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"Red Laughter": On Refined Weapons of Soviet Jesters

> Long live the jesters (*shooty*) of His Majesty the Proletariat! Once upon a time, jesters might have been able to tell the truth to their kings, while hiding behind their grimaces. But they remained slaves even then. Jesters of the proletariat will be the proletariat's brothers, the proletariat's favorite, jolly, ornate, lively, talented, vigilant, eloquent advisors.
>
> —Anatoly Lunacharskii, the first Soviet People's Commissar of Enlightenment (1964, 78)

> I belong to a tradition that cannot laugh without a whistling lash. I have an affinity for the laughter of destruction.
>
> —Sergei Eisenstein (1969, 81)

ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2001, *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE,* A POPULAR TELEVISION show, began its new season with a somewhat unusual opening scene. Instead of a traditional monologue of the hosting star, the opening remarks were delivered by New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The mayor had hosted the show before but this time it was different. With American flags in the background, Giuliani was surrounded on stage by two dozen members of the New York City Fire and Police Departments dressed in their uniforms. In his brief speech, Guiliani solemnly reminded the audience that

> On September 11th, more lives were lost than on any other single day in America's history. More than Pearl Harbor and more than D-Day. . . . But even as we grieve for our loved ones, it's up to us to face our future with renewed determination. Our hearts are broken, but they are beating, and they are beating stronger than ever. New Yorkers are unified. We will not yield to terrorism. We will not let our decisions be made out of fear. We choose to live our lives in freedom.

The remarks were followed by Paul Simon's performance of *The Boxer*, with another oversized US flag as his backdrop. After the song, the comic relief was finally delivered. Responding to Guliani's line about the cultural importance of *Saturday Night Live,* Lorne Michaels, the show's executive producer, asked the mayor, "Can we be funny?" "Why start now?" was Giuliani's response. Reese Witherspoon—the real host—replaced the mayor, firefighters, and police and the show proceeded as usual, making no reference to the 9/11 events (Saturday Night Live 2001; Gournelos and Green 2011, xii).

Scripted and staged, this episode nonetheless reveals important links between power and comedy, fear and laughter, sorrow and fun. The authoritative sanction here normalized—albeit indirectly and questionably—the pleasure derived from the comic disruption at the time when the nation was trying to come to terms with losses and disorders of a different degree. It is not the sanctioning gesture of the authority that I find crucial in the *SNL* episode, though. Rather, I want to draw attention to the social and psychological tension produced by the conflation of two contradictory impulses. In his request for an extra comedic justification of the nonsensical merriment in the context of grave seriousness, Lorne Michaels demonstrated how the assumed inappropriateness of laughter at the time of crisis could be combined with an equally strong perception of laughter as a key indicator of one's ability to manage and even to overcome the condition of crisis. Taking this

uneasiness about the disruptive and affirmative effects of the comedic as my starting point, in this essay I will discuss a structurally similar quest for proper political and moral situatedness of laughter that took place in a very different cultural context.

Following closely public debates of the 1920s–1950s about the nature and purpose of a distinctively "Soviet" laughter and comedy, I will try to distill arguments and rationales that were used by producers of Stalinist culture for determining a socially acceptable (discursive) place for the comic in the country that was going through dramatic transformations of every aspect of its life. Some questions that motivated these searches were identical to Lorne Michaels' "*Can* we be funny?"; others probed culturally acceptable limits of the comic (*How* funny can we be?); yet others attempted to figure out the very nature of the comic under socialism (*What* is funny today?).[1] I deliberately limit my discussion to publications in official Soviet sources, leaving aside actual practices of comedic performances as well as those debates about the nature of the comic that took place outside the domain of the official Soviet press. These limits allow me to highlight more saliently a complicated argumentative strategy devised by the Soviet political and cultural authorities in order to reclaim, appropriate, and adapt for the needs of the socialist state previously ignored comic genres (Chapple 1980, 2).

Among scholars of Soviet culture, it is common to ignore both these debates and the comedic forms that were publicly circulated in the Soviet Union. For example, a keyword search for "socialism and comedy" in the main catalogue of the Princeton University library produced only four entries: a collected volume with an essay on "Jewish socialism" in the United States, Charlie Chaplin's *Great Dictator,* a monograph on the politics and plays of Bernard Shaw, and a study of music in Soviet film. A similar search in the catalogue of Library of Congress produced seven entries, most of which were equally irrelevant.

