

NEW LIVES OF OLD FORMS:

*ON RETURNS AND REPETITIONS IN RUSSIA*¹

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One ought to study the old form the way one studies a frog. A physiologist doesn't study a frog to become conversant in frogs' mating calls.

Viktor Shklovsky (1927)

On New Year's Eve, we'll sit in front of a Sony TV, drinking Absolut vodka as we watch Russian films and sing Russian songs. Of course, the film is a remake shot in 35-millimeter Kodak film and cost millions of American dollars. We're nostalgic, but we're not crazy.

Leonid Parfyonov,
Interview in *The New York Times* (1995) (Stacey)

A NEW CLOSURE

The two decades that have passed since the revolutions of 1989 have produced an interesting outcome. Many scholars seem to agree that unlike many revolutions of the past, the radical transformation undergone by the "Socialist bloc" produced no new concepts, no original social order, no novel mode of perception and representation. Both in their goals and in their language, the revolutions

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of the 1980s were restorative rather than revolutionary: “[their] shared ideology was one of restored normalcy, of a return to Europe” (Vachudova and Snyder 1).

The very term “transition,” borrowed from studies of south Europe and Latin America to provide key concepts for framing the changes in former socialist Europe, suggested the vision of a spatial shift aimed to finally bring the Eastern European archipelago out of its isolation from the democratic European mainland (Schmitter and Lynn, “Conceptual Travels” 173-85; Bunce 111-27). Political changes were seen as geographical changes: the “transition” was identified with “democratic waves” capable of carrying to the European East the democratic ideas and practices, the market economy and civil liberties of the European West (Schmitter and Lynn, “Conceptual Travels”; Schmitter and Lynn, “From an Iron Curtain” 965-78). This macro-view of political changes, however, left aside such crucial aspects as the role of historical experience in the process of such alterations, or the problem of compatibility of the “old” and the “new old” orders, or the questions concerning the ability of the individuals who grew up under the socialist system to accomplish such “reversals” and “returns.”

That “return to normalcy” rehashed yet another component of the original model of the political “transit” of the 1970s, a component that has attracted little attention so far. In post-Franco Spain, the “pact of forgetting” (“*el pacto de olvido*”) put an implicit ban on any debate regarding the repressions perpetrated by the authoritarian regime. A social accord, not historical justice, was perceived as the ultimate goal of post-authoritarian Spanish society. The fragility of the civil peace, the lack of trust in available historical documents, as well as a shared sense of collective guilt contributed to the decision of the Spanish society to leave the business of settling the historical scores to future generations.²

The Socialist camp’s “return” to the norm involved a “pact of forgetting,” too. The trope of transition not only offered a precise “roadmap” (as well as an ideological scheme) for development, but also it marked any attempts to retain or reproduce the elements of the not-so-distant past as an unhealthy attachment to one’s own historical trajectory and individual biography (“path dependence”).³ Through various forms of “censorship” (exclusion, objectification, localization, etc.), the socialist experience was rendered inaccessible, both socially and symbolically. Personal biographies were displaced and marginalized by such

² For more detail see: Preston; Aguilar, “Justice, Politics and Memory”; Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia*; Davi; Beevor.

³ See Hedlund; on the erasure of socialist experience see Dunn.

social institutions as the House of Terror in Budapest or the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland (see for example Fuller and Zhurzhenko). In 1996 Ralf Dahrendorf, a prominent political scientist, drew a Spenglerian line under the political and geographical consequences of the “transition”: “[the] decline of the East is final, and a shift of Europe toward the West is irreversible” (Dahrendorf 161). The depressurization of the “closed” societies seemed a matter of social physics: the very liquidation of all the walls and barriers of socialism appeared to be enough to bring the “aerial space” of an entire social system back to the norm.

