

Laughter under Socialism: Exposing the Ocular in Soviet Jocular

Serguei Alex. Oushakine

What do we need, comrades? We need the broad masses laughing as much as possible. We need laughter so badly, it is enough to make you weep. . . . We need laughter. Thoughtful, serious laughter without the slightest grin.

—Nikolai Erdman and Vladimir Mass, *A Meeting about Laughter*, 1933

Laughter can be different. Yet, such terms as “ours” [*nash*] and “theirs” [*ne nash*]—trite as they are—have no difficulty in finding their proper counterparts. . . . “Our laughter” and “their laughter” are not mere abstractions. The two are separated by a gulf of different social reasoning [*propast' raznogo sotsial'nogo osmysleniia*].

—Sergei Eisenstein, *The Bolsheviks Are Laughing*, 1930s

In early 1953, the Leningrad Theatre of the Estrada and the Miniature—a restrained Soviet cousin of *The Second City*—presented its new show. The title of the show, borrowed from a poem by Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826), sheepishly conveyed the theater’s main concern: “Smeiat’sia, pravo, ne greshno” (Laughing Is Not a Sin, Really). The dilemma that underlay this apologetic framing was dramatized in the show’s opening routine: an angry viewer stormed from the audience onto the stage and viciously interrogated a surprised actor:

—What do you think you are doing? A comedy show? We’ve made such huge progress, we’ve achieved such colossal success, and you are laughing!?

—Yes, but we are not focusing on the success, we are focusing on the shortcomings . . .

—This is even worse! We have all these shortcomings to deal with, and you are having fun!¹

The mounting tension was followed by comic relief: the angry viewer, quickly removing his wig and mask, revealed himself to be none other

Epigraphs taken from Nikolai Erdman and Vladimir Mass, “A Meeting about Laughter,” *A Meeting about Laughter: Sketches, Interludes, and Theatrical Parodies*, trans. and ed. John Freedman (New York, 1995), 167–68; Sergei Eizenshtein, “Bol’sheviki smeiuetsia. (Mysli o sovetskoi komedii),” *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v shesti tomakh* (Moscow, 1969), 5:82, 83.

1. Elizaveta Uvarova, *Arkadii Raikin* (Moscow, 1986), 128.

than the theater's leading star, the immensely successful actor and stand-up comedian Arkadii Raikin (1911–1987).

Famous for his understated sarcasm and his instantaneous transformations on stage, Raikin had created an impressive gallery of negative—yet unmistakably Soviet—characters, including, as a 1960 article in *Pravda* noted, “bureaucrats, excessive risk avoiders [*perestrakhovshchiki*], idlers [*tuneiadtsy*], loafers [*bezdel'niki*], philistines [*obyvateli*], and individuals indifferent to the nation's concerns.”² For more than half a century, Raikin's sketches, plays, and films defined the standards for Soviet humor and satire.³ His success seemed universal; he became a mandatory item on the program of the official concerts in the Kremlin and performed his routines for every secretary general of the Communist Party, including Iosif Stalin. At the same time, his jokes became a part of contemporary folklore. Although he was no dissident, for many years he kept in his repertoire a sketch written for him by the denounced Mikhail Zoshchenko. He also helped to develop and to popularize the literary talent of Mikhail Zhvanetskii, who would become a key satiric writer of the 1970s–1980s.⁴

In a sense, Raikin provides an ideal point of entry to this cluster on comic genres under socialism. As both a symbol and a symptom of Soviet laughter, Raikin personifies the central themes discussed by the contributors to this volume and parallels each of their key figures. Like Grigori Aleksandrov, Raikin enjoyed incredible official success. Like Nikolai Lebedev, he suffered from political censorship and cultural pressure and learned how to get his message across without saying much. Like Sergei Kurekhin, he turned himself into a one-man-show, blurring the boundaries between different media and contradictory contexts.

There is another—structural—similarity, too. Perhaps in the most concentrated form, Raikin's art embodied the key social problem of Soviet jocularly. Despite his popular and official success, until his very death, Raikin retained an apologetic tone in his defense of the comic art, explaining again and again the importance of laughter for building socialism.⁵ Similar apologetic complaints about the shaky status of humor and satire in Soviet culture run through the entire socialist period.⁶ Psychological rationalizations of sorts, these laments revealed the unspoken truth about Soviet laughter: laughing might not have been a sin, *really*, but neither was it perceived as an obvious virtue.

