence services to estimate how far the Soviet Union had proceeded with the radioactive concentration. However, the Soviet secret service controlled the supposed agent, and the delivery was fake. The spies disclosed this conspiracy during the encounter, and killed the members of Dyatlov's group. The strangeness of one of the leading versions reflects the fact that the simpler and more straightforward versions (such as a natural disaster, an attack by local hunters from the indigenous ethnic group living in those mountains, or by escaped

convicts from the regional prison[12]) contain much more substantial discrepancies with the known facts of the case.[13]

The outstanding parity of the versions was one of the major reasons in selecting this case as an illustration. The lack of domination of a single version is grounded in a very specific configuration of the circumstances, preventing the most common and first-thought-of explanations from being exhaustively convincing, and providing room for increasingly sophisticated and exotic versions. To use another physical analogy, the perception of the interpreter in the Dyatlov case is similar to a piece of metal hanging in a magnetic field, that is, in a situation of balance among the acting forces. The balance enables the maintenance of the tension, which is crucial for the mystery. Certainly, if there was a single most-probable version, it would reduce the tension, even given the uncertainty that still existed. Judicial cases are good examples; if there is a clear motive that is plausible and fits the circumstances, the jury readily brings the indictment in spite of the existence of alternative, hypothetically possible scenarios.

Balance is important for the construction of mystery because it amplifies minor representations and makes them observable, thereby preventing domination of a single trope. Boltanski starts his reasoning on mystery and detective stories by retelling the entanglement of Chesterton's 'The Blue Cross,' in which Aristide Valentin, a French detective, comes to London and tries to find a criminal, Flambeau, without knowing anything about him and his possible misdeeds. 'Valentin thus opts for an approach that consists in paying attention to minuscule events that seem senseless and thereby take on the character of *mysteries'* (Boltanski 2014, p. 2). Unlike the Dyatlov case, balance is provided here by the lack of explanations for the strange events, whereas in case of the debates on the tragedy, balance is created by the competition of believed-in versions. Thus, it is a situation of dynamic balance created by the relatively plausible, but no single irrefutable competing versions that brings the tension to the Dyatlov case. Balance, created by tension, amplifies otherwise indistinguishable effects.

What is challenged? Uncertainty and the hierarchy of narratives

As for the other crucial feature of mystery, uncertainty is mostly dependent on the efficient challenging of common sense and dominant cultural structures. If there is nothing to be challenged, there is no room for mystery. For the same reason, Boltanski argues that the genre of detective stories is historically determined, and, for example, the popular genre of 'ancient detective' is in fact historical nonsense; in the absence of the sci-tech paradigm and the all-pervading idea of causality underlying the basis of common sense and social and political institutions, the challenging of

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[12] As an aside, the prison was previously a part of the Gulag system.

[13] Thus, an avalanche is not itself likely in that area, and, most importantly, this interpretation cannot plausibly explain the injuries and spatial distribution of the corpses; local hunters or escaped convicts would arguably have taken the money and the spirits from the tent.

those causalities wouldn't have an effect (Boltanski 2014). The object of the challenge is crucial for the construction of mystery.

However, there are two basic questions that arise when analyzing a mystery: what is challenged on the one hand, and what challenges and how on the other. Boltanski seeks major civilizational or even metaphysical entities to answer the former question, and does not really deal with the latter. In contrast, following a cultural sociological paradigm (Alexander and Smith 2003), I am trying to reveal concrete cultural structures, considering them historically contingent (but without making wide historiosophic generalizations), and to explain the ways of challenging those structures in every particular case.

These cultural structures are not just researcher's outlines of what people think about life, but rather actual tools of thinking and feeling, deeply believed-in and emotionally charged. They shape our intuitions and make one set of things and ideas clear, essential, right, and beautiful, whereas another set is made to be confusing, wrong, ugly, stupid, and evil.[14] These cultural structures make versions attempting to solve the mystery plausible.

It is because of this deep emotional charge that those narratives (and versions based on them) can be challenged consequentially. Revealing these structures is the first and necessary step for understanding the construction of any particular mystery. In this section, I focus on the question of what is challenged within the mystery, and postpone the analysis of what and how it challenges for the next section.