With some minor corrections, the same spatio-regressive perception of social changes can be traced in the Soviet society of the *perestroika* period: people looked for “points of return,” while the newly acquired “openness” was often represented through geographical images. The process of overcoming the isolation was seen extensively—as an opportunity to join a greater (“civilized”) community. The “transition” was perceived as a promise of a long-awaited reunification with ideas, practices and cultures that had been unavailable for decades. Some saw the new destination point in the community of Russian émigrés who left Russia after the revolution of 1917 and the Second World War (“Russia Outside Russia”). Others were less nostalgic and more cosmopolitan, preferring to talk about “our common *European* home.” The key importance of those spatial signposts had little to do with their political realizability and reasonability; rather it was the effect of symbolic positioning that this spatial perception of transition produced. Geographical metaphors of reunification displaced the process of the internal “depressurization” into an *external* environment, and—simultaneously—endowed this radical socio-political transformation with a semblance of tangibility.

As we all know by now, a genuine depressurization of the late post-Soviet society—a genuine return to this or that *common* home—never happened. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, spatial metaphors of socio-political transformations lost their symbolic attractiveness; in its Russian variant, the “transit” turned out to be a geographical dead end, a form of a new closure. The context and direction of a common “path” ceased to be obvious. The geographical metaphors of openness to the external world were replaced by an anxiety about internal processes. Practices and rhetoric of withdrawal became a norm. Political uncertainty was interpreted as a spatial confusion: for instance, Tatyana Zaslavskaya, a leading sociologist of the time, explained that for her, the “point of inde-

terminacy” that Russia reached in the fall of 1993, during the time of a major parliamentary crisis, was the main reason for organizing the annual international symposium of leading social scientists around a symptomatic title “Whither will Russia move?”⁴ In his turn, in 1995, Mikhail Gorbachev, ever heedful of his audience’s expectations, entitled his latest book addressed to his foreign readers *The Search for a New Beginning: Developing a New Civilization* (Gorbachev; see also Alekseeva 54-66 and *Slavic Review*). Toward the end of the nineteen-nineties, the need to renew the search for a “new beginning” inside Russia had become still more pressing, as the war in Yugoslavia and the enlargement of NATO eastward, by all accounts, had finally voided the metaphors of “external reunification” of any validity or perspective.⁵ In 1998 Grigory Yavlinsky, with an unusual passion, revealed to the readers of *Foreign Affairs* the existence of a direct link between NATO enlargement and the disappointment of the Russian populace:

The most important message of NATO expansion for Russians, however, is that the political leaders of Western Europe and the United States do not believe that Russia can become a real Western-style democracy within the next decade or so. In their eyes, Russia, because of its history, is a second-class democracy. Perhaps this is understandable. The combination of Chechnya (an arbitrary war in which Russia unnecessarily killed 100,000 people), the collapse of the Russian army, failed economic reforms, a semi-criminal government, and Yeltsin’s unpredictability has given the West enough justification to conclude that Russia, for the time being, cannot be a dependable partner and that NATO expansion should therefore continue.

Ironically, if the United States explained its push for NATO expansion in these terms to the Russian people, they would at least understand why the alliance is expanding and respect the West for its honesty. But when the West says to Russians: “Russian democracy is fine, Russian markets are fine, Russia’s relationship with the West is fine, and therefore NATO is expanding to Russia’s borders,” the logic does not work, leaving the Russian people and their leaders bewildered and bitter. This resentment will only be exacerbated if the West continues this two-faced policy. (Yavlinsky 77)

The local unacceptability of spatial tropes and promises of “return to Europe” was complemented in Russia by a number of unequivocal interpretive gestures coming from Europe itself. The same Ralf Dahrendorf, in a public lecture delivered at Harvard in October of 1996, reminded everyone that the notion of

⁴ The first symposium took place two months after the events of October 1993, when the Yeltsin government decided to shell the building where the oppositional parliament resided. Since then, this sociological forum has been an annual event, though the title of the conference went through a series of alterations. In 2003, the symposium decided to give up the trope of indeterminacy, and focused instead on “outcomes of societal transformation.” All the subsequent forums have been called “The Paths of Russia.” On the history of the first symposium see: Zaslavskaya.

⁵ For more on the shift towards internal tropes and problematic see Dubin, *Intellektual'nye gruppy* 93-94.