It is easy to dismiss these laments as the half-hearted attempt of privileged (but constrained) artists to retain a mask of dignity in a situation

2. “Boevoe iskusstvo estrady,” *Pravda*, 15 December 1960.

3. Raikin's routines and plays are available on several DVDs: *My s vami gde-to vstrechalis'* (1954), *Liudi i manekeny* (1974), *Volshebnaia sila iskusstva* (1970).

4. Arkadii Raikin, *Vospominaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1993).

5. For details, see his memoirs, *ibid.*, 410–16.

6. For instance, in 1974, Sergei Mikhalkov, another heavyweight of the officially sanctioned satire, lamented in *Pravda* about the striking underdevelopment of Soviet comic genres, appealing: “We need films, books, plays, and pamphlets that will ruthlessly ridicule [*besposhchadno osmeivaiushchie*] everything that is absurd [*nelepoe*], alien [*chuzhdoe*], incompatible with our ideals and the norms of our social morality.” Sergei Mikhalkov, “Dozhivem do ponedel'nika,” *Pravda*, 23 March 1974.

where cultural production in general and cultural critique in particular were subjected to strict state control. And for many scholars of Soviet culture, the social importance of humor and satire under socialism would be limited to just that. Taken as a whole, Soviet comic genres are often used to exemplify the regime's failure to produce its own forms of cultural critique—neither sympathetic and forgiving (as in humor), nor corrective and biting (as in satire). Some critics find the very idea of searching for “cheer in a cheerless land” to be an impossible project to begin with.⁷ Other researchers, refusing to draw any distinction between the political and the aesthetic, prefer to ignore artistic forms publically available in the Soviet Union altogether. Equating the artistic legacy of “socialist realism” with several decades of “cultural wasteland,” they focus almost exclusively on uncensored literature and underground art.⁸

This cluster takes a different approach. The contributors are not interested in viewing artistic discourses that openly circulated in the USSR as mere aesthetic variations of the regime's propagandistic clichés; but neither are their articles particularly motivated by some archeological desire to unearth subversive meanings that might (or might not) have been smuggled under the cover of ideologically sound cultural forms. Instead, these articles approach the laments about the problematic state of Soviet laughter seriously by exploring the complicated artistic practices that animated the ossified frameworks of socialist culture from within. The importance of censorship is not denied here. But the discussion about the role of cultural pressure is transposed—from the field of ideological critique to the field of aesthetic analysis. In their essays, the contributors replace a traditional fascination with the stifling impact of ideological values with a close scrutiny of the lexicon of expressive means that these values (and constraints) generated.⁹

This perception of censorship as productive and enabling is, at least to some extent, determined by the genre in question. The comic form, as Iurii Tynianov reminds us, is by its very nature derivative, being profoundly determined by the structure that it ridicules.¹⁰ The articles also share an important theoretical approach that determines their understanding of cultural production. As the contributions demonstrate, artists' structural dependency on socially available symbolic forms did not necessarily lead to the automatic reproduction of contexts and messages that were *originally* associated with these forms. Mocking or serious, distorted or not, citationality, as Jacques Derrida famously noted, is always duplication, if not duplicity. The iterability of the sign, its very reproducibility, creates

7. David MacFadyen, *The Sad Comedy of El'dar Riazanov: An Introduction to Russia's Most Popular Filmmaker* (Montreal, 2003), 6.

8. See, e.g., Janet G. Tucker, “Introduction,” in Janet G. Tucker, ed., *Against the Grain: Parody, Satire, and Intertextuality in Russian Literature* (Bloomington, 2002), 15.

9. Lev Losev, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*, trans. Jane Bobko (Munich, 1984). For a detailed discussion, see my essay “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat,” *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2002): 191–214.

10. See, e.g., Iurii N. Tynianov, “Dostoevskii i Gogol' (k teorii parodii),” *Literaturnaia evoliutsia: Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow, 2002), 300–339.