Usually, the cultural insignificance of the "officially sanctioned" laughter in the USSR is explained away through references to a partic-

ular version of what Michel Foucault (1978) called "the repressive hypothesis." A lack of vibrant comic genres is normally attributed to the cultural censorship exercised by the regime. The Soviet government, as the argument goes, was incapable of tolerating any form of critique, and therefore it meticulously suppressed all the areas and spheres that could have originated a subversive laughter, political or otherwise (Tucker 2002; Brandenberger 2009, 1–26). As a result, studies of Soviet laughter are traditionally limited to political jokes, Aesopian language, and "uncensored" forms of comic production that circulated mostly in the Soviet "underground" (Dolgopolova 1982; Lewis 2008; Graham 2009).[2]

What the supporters of the repressive hypothesis tend to overlook is that the government's desire to control and discipline laughter went hand in hand with a similarly powerful effort to explore and examine the available options. In other words, limited performative possibilities were overshadowed by the elaborate modeling of normative ideals and their "deviational" counterparts. The actual economy of "red laughter," as one critic called it in 1923 (Krynetskii 1923, 7), might have been severely restrictive but the number of discourses that problematized the comic was constantly growing. Cultural entrepreneurs in early Soviet Russia might have been vague about what they wanted, but they were pretty clear about things they did *not* want to see (Youngblood 1993). Every decade of Soviet history witnessed a major attempt to tackle Soviet laughter—be it a debate about the role of socialist satire, a search for the specifics of the socialist feuilleton, socialist comedy, or socialist caricature (Ozmitel 1964; Gorchakov 1938; Zaslavskii 1956; Nikolaev 1961; Eventov 1973).

The time and effort invested in these discussions and the elaborate lines of reasoning produced during these debates demonstrate that the early Soviet regime cared about discursive rationalization of its own politics just as much as it cared about the use of power. When seen from the distance of the present moment, the official cultural politics of the time appears neither opportunistic nor erratic, and perennial

debates about the nature and role of Soviet laughter helpfully crystallize a rather consistent cultural logic underneath a seemingly haphazard collection of cultural forms.

The failure of these discourses to produce memorable cultural products should not hide the intricacy of their arguments and the boldness of their attempts to envision a type of laughter that never existed before. It was not the laughter itself that was at stake; it was the process of its justification that mattered. To use Lunacharskii's description quoted in the epigraph, what seemed to be of major concern was a desire to imagine a situation in which the side-by-side coexistence of the proletariat and its jesters would not be, so to speak, ridiculous.

"WE WILL LAUGH"

In his memoirs published in the 1970s, Grigorii Aleksandrov, a film director who was largely responsible for creating the genre of Soviet musical "cinecomedy" (*kinokomediia*), recalled an important meeting from 1932. Having returned to Moscow from an extended trip to Europe, the United States, and Mexico with the film director Sergei Eisenstein, Aleksandrov visited Maxim Gorky, the major Soviet writer and the founder of socialist realism. At Gorky's dacha, Aleksandrov met Joseph Stalin, who suddenly began complaining about the backwardness of contemporary Soviet art, which was incapable of "matching up" the speed and scale of the industrial transformation of the country. In Aleksandrov's transcription, Stalin apparently said,

> our people, our Bolshevik party have all the grounds to be optimistic about our future. But for some reason, our art . . . is stuck in the past. It is well known that our people favor the art that is lively (*bodroe*) and cheerful (*zhineradostnoe*), but you do not take this preference seriously. Moreover, . . . there are enough people in the artistic circles who do everything they can to suppress all that is funny (*vsio smeshnoe*). . . .

> [C]an you help us stir up the masters of laughter in our art? (Aleksandrov 1976, 159)

And the masters of laughter were indeed stirred up. For the next 15 years or so, Aleksandrov filmed nothing but comedies, basically transplanting the Hollywood musical onto Soviet soil (Salys 2009). His first comedy, *Jolly Fellows* (*Veselye rebiata*), came out in 1934, presenting a jumbled collection of slapstick scenes and musical numbers. Released abroad as *Moscow Laughs,* this first Soviet musical cinecomedy was mildly subversive. The music that frames the film was jazz, the music that the very same Gorky described in 1928 in his article in *Pravda* as "an insulting chaos of wild sounds . . . played by an orchestra of madmen" (Gorky 1928). Gorky notwithstanding, the jazz comedy was a major success. Aleksandrov's second cinecomedy—*Circus* (1936)—firmly established him as the main symbol of the "Soviet Hollywood" (Taylor 1996). An imaginative blend of Soviet patriotism and Hollywood glamour, *Circus* was a film favored both by Stalin and by the Soviet people (Ratchford 1993).

It is striking that Aleksandrov himself attributed the popular success of his comedies to his sheer desperation to produce something funny. As the film director recalled it, the task of inventing cinecomedy came with no blueprints or instructions to follow: the fundamental questions—"What should we laugh at? What should we laugh for?" (*Nad chem smeiat'sia*? *Vo imia chego smeiat'sia*?)—pointed to no plausible answer (1976, 165).

Aleksandrov was not unique in his lack of clarity about the nature of Soviet laughter. Arguably, Anatolii Lunacharskii, the Bolshevik minister in charge of education and culture from 1917 to 1929—the Commissar of Enlightenment, as he was known—was also the first to address the problematic state of comic genres in Soviet Russia. In 1920, three years after the Bolshevik revolution, Lunacharskii—a theater critic, a playwright, and literary scholar himself—published a programmatic article that defined the perception of Soviet laughter for years. Titled *We Will Laugh,* his short essay expressed the feeling that would

not be out of tune with the comments of Rudolph Giuliani 80 years later. Writing at the end of the civil war and the international blockade, the commissar observed,

> We live in a hungry and cold country that was being torn into pieces only a short time ago. But I often hear laughter, I see smiling faces on the street. . . . This means that our strength (*sila*) has not been depleted; for laughter is a sign of strength. More: laughter is not just a sign of strength; it is strength itself. And it should be channeled in a right direction. . . . Laughter is a sign of victory (1964, 76).