In the Dyatlov case, a number of powerful narratives are involved at the different levels of generality. These narratives can be presented in a hierarchical structure from more general narratives, which are shared by all lay researchers and are common to all interpretations, to much more specific narratives, which inspire particular versions. At the first, most general level, the humanistic narrative is employed, as the basic fact (an elementary emotional attractor and a trigger of the humanist narrative) of this tragedy is the death of the people. In the absence of death, the case could be a riddle rather than a mystery, the difference between the former and the latter being the difference between a lack of knowledge and uncertainty (in the sense that Mary Douglas used this term). This primary truth about the story affects all versions, providing the entire body of discourse with a moral dimension, and informing it with the significance of the absolute event[15] of death.

At the next level of generality, there is a narrative of rational action, which presupposes both causal links connecting the events (in the same way as Boltanski

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[14] As Clifford Geertz wrote, 'We are concerned not with solving problems, but with clarifying feelings' (Geertz 1973, p. 81), and further '… the point is that in man neither regnant fields nor mental sets can be formed with sufficient precision in the absence of guidance from symbolic models of emotion. In order to make up our minds we must know how we feel about things; and to know how we feel about things we need the public images of sentiment that only ritual, myth, and art can provide' (Geertz 1973, p. 82).

[15] I use the term 'absolute event' here, following the theory of social events developed by Alexander Filippov (Филиппов 2005), in which absolute events are events that abolish the arbitrariness of the observer. In Durkheim's theory, sacred objects and events play the same role: the sacred transcends itself above the profane because every particular participant of the ritual (the observer) is doomed to perceive the object or event, collectively turned to sacred, as the sacred.

argues), and assumes that humans act reasonably. As Boltanski has shown in his research, even a relatively unimportant fact that runs counter to this commonsense order can have an enormous effect, as it, in his terms, creates doubt concerning the very 'reality of reality.'

A challenge, performed by a trigger, as we already have seen, does not necessarily have to attack the core of the narrative, because culture is structured. In this situation, affecting the part affects the whole. Thus, even relatively minor facts, such as the ski pole, shortened by a knife, the tent cut from the inside, the absent tongue of a severely injured body, or even a strange fabric band with saber knots at its ends, challenge corresponding narratives, beginning from a rational action narrative and moving to those more specific ones, such as body integrity, a 'war echo,' and others. The symbolic mechanism here is the same as in the case of the violation of a minor taboo, which could have very serious consequences because it violates the entire symbolic universum.

The Dyatlov case is full of major and minor facts that strictly contradict common sense and are dramatically unaccounted for. Thus, when the hikers cut their own tent from the inside in the dead of a winter night and run away undressed and unshod, they perform many seemingly absurd actions which, to the best of their knowledge, would lead to their certain death. The whole story clearly demonstrates, in Boltanski's terms, an enormous amount of the 'missing mass of causality,' that is, 'the causality without which events become incomprehensible and absurd' (Boltanski 2014, p. 144).[16]

These two narratives are common in all versions. However, there are also narratives exhibiting the next level of generality, specific to particular versions. To illustrate this, I will mention three groups of these narratives, which exist among many others. First, the esoteric narratives often affect those who are impressed by the very name and the supposed sacredness of the 'Mountain of the Dead,' the place where the hikers died. They may subscribe to the mythologies of the local tribes, or UFO/Yeti/parallel universe narratives, or the zombie narrative, employed, for example, by the filmmakers who created a movie about the Dyatlov tragedy.

Another example is the broad ecological narrative that puts the strange fact concerning the radioactive contamination of several belongings of the hikers into focus. Radioactivity, as a dark sign of technology beyond the thinkable, coupled with a magic-like imagery of the microcosm, is known to be a core of eschatological narratives (Beck 1987; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982).