“Central Europe” from its outset had been conceived of as a political and geographical *antithesis* to the Soviet Empire.⁶ Similarly, representatives of “Central Europe” left no doubt that in their view any “return” of Russia—however evolved and modified—would be undesirable. In 1999, during the celebration of the admission of three Eastern European countries into NATO, Janos Martonyi, Hungarian Foreign Affairs Minister, stressed in an interview with *The New York Times* that “[i]t has been our manifest destiny to rejoin those with whom we share the same values, interests and goals.” When the newspaper’s correspondent asked three Eastern European foreign affairs ministers whether they could ever envisage Russia as a NATO member-state, the ministers’ initial response was that of utter perplexity. After a long and awkward pause, Mr. Martonyi, one of the three ministers present, summarized their reaction in the following terms: “[s]ilence is your answer” (Perlez).

This rhetorical shrinking of available spatial opportunities, I suggest, has played an important role in defining perspectives and visions of the future in Russia. Without going into a detailed analysis of historical and political reasons behind a new edition of socio-political closure, in what follows I want to demonstrate how this perceived experience of being at a dead-end was reflected and represented by various discursive communities in Russia. I argue that the general epistemological conservatism, typical for the post-socialist “transition,” taken together with the imagined or experienced feeling of radically limited spatial choices, gave rise to a series of interesting symbolic shifts. An urgent search for a “new beginning,” a perceived state of semantic “indeterminacy” and “cognitive vacuum,”⁷ a recognition of the loss of all meaningful bearings was often

⁶ In his talk Dahrendorf cited British historian Timothy Garton Ash, an active proponent of the idea of “Central Europe.” In 1986, in an article published in *The New York Review of Books*, Ash insisted that “Central Europe” had come “back”—it was back, above all, as an alternative to the Soviet Empire based on “lies, violence, the atomization of society.” The idea of “Central Europe,” in Ash’s opinion, could signify the beginning of a “process of differentiation” of Europe’s East with regards to the totalitarian empire. In this case the limited sovereignty of “Finlandization” was opposed to the model of “Ottomanization,” which presupposed the existence of diverse national communities and forms of self-governance within the framework of an empire incapable of exacting any kind of effective dictate. See: Ash. On “Finlandization” and “Ottomanization” see, for example, Hirst, 112-35. See also: Dahrendorf, 161.

⁷ For a discussion of the “cognitive vacuum” in Russia see Diligenskii 8. See also Pantin and Lapkin, who maintained that at the end of the last century “the Russian society, both its elite and the majority of its population,” found themselves “in a state of indeterminacy, having to make a choice among various value systems, and the trajectories that these systems imply.” Mark Urnov, the president of the *Ekspertiza* foundation, also suggested that one of the fundamental problems that the Russian society faced was “the absence of agreement regarding basic, dominant values” (Tumarkina, 15).

represented as a disintegration of speech, as a deficiency of symbolic forms that could no longer express essential qualities of the current condition. The absence of comprehensive cognitive “maps” capable of representing the trajectory of development led to a pronounced preoccupation with the domain of minutiae, with tangible yet fragmented context. Also, this “being at a dead end” precipitated a move from the symbolism of space to the symbolism of time: “geography” gave place to “history.”

In my view, this dynamic of the Soviet society’s depressurization, this “being at a dead end,” in an unexpected way has underscored the importance of what Jacques Lacan dubbed a “symbolic function” in the process of formation of individual and group identities. In the psychoanalyst’s view, the symbolic order—taken to signify both the *vocabulary* of accessible symbols and a hierarchically organized *structure* (order) of symbols and social positions that go with them—“provides the form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being” (Lacan 1993, 179). The “dead-end situation” that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in many ways led to a condition in which a search for adequate symbolic forms was supplanted by the recycling of prefabricated symbolic constructs. The indeterminacy of language and subject positions that this language failed to describe would be overcome through the restoration of limits and borders familiar from previous experience. Partially, this recycling of the Soviet social/symbolic order was facilitated by the absence of a Russian version of a “pact of forgetting” regarding the Soviet past; yet to a large extent this return to the Soviet symbolic legacy was sanctioned and legitimized by an active redeployment of Soviet aesthetics in multiple “retro-projects” delivered by Russian television in the second half of the nineteen-nineties.