“the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting.”¹¹ By focusing on the changing contexts of recognizable signs and structures, these articles present Soviet laughter as a site of contesting interpretative and formal strategies, “unfinalizable,” in the language of Mikhail Bakhtin, and often unpredictable.¹² What may seem like a “cultural wasteland” in one conceptual framework can become a rather rich cultural soil in another.

Anthropologically speaking, such a shift in evaluation of cultural forms is not unusual. More than forty years ago, Mary Douglas observed that the status of cultural waste is determined not by its intrinsic quality but by the grids of social classifications and spatial typologies that shape the vision of the group that passes judgment.¹³ Apart from the change in the grids of cultural perception, the shift in evaluation is also motivated by a different historical sensibility. The adoption of an aesthetic perspective on the comic genres of socialism allows the authors of this cluster to illuminate the profound confusion among Soviet cultural producers regarding the content and status of laughter under socialism—a confusion that previous, ideologically driven, studies have failed to notice and address.

This introduction is not the place for a detailed history of various Soviet attempts to solve the riddle of the comic, therefore I will mention only a few key cases to establish the general historical background. In his notes for the first congress of Soviet writers, Zoshchenko summarized the extensive debates on Soviet satire that had taken place in the 1920s and 1930s. As he put it, some critics in these discussions “talked themselves into 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 favorable. This mushy [*rykhlaia*] formula has remained not entirely clarified ever since.”¹⁴ This lack of definite clarification is symptomatic. Studies of the comic, from the 1917 revolution until perestroika, are marked by a similar inability to provide conclusive answers about the aims, motives, and intended effects of socialist laughter.

The perennial laments about the absence of the proper Soviet humor and satire were closely linked with a fundamental uncertainty about the social function and importance of the comic under socialism. Thus, Aleksandrov, the film director largely responsible for shaping the canon of Soviet musical cine-comedy, recalled that the task of inventing the new

11. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982), 320.

12. On Bakhtin and unfinalizability (*nezavershennost'*), see my essay “Vne nakhodimosti: Bakhtin kak chuzhoe svoe,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 3 (2006): 73–86.

13. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, 2002).

14. Mikhail Zoshchenko, “Osnovnye voprosy nashei professii,” *Rasskazy, povesti, fel'etony, teatr, kritika: 1935–1937* (Leningrad, 1937), 379–80. Recollecting a public debate about Soviet satire in 1930, Lilia Brik noted in her diary how critics such as Vladimir Blum insisted that people should write complaints directly to the law enforcement institutions instead of writing satirical stories. Lilia Brik, *Priustrastnye rasskazy* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2003), 197. See also the coverage of the debate in E. G., “Nuzhna li nam satira? Na dispute v politekhnicheskome muzee,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 13 January 1930.

genre in the early 1930s had left him totally perplexed. The fundamental questions—“Nad chem smeiat'sia? Vo imia chego smiat'sia?” (What should we laugh at? What should we laugh for?)—lacked any precedents or answer keys to follow.¹⁵ In his writings from the 1930s, Sergei Eisenstein expressed a similar feeling: “Do we have our own laughter? We will have it. But what kind of laughter will it be?”¹⁶ Georgii Malenkov might have popularized the phrase “We need Soviet Gogol's and Shchedrins,” only in 1952 in his report to the nineteenth congress of the Communist Party. However, this affirmative desire for (more) humor and satire in Soviet life was a common feature of artistic discussions during all of Soviet history.¹⁷ Every decade witnessed a major attempt to tackle Soviet laughter—be it a search for the essence of the socialist fable (*basnia*), or for the specifics of the socialist feuilleton, or for the structure of the Soviet comedy, or for the key parameters of the art of Soviet political caricature.¹⁸

The dominant Marxist trend of perceiving social relations in terms of conflict and struggle largely determined the trajectory of these searches for the comic. Diverse thinkers—from Bakhtin to Eisenstein, from Mikhail Kol'tsov to Anatolii Lunacharskii—emphasized the functional aspect of laughter, viewing it first and foremost as a form of power. However, when Lunacharskii optimistically promised in 1920 that “We will laugh,” describing laughter as a great force (*sila*) that should be “channeled in a right direction,” he could have hardly expected that it would take at least ten years to begin the specification of that direction.¹⁹ The effort to do so was led by the special Commission on Researching Satirical Genres (KSAZh), created by the Academy of Sciences in 1930 on Lunacharskii's suggestion. Not surprisingly, the Commission proved to be largely ineffective: it conducted only eight meetings and published only a few books before its status was downgraded from a research unit to a mere book depository office (*kabinet po sboru literatury*) in 1932.²⁰