Finally, contemporary body narratives emphasize the injuries the members of Dyatlov's group sustained. These injuries, being elementary emotional attractors, vividly animate people's imaginations. These narratives tend to give special attention to not only the most physiologically serious traumas, but rather the most mind-boggling (i.e., challenging dominant body models). The most illustrative example is

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[16] An important difference between my approach and Boltanski's theory is that he limits himself to this level of the narrative structure, obviously out of his historiosophic theses, whereas I see it as only one of the basic narratives.

the absent tongue in one of the corpses, which became a matter of multiple discussions and probably was the basis of some versions.[17]

Following the analysis of the case, I can suggest that the dynamics of attraction within a mystery expands from the narratives at more general levels of the proposed hierarchy toward the more specific ones. The primary interest in the case is attracted by the fact of the strange deaths (first and second levels), but then, it moves to more specific narratives, following the process of the formation of interpretations.[18] Even before the version is built or chosen, the fascination experienced is already driven by certain emotional attractors. Mystery, thus, is like the question posed that contains an important part of the answer. However, there is no evidence that any mystery has such a hierarchical narrative structure and the corresponding dynamics of attraction. Thus, this suggestion forms a heuristic hypothesis.

How the challenge works, and what it has to do with version-building

In the previous sub-sections, I have tried to show that mystery works within the context of certain narratives. When I provided an overview of some of these narratives in the context of the Dyatlov tragedy, one could mention that there have always been particular singular objects or events, which focused attention and attracted an emotional reaction, and those objects or events provided more or less clear references to these narratives. Following the trigger-narrative model, I call these events or facts triggers of the narratives.

Thus, the radioactive sweater as a trigger calls to the ecological narrative, so that the core of the mystery appears to be the supposed link between two crucial, unnatural, and disgusting events—the deaths of young and healthy people and the existence of radiation in the heart of the wilderness. The coming out from the tent undressed and unshod is a trigger of a general rational action narrative; when we imagine as it happened, common sense and rationality appear to be dramatically challenged. When we discover that the name of the mountain where the hikers died, by strange coincidence, is arguably translated as 'the Mountain of the Dead' from the *Mansi* language, we might think that it is not a coincidence. Then, the esoteric narrative

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[17] These specific narratives, challenged within mystery, often reveal the most dominant cultural structures for a given time and place. Thus, we can see the most socially important themes of Russian discourse represented in the most popular versions of the Dyatlov case. The KGB, the GULAG, the CIA, the echo of World War II, culpable Soviet authorities and an authoritarian state neglecting the lives of the people, the test of a secret weapon of unprecedented power, super-agents and their extraordinary abilities, not to mention UFOs and other esoteric miracles, are all invoked. Although it is not a focus of the current research, the analysis of this and similar cases can reveal the most important cultural codes of national discourses.

[18] As it follows from the theory of genres, it is the relationship and the distance between heroes and the audience of the story that emphasize certain of these levels of narratives and defuse the others. Thus, too close a distance between the heroes/victims and the audience would probably substitute curiosity with despair. It is an important question for future research, if the center of the gravity must be distributed in a certain way between the mentioned levels of narratives to keep it a mystery. It seems clear, however, that the Dyatlov tragedy is only partly a tragedy, because otherwise, it could not be a mystery.

Table 1 The Trigger-Narrative model in the case of the Dyatlov tragedy

Trigger(s)	Narrative	Narrative's hierarchical position	Version
Death of the hikers	Humanistic	The most general	All versions
Coming out from the tent undressed and unshod; cutting the tent from the inside	Rational action	General	All versions
Radioactive sweater	Ecological	Specific	Spy version; weapon testing version
Zolotarev as abnormal companion (older age, faked name); the fabric band with saber knots at the ends	Social structure	Specific	'War echo' version; spy version
'The Mountain of Dead' as the supposed translation of the name of the mountain from the *Mansi* language	Esoteric	Specific	Zombie version; UFO version; Mansi shamans version
The absent tongue; other strange injuries	Enclosed body canon	Specific	'War echo'; alternative 'other people' versions
Fireballs	Sci-Fi	Specific	UFO version; weapon testing version

gains force; the sacred land should not have been transgressed, and this violation is connected to the tragedy.

In these and many other cases, we can see that the narratives underlying this or that version correspond to meaningful symbols, events, or facts. The effects of the mystery thus stem from the trigger-narrative pairs. In Table 1, I provide an overview of several pairs of triggers and their corresponding narratives.

In the previous analysis, we have seen that the challenge a trigger poses to a narrative attracts attention and emotional excitement. However, the table shows that at least in many cases, the triggered narrative also becomes the basis for constructing a version. This implies that the emotional effect might not be the only result of the trigger-narrative relation. The other crucial effect is the dynamics of interpretation that seem to flow along the lines the trigger-narrative pair has shaped. How exactly are mystery and solution related? How are the dynamics of the movement from mystery to interpretation organized? What does the model I have constructed to explain the mechanism of the challenge tell us about that?