Lunacharskii's equation of laughter with (moral) superiority and resilience—the commissar duly noted Henri Bergson's impact on his views—had an additional component. The Russian word *sila* that Lunacharskii used to describe laughter provided an important associative link: *sila* in Russian can also mean "power" or "might" (as, for instance, in *silovye vedomstva*, power ministries). The semantic combination of superiority, resourcefulness, and power finally resulted in a fundamental Soviet metaphor: laughter is a weapon. Or, more precisely, laughter is a "*refined* weapon," as Lunacharskii emphasized it. That is to say, laughter is a type of weapon that is necessary to ultimately disable the enemy when all the major blood work has been already done (1964, 77).[3]

Hardly controversial, Lunacharskii's emphasis on the liberating (or, depending on the perspective, lethal) quality of laughter was quickly turned into a cliché in early Soviet Russia. But "channeling" the newly discovered "strength" and "weapon" towards proper goals was more complicated. While questions about the cleansing effect and elevating function of the comic under socialism did not seem to produce any problem, the *object* of laughter turned out to be a serious difficulty.

The core of the problem with Soviet laughter was established quickly. As early as 1923, *Krasnaia pechat'* (Red Press), a major Bolshevik

journal, published a short article called *Why Are We Unable to Laugh*? The article predictably praised the didactic usefulness of comic genres, stressing that "diverse groups of the population" could comprehend portrayals of social evils much more easily when such problems are framed in a funny way. This framing, the article went on, allowed the masses to perceive the intended message directly, without the "mental strain (*napriazhenie uma*)" that "serious denunciations" of social vices would normally require. Yet, as the article pointed out, despite their clear advantage, such comic genres as satire, feuilleton, or even comedy were almost completely neglected by the young Bolshevik press. The reason for this situation, the author opined, was not a lack of necessary skills of dealing with the comic. Rather, "the fundamental reason for our inability to laugh is the inability of our press to discover its main theme, to discover its main enemy that could preoccupy the press's attention in a significant way" (Shafir 1923, 6–7). Quickly surveying popular objects of Soviet laughter—the political opposition, priests, and the petty bourgeoisie inside Russia, as well as "bourgeois politicians" in the West—the article summed up the main flaw of this trend. All these objects of Soviet laughter were relicts of the past that Soviet Russia was trying to get rid of; all of them were too insignificant, too meek, too transitory to be in the focus of the red press for an extended period of time. As the article suggested, the only truly powerful enemy that could be an object of sustainable and persistent ridicule, the only real enemy that could create a unified front, bringing together controlling institutions, the press, and Russian peasants and workers would be the "Soviet bureaucrat"—"an undoubtedly considerable enemy that requires a daily fight of the most severe type" (Shafir 1923, 7).

This choice of the main target was not entirely surprising. By the time of the Bolshevik revolution, Russian literature had excelled in its caustic portrayal of state officials, practically creating a subgenre of anti-governmental satire. The literary success of such prominent Russian writers as Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852) and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin

(1826–1889) almost entirely rested on their scathing critique of corrupt, stupid, and lazy bureaucrats (Gogol 2005; Saltykov-Shchedrin 1985).

The critique of the *Soviet* bureaucrat presented a certain difficulty, though. As Iakov Shafir, the author of *Why Are We Unable to Laugh*? framed it, "it is not an easy thing to know where exactly a critique of concrete individuals stops and where a critique of the regime starts" (Shafir 1923, 8). The fuzzy distinction between making fun of particular individuals and making fun of the Soviet system at large would remain a key political, narrative, and stylistic dilemma for the theoreticians and practitioners of Soviet laughter: for several decades thereafter, they would try to calibrate an acceptable combination of the individual and the systemic components of the comic genres under socialism.

Before I outline key points of these discussions, I want to highlight two moments. First, the focus on a "proper" target of ridicule should not hide a more important function of the comic that would remain largely unarticulated though implicitly recognized by theoreticians of Soviet comedy. A properly addressed ridicule does not only perform the task of social disinfection, as some writers suggested (Reisner 1922, 22–26); it also has an important organizing function, creating and encouraging a sense of community among its readers and spectators (Prussing-Hollowell 2008, 2–4). What produced a serious social conundrum for the Bolsheviks was precisely this lasting consequence of (collective) laughter, the social structuring along the lines of a common emotional experience, that a good comic performance could achieve. As a result, the comic exposure of sins and vices of the Soviet bureaucrat would be conceived in such a way as to prevent, discourage, or downplay the emergence of alternative forms of collective experience and collective identities. The "negative realism" of Soviet laughter (Lunacharskii 1967c, 500) would be diffused in order to avoid the stabilization of the negative subject position vis-à-vis the (representatives of the) Soviet state.