Lunacharskii's own book-length project, *The Social Role of Laughter*, also failed to materialize. Yet we can get a sense of his general direction by looking at his last speeches and publications. As if blending the theories of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Lunacharskii associated laugh-

15. Grigorii Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino* (Moscow, 1976), 165.

16. Eizenshtein, “Bol'sheviki smeiuetsia,” 80.

17. See Georgii Malenkov's “Otchetnyi doklad XIX s'ezda VKP,” *Pravda*, 6 October 1952, 6. As early as 1925, S. Gusev complained in his article in *Izvestiia* that “we've yet to find our own Soviet Gogol's and Saltykovs [-Shchedrins].” S. Gusev, “Predely kritiki,” *Izvestiia*, 6 May 1927, quoted in Evgenii Ozmitel', *Sovetskaia satira* (Moscow, 1964), 11. See also Ia. El'sberg, *Nasledie Gogolia i Shchedrina i sovetskaia satira* (Moscow, 1954).

18. For a good concise review and extensive bibliography, see Ozmitel', *Sovetskaia satira*. See also N. Gorchakov, “Komediia v sovetskom teatre,” *Pravda*, 19 April 1938, 4; V. Frolov, *O sovetskoi komedii* (Moscow, 1954); D. Zaslavskii, “O satiricheskikh zhurnalakh,” *Pravda*, 5 September 1956, 4; D. Nikolaev, “V zashitu spetsifiki satiry,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 2 (1961): 47–56; I. Eventov, “Ostroumie skhvatyvaet protivorechie,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 6 (1973): 116–34; I. Eventov, *Sila sarkazma: Satira i iumor v tvorchestve Gor'kogo* (Leningrad, 1973).

19. Anatolii Lunacharskii, “Budem smeiat'sia,” *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow, 1964), 3:76.

20. For details, see commentaries in *ibid.*, 8:622.

ter with two major social effects—obedience and cohesion, on the one hand, and distinction, on the other. Emphasizing the mocking, ridiculing, and scoffing forms of the comic—Eisenstein would later call this “a militant humor [*voinstvuiushchii iumor*]”—Lunacharskii 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*].”²¹ A collective laugh, Lunacharskii suggested, has both a bonding and a distancing effect. Laughter-for-oneself, the bonding “laughter of fellowship,” in other words, goes hand in hand with the laughter-at-others used as “a way of establishing distance.”²² Mockery becomes a tool for articulating “a mutual contradistinction” among classes.²³

This interplay between unity and distinction, unleashed by laughter, is another common theme in all three articles in this cluster. However, unlike for Lunacharskii, for the contributors to this volume the assumed stability of social distinctions—us versus them, our laughter versus their laughter—is far from obvious. Anna Wexler Katsnelson, for instance, convincingly documents the fluidity of the content of Soviet laughter, while Yuri Leving and Alexei Yurchak explore in detail how the dominant conventions of the comic became the object of open ridicule.

The obscure object of Soviet laughter even stupefied the usually eloquent Bakhtin. His 1940 essay on “Satire”—written as an entry for a volume of the *Soviet Literary Encyclopedia* but never published—is a good case in point. Bakhtin’s discussion of the culture of laughter lost its conceptual clarity as soon as he reached the Soviet present. His lucid analysis disintegrated—perhaps intentionally—into a mushy mumble:

For a satirist, the present is totally decomposed into the past and the future, with no place for any neutral and autonomous present. Today’s reality is a process where the past is dying and the future is emerging. . . . Ambassadors [*polpredy*] of the future are always present in satire in this or that form; therefore this future often has utopian features. Only Marxism-Leninism revealed the future scientifically, as a necessity. For us, the future has become a reality-in-the-making [*rastushchaia deistvitelnost'*]. It was born and it matures in *our* reality of today. Therefore in no way can the depiction of our contemporary reality be conceived of in negative images. The dying past in our reality is impotent, occupying a negligible space. Still, because of its presence, Soviet satire must exist.²⁴

21. Anatolii Lunacharskii, “O smekhe,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8:533, 534. See also his “O satire,” *ibid.*, 8:185–87. Eizenshtein, “Bol’sheviki smeitsia,” 84.

22. Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, 1962), 235.

23. Lunacharskii, “O smekhe,” 8:535.

24. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Satira,” *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh* (Moscow, 1996), 5:34. Emphasis in the original. Grigorii Aleksandrov, whose aesthetics would be in complete opposition to Bakhtin’s, expressed a similar understanding of satire: “Our comedy should not only laugh [at vestiges of the past]. It should provide some fun [*byt' veseloi*], too. Satire, biting humor, and caricature are weapons against the obsolete [*otzhivaiushchii*] that prevents us from moving ahead. But merriment and cheerfulness [*vesele, zhizneradostnost'*] are

This recognized need for a carefully maintained balance between what Bakhtin called *osmeivaiushchaia satira* (laughing at) and *smeiushaiasia satira* (laughing with), eventually took the shape of a particular genre.²⁵ A distinctively “different social reasoning” of Soviet laughter, emphasized by Eisenstein in the 1930s, evolved into a peculiar form of positive critique—the “favorable feuilleton” [*polozhitel'nyi fel'eton*], in which the corrective edge of traditional satiric forms was replaced with the pathos of (socialist) affirmation.²⁶

Taken as a form of comic narration, this favorable feuilleton was a complete failure—strikingly humorless and excessively didactic. Retrospectively, however, it had important negative value. As the epitome of Soviet comic genres, the favorable feuilleton—and the positive critique in general—indicates the analytic limitations of viewing Soviet cultural phenomena exclusively as discursive formations. In a similar vein, the authors of this cluster suggest that the work of Soviet laughter would remain misunderstood or simply ignored as long as the text-driven approach continues to enjoy its analytic monopoly. As an alternative, all three articles call attention to the role of the visual in tracing the peculiarities of the comic under socialism.²⁷ While the text often provided a streamlined narrative backbone to the comical performance, it was nonverbalized imagery that effectively undermined the ideological predictability of narrative canons, producing a situation of laughable incongruence. To put it differently: by focusing on the visual aspects of Soviet laughter, the cluster shows that the source of the Soviet comic was not so much *intra*-textual, as in traditional comedy, but *inter*-medial. It was the counterpoint of different performative media—textual versus visual, vocal versus gestural—that unleashed an important affective discharge, which might or might not have been intended in the original text.

To emphasize this point, I want to return—for the last time—to Raikin. A skillful practitioner of Soviet laughter, he clearly recognized the strategic role that visualization played in producing a comic effect. During his routines, the enforced (ideological) harmony of the text would quickly implode under the pressure of tacit but persistent bodily gestures and facial expressions. Stimulated by this parallel somatic narrative, the overall semantic discrepancy of the performance would result in an experience of *nesoobraznost'* (literally—*iconic dissonance, optical incompatibility*) (see figure 1). Raikin's recollections of his work with Zoshchenko are

a remarkable means [*sredstvo*] to affirm the new, a means that that can provoke inspiration in people.” Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino*, 205.

25. See, e.g., Mikhail Bakhtin, “L. E. Pinskii, ‘Dramaturgiia Shekspira. Osnovnye nachala,’” in Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 6:441. For a discussion of the binary “laughing with” versus “laughing at,” see James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York, 2005), 6–7; see also Highet's *Anatomy of Satire* for a detailed elaboration of this typology.

26. On “positive” humor, feuilleton, and comedy, see, e.g., I. Eventov, “Smekh—priznak sily,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 7 (1962): 33–34; Evgeniia Zhurbina, *Iskusstvo fel'etona* (Moscow, 1965), 62–65; V. Frolov, “Zametki o komedii,” *Pravda*, 26 January 1952, 2.

27. For a similar approach, see also Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, eds., *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (New Haven, 2008).