To answer these questions, it is helpful to employ Rene Girard's theory of the sacred and violence, and in particular, the notions of *tragedy* and *mythical elaboration* (Girard 2005). Following Girard, the nature of (broadly understood) violence is 'indifferentiation,' i.e., erasing the distinctions within cultural structures. Culture and order consist of distinctions (and stem from the basic distinction of the sacred and profane). Violence, thus, destroys culture, and provides an unbearable vacuum of meanings distinctive for such situations as a sacrificial crisis, a situation of uncontrollable anger, violence, and other liminalities. In other terms, what occurs when we deal with violence is named transgression.[19] The vacuum of meanings and indifferentiation create the impure sacred, which, importantly, later tends to be transformed into the new pure sacred. A disorder, thus, participates in the emergence of a new order. Many rituals employ this fundamental feature of the sacred, which is called the ambiguity of the sacred, when, for example, the violence of the ritual sacrifice turns into the purity of a renewed sacred order (Kurakin 2015). The new order is built upon a narrative, which reinvents cultural distinctions; Girard calls it 'mythological elaboration.'[20] I propose that the version-building has the same nature; it stems from, though is not determined by, the transgression against a narrative.

To describe this progress from the vacuum of meanings to the new order, Girard employs the notion of tragedy. He thus uses the literary genre of tragedy as a method for solving anthropological problems (Girard 2005, p. 58). Tragedy, being critically rethought, appears to be a convenient base for this method because, as Girard shows,

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[19] As I mentioned earlier, the mechanism of challenging of cultural structures can be characterized as a form of transgression, the basic symbolic mechanism of violating the prescribed boundaries that ostensibly keep the sacred and profane separated (Kurakin 2015). As Mary Douglas has exhaustively demonstrated, this mechanism in fact can take many particular forms that can be analytically distinguished, such as getting out of a place, confusing existing structures, providing ambiguity concerning the placement of elements into a structure, etc. (Douglas 1966). However, all of these forms are forms of transgression, as they operate in respect to the basic opposition of the sacred and the profane.

[20] It is important to stress that the term 'mythical' does not mean 'untrue'; quite the opposite, it refers to a 'collective representation,' a socially defined truth.

it is built upon indifferentiation. Girard finds that the struggling antagonists in classical Greek tragedies are in fact symmetrical figures, and the differences (such as the difference between good and evil) are only later superimposed as a result of the process that Girard denotes as mythological elaboration.

> Tragic drama addresses itself to a burning issue—in fact, to *the* burning issue. The issue is never directly alluded in the plays, and for good reason, since it has to do with the dissolution by reciprocal violence of those very values and distinctions around which the conflict of the plays supposedly revolves. Because this subject is taboo—and even more than taboo, almost unspeakable in the language devoted to distinctions—literary critics proceed to obscure with their own meticulously differentiated categories the relative lack of difference between antagonists that characterizes a tragic confrontation in classical drama (Girard 2005, pp. 58–59).

Tragedy stands in opposition to mythical elaboration as mystery opposes its solution. Mystery (as well as tragedy) is beyond the thinkable. It maintains uncertainty and tension, and thus, creates and holds fascination. Who are the Dyatlov group members: are they all victims, or are some of them in fact aggressors, as some versions suggest? Who is Semyon Zolotarev—a war hero or a Nazi collaborator? What if the tragedy resulted from a massive rampage, and, if so, doesn't it imply that our minds are not as reliable as we would like to think? Should we firmly exclude the UFO, zombies and other supernatural entities from our worldviews or might the world turn out to be something unfamiliar? The tragic mystery thus casts doubt on many distinctions that we take for granted. A solution (as well as a myth) is the return to the thinkable and it demolishes the mystery, because it releases the tension. Mythological elaboration returns the names and labels to the previously undifferentiated world. Every version aims to be a mythological elaboration and its ultimate domination over the alternative versions signals the end of the mystery.