Second, unusual as it might sound, early Soviet uneasiness about the social appropriateness of laughter was *not* originally motivated by a desire to suppress any form of internal critique. Multiple

articles on Soviet laughter published in the 1920s stressed again and again the importance of funny or even farcical portrayals of the new Soviet state and its problems. In fact, the slogan of the moment seemed to be "Critique! We need more critique!" This point was made in 1927 by Sergei Gusev, a party official, in an important article in *Izvestiia*, the second major Soviet newspaper. In the same article he lamented that "unfortunately, we are still lacking our own, Soviet, Gogols and Saltykovs, who could be lashing out at our drawbacks (*nedostatki*) with the same force."[4] The critical content itself did not seem to be that objectionable; the comic portrayal of vices and sins of the Soviet official did not raise questions. Rather, as I will show below, it was the narrative framing and the context of the comic that often provoked heated debates. It was the comedic nature of this portrayal; it was the *doubling* transposition of social vices and sins to the realm of aesthetics that created a tangible uneasiness. To put it somewhat differently: the crux of the matter was the performative quality of the comic.

A WEAPON OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

"Weapon" as the operative metaphor, and social vices of state officials as the main target of Soviet comic genres, delineated a semantic field in which comic genres were increasingly perceived as a form of class struggle. The transition to this militant laughter, the laughter of destruction—to use Eisenstein's terms (1969, 80)—happened gradually, following overall political development in the USSR.

In the early 1920s, with the revolution and civil war still in the background, the debates primarily focused on the idea of retooling for revolutionary purposes the industry of fun inherited from the previous regime. Osip Brik, a prominent Russian formalist, was one of the key theoreticians of these short-lived attempts to determine the revolutionary use-value of nonrevolutionary genres. In his essay *About Something Indecent,* Brik polemically insisted in 1922 that "light genres" (cabaret, farce, operetta, grotesque) could have indeed been initially created to "satisfy the bourgeois lust." However, the "bourgeois origin" of these

cultural forms should not prevent them from being used for creating educational and "agitational" theater in the new Russia. "Would it be 'sinful,' too," analogized Brik, "if we turn a well equipped brothel into a hostel for the workers?" (1922, 30)

Apparently inspired by the Futurist Manifesto of the Italian poet Filippo Marinetti, in 1921 to 1923, Brik, Sergei Eisenstein, and other colleagues from Nikolai Foregger's theater company *MastFor* staged several productions using the performative structure of the European music hall as the organizational backbone for a new revolutionary institution of *agit-hall* (Chepalov 2001; Abramov 1922, 35–38). The openly buffoonish play of 1922, *A Good Relation towards Horses*, was met with stern reproaches in the press, which condemned the "mindless fun" (*bezdumnaia razvlekatel'nost'*) of the parodic spectacle (Uvarova 1983, 58). Yet Vladimir Maiakovskii, perhaps the most acclaimed revolutionary poet, strongly defended the idea of *agit-hall* during one of the public debates in 1922. The poet went as far as to proclaim: "yes—to *shantany* [from French *chantant,* singing] and music-hall! . . . Give us dancing ideology (*tantsuiushchaia ideologiia*), give us a jolly, unrestrained and cascading propaganda, give us sparkling revolutionary theatricality. . . . Enough of these sneaky efforts to push through under the name of revolutionary literature some literary yawn" (as quoted in Uvarova 1983, 58; M. Z. 1922, 43).

Despite the defense, *agit-hall*, with its vaudeville structure and entertaining content, did not really take off as a major comedic form in early Soviet Russia, nor was it seen as a suitable model for Soviet laughter. The "fun" component, the attempt to combine "'showgirls' with ideology," as one critic put it, was increasingly perceived as inappropriate, given the educational and political goals of Soviet art (Mlechin 1931, 92). A crucial turning point emerged in 1929 and 1930, during a series of open discussions in Moscow.

In 1929, *Literaturnaia gazeta*—a newly relaunched newspaper of the Federation of Soviet writers—published a series of essays that explored the role and function of socialist satire. The predictably affir-

mative stance of these articles was disrupted by Vladimir Blium, a Moscow theater critic known for his strong opinions. In his polemical essay *Will Satire Survive*?, Blium drew the line under perennial litanies about the moribund state of satirical critique in the Soviet Union: "We should admit without any panic that 'lashing' and 'biting' satire did not manage to pan out (*ne vytanstovalas'*) in our country. And without any liberal blushing let's also admit that it should not have to!" (Blium 1929) Relying on examples from Russian literature, Blium argued that the overwhelming success of the satirical portrayal of corrupt bureaucracy in tsarist Russia was determined by a particular standpoint that these writers assumed vis-à-vis the autocratic authority. Distancing themselves from the tsarist state, Russian writers used grotesque and satirical generalization to create a negative picture of the class (Russian nobility) and the state (Russian monarchy) that had become an alien anachronism a long time ago: "The task of the satirist was to demonstrate how low "they" could go. And "they" in this case meant a class enemy, an alien statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*), and an alien public" (Blium 1929).