Figure 1. “Practicing a Visual Discord: Arkadii Raikin and His Mask.” From Adolf Beilin, *Arkadii Raikin* (Moscow, 1965).

quite useful in this respect. In his memoirs, the actor singled out a particular aspect of Zoshchenko’s narrative technique. The comic situation was created not by the usual unfolding of the story but by supplementing it with the gestures and stage setups that eroded the message of the text. As Raikin wrote: “The main task was to present the totally absurd rush of [Zoshchenko’s] character . . . as something natural and ordinary.” The actual narrative, in this sense, was simultaneously offset and occluded by the actor’s extensive facial miming, modulations of voice, and body movements.²⁸

Raikin was not entirely unique in achieving his comic effect by developing contrapuntal relations between message and speech, between narrative and behavior. Early Soviet culture contains plenty of similar ideas, methods, and practices. For example, in his texts on “conditional theater” Vsevolod Meyerhold insisted that the rhythmic structures of words and the plastic movements of bodies do not and should not coincide onstage. “Words are for the ear,” he wrote, “plasticity is for the eye.”²⁹ Viktor Shklov-

28. See Raikin, *Vospominaniia*, 325–26; see also Uvarova, *Arkadii Raikin*, 152.

29. Vsevolod Meierkhol’d, *O teatre* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 45. See also his *Agitspektakl’* (1923), in V. Meierkhol’d, *Stat’i, pis’ma, rechi, besedy. 1917–1939* (Moscow, 1968), 2:50–52.

skii also identified the discrepancy between an actor's words and gestures as a major source of the comic. In his writings on early Soviet theater, Shklovskii observed that "the laughable is . . . [caused by the] incongruity of mundane words and eccentric actions."³⁰ Finally, Iurii Tynianov pointed out a similar trend in literature, arguing that purposeful stylistic discordance in a text—achieved through the misaligning (*neviazka*) of images or the deliberate contrast of semantic levels—was the key mechanism in parody.³¹

It is impossible to say to what extent Raikin's method was directly influenced by this artistic and intellectual tradition.³² Crucially, however, his art reveals the fundamental significance of the optic supplementation for the production and performance of laughter under socialism.³³ Merging the visual with the verbal into a conflicting symbiosis, Raikin demonstrated that in the universe of censored culture, the main source of the comic may need to be located *outside* the text. Through emphatically visual performances, he exposed the ocular nature of his art of jocularit.

Following his lead, the authors of this cluster examine Soviet laughter first and foremost as an ocular phenomenon. Each article focuses on the way a particular visual strategy grafts itself onto a verbal narrative in order to significantly transform this narrative from within, without, however, altering its structure or consistency. The cinematic excess of Aleksandrov's *Radiant Path*, which Katsnelson analyzes in her article, affirmed the official message of socialist realism while simultaneously refuting it by laying bare the fantasmatic and illusory quality of its main assumptions. Lev-ing, in his genealogical study of Nikolai Lebedev's artistic contribution to Samuil Marshak's poem *Mister Twister*, demonstrates how intervisuality—the thinly veiled reference to the biography of a particular image—can transform illustration into an independent mini-plot with a playful story that could not have been articulated otherwise. Finally, Yurchak reveals a perestroika-era inversion of these strategies, in which Kurekhin built an improbable story using as his foundation the static and familiar imagery of Vladimir Lenin. Despite obvious differences, Kurekhin's prank produced an effect familiar from Aleksandrov's film and Lebedev's illustrations: the incommensurability of imagery and narrative resulted not in comic relief but in a state of confusion. All these cases celebrated visual and semantic discord, creating a situation of *nesoobraznost'*. In short, they all provoked a peculiar Soviet laughter that responded to incongruence with a muted expression of controlled bewilderment, "Laughing is not a sin. Or is it?"

30. Viktor Shklovskii, "Komicheskoe i tragicheskoe," *Gamburgskii schet (1914–1933)* (Moscow, 1990), 113.

31. Tynianov, "Dostoevskii i Gogol'," 304, 306. For a detailed elaboration of the same approach, see also Sergei Eizenshtein, "Komicheskoe," *Metod. Grundproblem* (Moscow, 2002), 420–31.

32. Raikin was keenly interested in Meyerhold's work; in 1925 the director even invited the young artist to work in his theater. Raikin, *Vospominaniia*, 114–25.

33. For a useful discussion on visual supplementation, see Rosalind C. Morris, "Photography and the Power of Images in the History of Power: Notes from Thailand," in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and South East* (Durham, 2009), 134–35.