There remains an important question, namely, if a triggered narrative enabling the emotional effect of a mystery is necessarily the same narrative that serves as a base for an emerging version. Mystery and its solution are related as a question and an answer. An answer begins from and within a question as the question contains a substantial part of the answer. Following this lead, one might suggest that the narrative, challenged (and thus thematized) by the trigger, not only provides the conditions for establishing a mystery, but also provides a scenario for the solution. If we compare the 'Narrative' column in the table with the 'Version' column, we can see that in many cases, they correspond to each other. Those who are fascinated by 'the Mountain of the Dead' as a trigger tend to build a version within the same esoteric narrative.

If we turn to mystery as a literary genre, however, we can easily see that this is not necessarily the case. The coincidence of the narrative that is basic for the perception of the mystery and the narrative that is basic for the solution of the mystery is just the simplest (and thus, probably, the more common) structural option. It is easy to provide examples, though, in which they do not coincide; a classical detective story often raises fantastic imagery, but the answers are always this-worldly. Conan Doyle's 'The Speckled Band,' 'The Hound of Baskervilles,' and many other

stories are good examples of solving the mystery within the resolution of the detective in favor of causality and common sense.

Sometimes the pair is connected differently in real-life mysteries as well. For example, one of the esoteric versions of the Dyatlov tragedy asserts that the absence of the tongue resulted from a supernatural weapon that destroyed the astral base of the body, so, the material component necessarily had to disappear later. In these examples, we can see that the trigger-narrative relation appears to be not as symmetric as in the cases I analyzed before. Strongly believed narratives might be less structurally dependent upon triggers, so the triggers are appropriated and colonized by the narratives; thus, a sexually obsessed mind finds a trigger of desire in any arbitrary object, and a religious mystic finds a god's signs in everything.

If there is something in common between the two exemplified exceptions from the supposed prevalence of the conjunction of the challenged and version-generative narratives, it is the mastery toward the story-telling/version-building, which author of the novel and the believer, strongly obsessed with a single idea, share—as opposed to the mindset of the respectful to the facts investigator. Future research might shed light on whether this distinction between a symmetrical and asymmetrical trigger-narrative coupling makes a substantive typology and is connected with structural opportunities within the trigger-narrative scheme and with resulting narrative genres.[21]

Conclusion

In this paper, I follow penetrative leads while critically addressing some statements and conclusions from Luc Boltanski's theory of mystery (Boltanski 2014), and try to develop further Philip Smith's theory of clues and genres (Smith 2006). In his major research on mystery, Boltanski reveals a fundamental link between mystery as a singular anomaly, often manifested through seemingly minor and unimportant events, and the modern worldview that pictures reality as a law-governed system. This solves a paradox of mystery by allowing us to explain how small and isolated events sometimes gain an enormous and disproportionate emotional effect. If reality is seen as a system, then affecting a part leads to affecting the whole. The mystery of mystery lies in the hidden relations between a mysterious case and the broader context.

However, Boltanski links the nature of mystery to an exclusively sci-tech paradigm, whereas I argue that the principle he describes becomes, under a

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[21] There are at least two debates in cultural sociology that provide clues for taking the next steps in solving this problem. The first is Isaac Reed's work on causal explanation in the interpretive social sciences (Reed 2011). Reed shows that the relations between theory and evidence (which in our case, correspond to the narrative-trigger relations) take different forms depending on the epistemic regime. The second is the debate concerning iconicity (Alexander, Giesen, and Bartmanski 2012). Should an iconic object, as an elementary emotional attractor, be seen as the origin of meaning (which in our case, corresponds to the 'respectful to the facts investigator' mindset) or its mere representation (which corresponds to the 'triggers, colonized by strongly believed narratives' vision).

cultural–sociological revision, applicable to a much broader range of narratives. If culture is somehow a system, as Durkheimian cultural sociology insists, then the principle of mystery, revealed by Boltanski, works not solely for the sci-tech paradigm but for a variety of cultural narratives, because all of them, being internally structured, can be effectively challenged in such a way (affecting a part affects the whole). I argue that it is a symbolic mechanism of transgression against existing cultural structures that stands behind such a challenge, and the distortion of causality Boltanski focuses on is in fact just a special case of this more general mechanism.