Could this originary motivation of Russian satire be repurposed and redirected? For Blium, the answer was ostensibly negative. As a genre, satire knows no positive content, and therefore every attempt to develop satirical forms under socialism would amount to a "counter-revolutionary" assault, to "a direct strike against our own statehood and our own public" (Blium 1929).

The publications that responded to Blium did not entirely refute his assault on satire, but they did moderate to some extent his desire to equate satire with legal sanctions. Summarizing responses, the editorial in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, expressed full confidence in the "blossoming future" of Soviet satire. However, simultaneously, the newspaper made it clear that "the authentic, serious Soviet satire" would be an organically *new* genre. By celebrating its realistic quality and avoiding "excessive obsession with naturalism," Soviet satire would stay away from such comedic forms and devices of the past as "archaic" tricks of

Aesopian fables, with their hidden allusions and metaphors, or "the so-called pure comicality (*goloe smekhachestvo*), anecdotage (*anekdotizm*), and laughter for laughter's sake" that had become a landmark of the bourgeoisie's "spiritual idleness" (O putiakh 1929).

The debates in press were concluded with a public dispute that took place on January 8, 1930, in Moscow's Polytechnic Museum. Defending his position, Blium again insisted that "Soviet satire is unnecessary" since it provides the class enemy with a convenient tool for masking his/her real—"harmful"—intentions. The very notion of "the Soviet satirist," Blium suggested, was an oxymoron, equal to such similarly unimaginable phenomena as "Soviet banker" or "Soviet landlord (*pomeshchik*)" (E.G. 1930). Lilia Brik, an important cultural activist at the time, later recalled this dispute in her diary, noting that in his polemical rage Blium even insisted that instead of writing "playful" satirical sketches, people should report offenders directly to the law enforcement institutions (L. Brik 2003, 197). Despite his polemical fireworks, at the time it looked like Blium was in a clear minority. Mikhail Kol'tsov, a famous satirical columnist from *Pravda* and one of the most authoritative Soviet journalists of the period, seemed to draw the final line at the dispute. Having characterized Blium's approach as "reactionary," Kol'stov emphasized the fact that Soviet satire was an important weapon of the revolutionary class "successfully" deployed in the struggle for building a new society (E.G. 1930).

The importance and intensity of the polemics initiated by Blium did not go unnoticed by the Soviet authorities. In 1930, Lunacharskii took time to respond to Blium's rejection of satire, too. In two short essays—*What is Humor*? (1967a) and *On Satire* (1967b)—he explained that historically, laughter was not only "a class weapon of enormous power" employed by subjugated classes against their oppressors. The dominating class also used laughter against itself—to iron out its own weaknesses and imperfections. In Lunacharskii's view, laughter emerged as a universal apparatus of social self-making, as an instrument of defense, and as a formula for tempering one's self (1967, 185)

In his 1931 speech, *On Laughter*, Lunacharskii developed this idea of the comic as a crucial tool of class formation even further (1967c). As if blending the rhetoric of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Lunacharskii linked laughter with two crucial effects: social obedience and cohesion, on one hand, and social distinction on the other. Emphasizing the mocking, ridiculing, and scoffing effects of the comic, he concluded in 1931:

> Laughter is a weapon—and a very serious weapon at that—of a social self-discipline of a particular social class. . . . Molière, in a sense, created a wonderful school of self-discipline; one can say that three quarters of his comedies were aimed at teaching the bourgeoisie how to understand and respect itself (*uchit' samosoznaniiu i samouvazheniiu*) (1967c, 533–534).

The bonding effect of the collective laugh, as Lunacharskii suggested, was also used to mark (or introduce) a qualitative distinction between individuals, groups, or classes: the laughter-for-oneself, the "laughter of fellowship" (Highet 1962, 235), went hand in hand with the laughter-at-others, used as "a way of establishing distance"; mockery was appropriated for articulating "a mutual contradistinction" of classes (Lunacharskii 1967c, 535).

Even though Lunacharskii's own book-length project, *Laughter as a Weapon of Social Struggle*—planned as a massive three-volume history of Russian and European comic genres—never materialized (Lunacharskaia-Rozenel' 1966, 218), he was crucial in raising the social importance of laughter in Soviet Russia in yet another way. As a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, he initiated in 1930 the creation of a special Commission on Researching Satirical Genres under the auspice of the academy. The initial mandate of the commission was rather impressive: it was supposed to accumulate Russian and foreign literature on the topic and to study "crucial aspects of contemporary life"

(Rovda 1978). In practice, the outcome was much more modest. During one year of its activity, the commission conducted four meetings at which eight academic papers were presented, with topics ranging from the Spanish picaresque novel, satirical pamphlets published during the French Revolution, and Juvenal in European satire to "tavern holidays" in seventeenth-century Russia and the "genetic semantics of satire" (Kommentarii 1967, 622). The historical focus of the commission is symptomatic: the history of comic genres was perceived as a repository of useful tools and devices that could be productively appropriated by the emerging class.

Abstracted from its entertaining function, the comic was reformatted and reloaded with new social tasks in the 1930s. As a result of this repositioning, the self-disciplining effect of laughter started to gain more and more prominence. The object of the comic was inversed: self-critique (*samokritika*) was presented as a key social ritual and communication protocol that effectively placed the biting (or sympathetic) satire within a closed social circuit. Comic exposure among friends was seen as a starting point for self-improvement: "A ridicule (*nasmeshka*) can be good-natured and self-critical," wrote Lunacharskii in 1931, ". . . when we criticize one another, while being within the same milieu, within the tight milieu of revolutionaries (and . . . it is tight in a sense of being deeply cohesive), this self-critique cannot not be good-natured, especially if it is delivered by a comic magazine, or a joke, or a comedy" (1981, 150).

Along with such discursive instruments as autobiography, diary, or public confession, laughter in Soviet Russia was envisioned as yet another tool for learning how to speak and perform the Bolshevik, as Stephen Kotkin framed it (1997).[5] In other words, it became part of the arsenal of ammunition accumulated for fashioning individual and collective identities of a new—working—class: a corrective apparatus that exposed and ridiculed personal weaknesses while leaving some room for their improvement. Laughter had an important additional function, too: in a situation where material distinctions were not obvi-

ous or important, laughter performed a task of social stratification, marking a discursive border between friends and enemies (Skradol 2011).

Different as they are, the early Soviet interpretations of the comic that I have described so far are similar at least in one respect. Within the official domain, laughter was perceived in Soviet Russia largely as instrumental: as a weapon of class struggle, as a mechanism of social control, as an instrument of social cohesion, as a means of distinction, or as a tool of self-improvement. Escapist pleasure rarely entered the domain of official comic genres under socialism. This persistent marginalization and eventual elimination of "laughter for laughter's sake"—motivated predominantly by educational reasoning—is crucial for understanding the social context that determined expressive and narrative possibilities of the comic in the USSR.[6] When amusement and entertainment did become a part of a comedic production, they had to be balanced out by some didactic component. Aleksandrov explained in his memoirs that it took him a long time to realize that his cinecomedies should combine two kinds of laughter: "Our comedy shouldn't be only mocking; it should be merry as well. [We should] not only satirically reject the evil, but also we should affirm the new (*novoe*) with a kind smile" (1976, 204).

It is easy to dismiss this desire to balance guilty merriment with some useful satire as a reflection of revolutionary puritanism and pedagogic condescension towards the masses and their tastes. Yet, I think, the contributions by Lunacharskii, Aleksandrov, Eisenstein, and others convey much more than that. In most cases, laughter was ultimately linked with emergent forms of life—be it a new class (as in Lunacharskii's work on the history of comic genres) or some abstract, anticipatory new development (as in Aleksandrov's comments on Soviet cinecomedy). And it is precisely this preoccupation with the "new" or, rather, it is this attempt to rely on a noncommittal smile as a gesture of affirmation of things and processes as yet not fully unfolded, that I find so indicative about the laughter debates in the early Soviet

Russia. In the absence of stable rituals and established communicative genres, the comic was envisioned as a form of participatory critique, as a discursive and somatic exercise of public self-exposure, self-improvement, and self-discipline. A simultaneous act of identification and difference, laughter was conceived as an open promise, as a possibility whose structure had not quite crystallized: Do we have our own laughter?—Sergei Eisenstein asked in the early 1930s—"We will have it. But what kind of laughter would it be?" (1969, 80)

By the mid-1930s, this attitude and this rhetoric would change significantly. In 1932, the status of the Commission on Researching Satirical Genres was radically downgraded: it was transformed into a mere library (*kabinet*) responsible for collecting satirical literature. Lunacharskii's death in 1933 (on his way to Madrid as a newly appointed ambassador) also contributed to the transformation of the overall tone of the laughter debates. Vladimir Blium's point about the counterrevolutionary nature of satire in Soviet Russia—"any satirist today . . . would have to act revolutionary against the [Bolshevik] revolution" (as quoted in Lunacharskii 1967b, 180)—was gaining more and more support, despite its initial defeat. With the beginning of show trials against counterrevolutionaries and saboteurs at the end of the 1920s, the innocent polemics about comic genres acquired grave overtones. As a result, the focus of the debates shifted from early Soviet attempts to use the historical legacy of comic genres for shaping a new society to more pragmatic concerns with the instrumental deployment of laughter for the affirmation of the consolidated regime.