A 'sci-tech' paradigm, which implies causal links between events, informs only one (the middle) level in the 'hierarchy of narratives' I have reconstructed with regard to mystery. Meanwhile, in the Dyatlov case that I have used for illustration of my theory, there is also an upper moral humanistic level involved, which only provides this mystery with the coloring of a tragedy (we are dealing with people's deaths), and a range of lower 'specific' narratives, from esoteric UFO/zombie narratives to this-worldly ecological, historical, political, and many other narratives. Thus, in the Dyatlov tragedy, there is not only the 'missing mass of causality' (Boltanski 2014, p. 144) that shapes a mysterious perception, but also a repertoire of specific narratives, triggered by the 'sacred mountain,' the echo of the war, spies, radiation, the missing tongue of the dead girl—all in the greater context of human death.

To build a cultural sociological theory of mystery, I introduce the notions of elementary and complex emotional attractors and develop the 'trigger-narrative' model. I argue that mystery is a complex emotional attractor, shaped by elementary emotional attractors, 'strange' things, or events. Mystery thus works at two distinct levels: by means of the singular effects of elementary attractors and by the effect of their configuration. At the elementary level, mystery embodies a relational nature, and its emotional effect is based on concrete pairs of master narratives on the one hand and their triggers—events or symbols, which challenge, and by challenging, thematize them—on the other hand. These trigger-narrative relations are not necessarily symmetrical; in certain cases, they are dominated by powerful and expansive narratives, whereas in others, 'facts' come to the fore. These pairs, in turn, shape certain configurations, which themselves affect the perception of mystery. Thus, in the Dyatlov case, it is the relative equiplausibility of the versions and a lack of domination by a single one, which reinforce uncertainty and tension and thus, inform the entire mystery with such an outstanding emotional effect.

The trigger-narrative model, which connects a (quasi) static picture of cultural structures to the dynamism of the events of social life, and which pushes cultural theory toward the vague and controversial problem of cultural causality (see, for example, Reed 2011), contributes to Philip Smith's theory of 'clues'—symbols or events that are able to switch the genres of a discourse, and thus, lead to real consequences in social world. In comparison with Smith's theory, the trigger-narrative model deals with narrower cultural entities, because multiple narratives can belong to a single genre. My model, thus, aims to move forward and sharpen Smith's original development.

A central promise of the strong program of cultural sociology is that it can overcome a flat rational action-dominated vision of disenchanted social life.

Mystery is another widely spread form of re-enchantment, which is tightly intertwined into the fabric of modern life. In contrast to major forms of the 'return of the sacred' through new religious movements, including civil religion phenomena, neo-tribalism, new fundamentalism, etc., mystery is built into everyday life. It reveals itself in people's passions and devotions, and in the discovery of new, unexpected dimensions at the heart of habitual life.

Mystery is a permanent challenge to our ability to understand contemporary life. Studying mystery offers us a chance to think about the sacred core of social life differently, and to recognize its influence beyond special zones habitually marked as 'sacred.'

An important feature of mysteries to be considered in future research is their growing prominence in crisis periods. Thus, Edward Tiryakian has shown that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an era of far-reaching cultural and political changes, an extraordinary 'occult revival' took place in the United States and other Western countries (Tiryakian 1972). Similarly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the times of anomie, when many people lost their reference points in terms of worldview, ethics, and aesthetics, the obsession with esoteric mysteries became disproportionately salient. It is sufficient to say that one of the most popular weekly TV shows in 1989–1994 was called 'UFO: An undisclosed visit.' One might suggest that a phenomenon such as mystery, and especially esoteric mystery, manifests the least-ordered and least-controlled forms of the sacred corresponding to unsettled times (although not exactly in the sense Ann Swidler uses this term). This provides another dimension for the further development of cultural–sociological research on mystery.

Mystery is a phenomenon of the microcosm of social life. In physics, the discovery of the microcosm has changed the landscape of the discipline. The energy hidden in matter, which only seems unobservable within ordinary (Newtonian mechanics) interactions (but in fact conditions the physical features of matter), powerfully reveals itself at the macro level under certain conditions, for example, in chemical transformations of matter or in phenomena related to nuclear power. Similar to the physical microcosm, mysteries and other emotional attractors, often hidden under the surface of social life, only seemingly remain unengaged, and in fact, are deeply involved in the flow of events, effectively energizing social life and steering it away from any kind of disenchantment.

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