SERIOUSLY SOVIET SATIRE

The process of organizational and ideological consolidation that political and cultural life underwent in Soviet Russia in the second half of the 1930s is well known by now. Autonomous artistic groups were unified in artistic quasi-ministries (the Union of Soviet Writers, the Union of Soviet Composers, the Union of Soviet Architects, for example), and book and newspaper publishing as well as film production were central-

ized. Socialist realism, understood as an artistic ideology and a creative method, was supposed to provide a normative guidance (Clark 2000; Dobrenko 2007). Comic genres went through this ideological and artistic streamlining, too: the vibrant polemic exchanges of the 1920s were replaced by univocal programmatic instructions in the 1930s.

The First Congress of Soviet Writers that took place in Moscow in August 1934 was probably the last major event where the old-school defense of the importance of Soviet satire had an opportunity to present its argument. In his speech at the Congress, Mikhail Kol'tsov appealed to the common sense of his audience, explaining that "laughter kills" outdated habits and encumbering routines:

> There are still plenty of stumps and roots of capitalism in our country. . . . *In our party*, too, there is still an alien, philistine close-mindedness … and *we, we ourselves,* —despite our desire to come through as truly new people, as faithful Bolsheviks, as conscious and devoted builders of a classless society, —don't we ourselves still retain some old, petty bourgeois, philistine acids? The acids that might not be dangerous enough to require red-hot iron but that still have to go through some leaching operation. . . . To deny the meaningfulness and the necessity of Soviet satire in this situation would be equal to denying the meaningfulness and the necessity of self-critique under the dictatorship of the proletariat. . . . (1961, 129).[7]

Four years later, Kol'tsov would be arrested. Accused of spying for three (or five, depending on the investigator) foreign intelligence services, he would be executed in the 1940s, adding to the imaginative metaphor of laughter that kills a sinister extra-textual connotation (Efimov 2000, 308–318, 450–461). Yet Kol'tsov lived long enough to see how the satirical operation of "leaching" harmful acids was replaced by a very different procedure, in which "acids" were not neutralized but "contained."

Mikhail Zoshchenko, a Soviet writer famous for his humorous and satirical portrayal of everyday absurdity of postrevolutionary life in Russia, was also at the First Congress. Unlike Kol'tsov, he was not given a chance to speak but he did prepare remarks that traced the transformation of Soviet jesters after the Bolshevik revolution. Summarizing the outcome of laughter debates in the 1920s–1930s, Zoshchenko pointed out that during these discussions some critics talked "complete nonsense, claiming that we should have no satire whatsoever. Others thought that satire ought to be very concrete—with proper names and addresses. However, the ultimate winner was the idea that satire was necessary but that it should be positive (*polozhitel'naia*). This mushy (*rykhlaia*) formula has remained not entirely clear ever since" (1937, 379–380).

Zoshchenko's comments identified an important paradigmatic shift that would determine the Soviet understanding of the comic practically until the very collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. By moving from the negative realism of the comic—which Lunacharskii and Eisenstein were endorsing so eloquently in the early 1930s—to the so-called positive satire, the comic genres had to downplay the perception of laughter as a weapon of class struggle. Instead of this, the "positive satire" pushed mimetic and didactic qualities of laughter to the forefront. In a sense, Soviet jesters were expected not only to make fun of weaknesses and imperfections but also to provide a constructive alternative, if not a guidance. The satirist was seen now "an attentive and perceptive educator, who helps people get rid of the vestiges of capitalism" (El'sberg 1954, 89)

The first bold move in this direction was made in 1936, when Evgenia Zhurbina, a historian of literature and a key proponent of the new Soviet genre of the "positive feuilleton" in the 1960s (Zhurbina 1960, 62–65), published two programmatic articles that placed Soviet satire within new stylistic limits. As the historian framed it, "lyrical enthusiasm (*liricheskaia vostorzhennost'*), which underlies the perception of our reality, emerges as the main connective link that allows [the sati-

rist] a transition towards the runway of new Soviet satire. . . . Displacing skepticism and bile, lyrical enthusiasm has completely transformed the overall outline of the satirist' art" (Zhurbina 1936a). The shift articulated by Zhurbina was structural, not rhetorical. "Lyrical enthusiasm," as she specified in yet another article, was to provide a new "emotional 'space,' a new emotional air," a "new contrasting backdrop" against which the Soviet satirist could "unmask" the vestiges of the past (Zhurbina 1936b, 129). "Joy, courage, calm, and confidence" were supposed to become the springboard from which to attack "necrotic mental norms" and, simultaneously, to envision new forms of relations among people—"without slavery and exploitation, without oppression and greed, without lie, slyness, and dissimulation" (1936b, 129).

The transformation of the social function of laughter brought with it another innovation: "a positive hero as a new type of the comic genre" (Frolov 1952). In a 1938 *Pravda* article, Nikolai Gorchakov, the artistic director of the Moscow Theater of Satire, spelled out the essence of the new approach to comedy quite clearly: "Soviet comedy must mercilessly ridicule and expose those inert and ignorant elements that still manage to find their place on the margins of our daily life. But Soviet comedy should also have its own positive heroes—lively, full-bloodied representatives of our epoch. Soviet comedy should reflect our healthy optimism, our belief in the future, and our will to defeat the enemy."

This emphasis on the optimistic and the positive as a necessary part of Soviet comic genres finally provided a path out of the logical dead end created by the theoreticians of Soviet laughter in the 1920s. The idea of the "positive satire" of the 1930s finally instrumentalized the fuzzy distinction between the satirical portrayal of individual weaknesses and the satirical attack on the system that worried so much cultural producersin the end of the 1920s. The "kind smile" of affirmation of "the new" that Aleksandrov saw as an important supplement to the biting satire of Soviet comedy went through a radical alteration here. Rather than supporting a nascent system that had yet to mani-

fest its own potential, comedy was now supposed to demonstrate the gradual disappearance of the very demand for lashing critique. The tension between the individual and the systemic was reformulated as the conflict between the individual and his or her context.

This reformulation, however, would not have been possible without a major rhetorical and social evolution: social environment was transformed from a source of societal destabilization into a guarantor of socialist stability.[8] In the 1950s, Vladimir Frolov, a prolific scholar of Soviet comedy, expressed well this new approach to the comic: "the most popular type of our [Soviet] comedy is the one that depicts sharp collisions of positive and negative characters; this comedy demonstrates how nasty people behave in the *positive* environment, in the environment where Soviet, socialist principles of life are dominant" (Frolov 1954, 42).

Ironically, it was exactly in this situation, where the overall context exuded socialist confidence, that theoreticians of Soviet comedy turned to hyperbole and farce again. Yet in this case, the deployment of the grotesque was not aimed at generalizing an individual vice to the status of the systemic flaw. Instead, the purpose of this application of the grotesque was effectively to prevent viewers/readers from identifying with a negative character. In his monograph on Soviet comedy, Frolov underscores that the grotesque was "vitally necessary" for "emphasizing in the most graphic and sharpened way" the typicality of the negative character (1954, 231). What he failed to mention is that this very same method transformed a potential portrait into a mask that estranged and circumscribed the satirized flaw, turning it into something exotic and distant.[9] Jesters, again, could tell the truth as long as they kept their grimaces on.

* * * *

In 1923, theorizing about "red laughter," N. Krynetskii provided a list of reasons why laughter was pushed to the periphery of the vocabulary of expressive means:

> war, revolution, hunger, struggle, economic depression, unemployment—the radical demolition of everything (*lomka vsego*), hard conditions of existence in general . . . — all that was not conducive to eliciting laughter. Even when the worker did laugh, his laugh was a shrill, brief, hard revolutionary laughter. This type of laughter did not find any reflection in the press because new forms of laughter were not there yet, while the old ones . . . were incapable of fitting [this revolutionary laughter in their moulds….] We cannot write in a "funny" way, we have not learned how to do it (1923, 8–9).

As we have seen, this recognition of the lack followed by a clear desire to learn how to master the new art of the comic was the main motivation behind persistent debates about "red laughter" in Soviet Russia. Issues of social and artistic control were only part of these debates. Predominantly, however, they were organized around the same genuine attempt to translate a possibility of "red laughter" into tangible aesthetic forms, stylistic conventions, and narrative structures. Ultimately, this attempt failed: the idea of successful administration of laughter was hardly compatible with laughter's disrupting and unsettling effects. The refined weapon turned out to be too delicate to handle, and with time, "red laughter" resembled more and more "red herring:" a figure of speech, a discursive shifter, devoid of any real referent.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of the similar process in socialist Europe, see the

thematic section on "Jokes of Repression" that I edited for *East European Politics & Societies* (2011).

2. Lipovetsky (2011) and Horton (1993) are rare exceptions to this rule.
3. A decade or so later, Sergei Eisenstein would build his essay on laughing Bolsheviks around the same idea, presenting Soviet laughter "as a light weapon with lethal capacity used in a situation where the crushing offense of the tanks of social ire is excessive" (1969, 84).
4. This line—"We need Soviet Gogols and Shchedryns"—would be popularized again in 1952 when Georgii Malenkov (instead of Stalin) delivered the main speech to the nineteenth congress of the Communist Party. The slogan was quickly parodied in a rhymed joke: "We support laughter! But our Shedryns could be nicer. And our Gogols should lash out at somebody else!" (*My za smekh! No nam nuzhny podobree Shchedriny. I takie Gogoli, chtoby nas ne trogali*) (Melikhov 2009)
5. Halfin (2011), Hellbeck (2006), and Kharkhordin (1999) provide a useful analysis of various tools of discursive production of the Communist self in Soviet Russia.
6. In her study of Aleksandrov's films, Anna Wexler Katsnelson (2011) traces in great detail this erasure of laughter from Soviet musical comedies.
7. The expression "laughter kills" originally was used in 1930 by Lunacharskii in his essay on Swift (1965).
8. I discuss the early Soviet preoccupation with potential threats of the outside world in my essay (Oushakine 2004).
9. On portrait versus mask on the Soviet stage, see Shklovsky (1941).

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