What is crucially important about this repopulation of the ready-made forms borrowed from the recent past, however, is not the nostalgic tonality with which these forms have traditionally become associated. More than anything else, what is essentially important is the *formal* habitual nature of these symbols, that is to say their ability to evoke the effect of social and symbolic recognition. To put it differently: the second life of a symbolic system is motivated not so much by historical or political motivations, but rather by the structural and communicative predicaments of that period. The notion of the signifier used by Lacan in his description of the symbolic function is not accidental, of course: the term emphasizes the structural, form-producing function, relatively independent from the content (the “signified”) that could be associated with this form.

I argue that such a form-driven approach allows us to better understand the chains of signifiers through which the post-Soviet subject becomes attached (again) to the Soviet past. Also, and perhaps more importantly, this approach might provide us with a more nuanced picture of the process that resulted in a new self-withdrawal. A new state of isolation might look different if we perceive current deployments of old signifiers not so much as a bad diachronic joke of the nostalgia for bygone Soviet days, but rather as a synchronic reflection of the state of a post-Soviet symbolic (dis)order, that is to say, as a historically specific state of a discursive field in which symbolic forms of the past have been turned into objects of complicated strategies of symbolic recycling in a situation where signs able to adequately represent a new (post-Soviet) situation and new (non-Soviet) experience were absent or unavailable.

In what follows, I will attempt to show that this state of “new isolation” has its own internal logic. The fragmented perception of the present and the regression toward the cultural forms of the past that are so characteristic of post-Soviet Russia have a lot in common with the process of linguistic aphasia. In the type of symbolic production that I discuss below, semantic paralysis—one that manifests itself in a futile search for a “new beginning,” for instance—is overcome through an endless exploitation of the formal potential of ready-made symbolic structures and forms. Before I discuss my materials, I will briefly outline the most crucial features of the aphasic behavior.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the term “aphasia” has been used to describe a speech disorder⁸ caused by damage inflicted upon a certain part of the brain (see Forrester 15, Luria, *Traumatic Aphasia* 17-26). There are, however, other, non-physiological approaches to studying aphasia.⁹ For example, in his phenomenological treatise on symbolic forms, Ernst Cassirer observes that “the theory of aphasia took a definite direction, leading toward the universal problem of the symbol” (Cassirer 202-15). In the nineteen-forties, Roman Jakobson offered yet another version of the non-physiological approach to aphasia by conducting a thorough investigation of the structure of relationships that are formed at the intersection of the individual’s ability to speak and society’s ability to make available a historically specific repertoire of discursive practices. In this structural approach, aphasia, then, reflects a combination of two crucial

⁸ Translated from the Greek, “aphasia” means “inability to speak.”

⁹ For a detailed analysis of various types of aphasia, go to Roman Jakobson’s classical essay “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances”. On aphasia and symbolization see Cassirer 202-15; see also: Doody, 285-303. On the history of aphasia studies see Greenberg.

processes: the disintegration of speech is paralleled (“compensated”) here by a regression to earlier stages of discursive fluency (Jacobson, *Studies* 13).

Taken as a social—rather than purely linguistic—phenomenon, aphasia is interesting not because of its indexing of the *individual’s* symbolic dysfunction. What is crucial for my discussion is the shortage of *socially available* expressive means that aphasia points to. Aphasia manifests itself as a discursive paralysis of sorts—Jacobson himself called it “the ‘frozen’ beginning stage” (Jakobson, *Child Language* 15), at which the already formed desire to communicate is not yet complemented by the ability to communicate *something*. Expressivity is devoid of expressions here.

In other words, the very condition of aphasia can be seen as a symbolic analogy to the social “point of indeterminacy,” a specifically verbal “representation of the absence of representation” (Green 226). At the same time, the loss of one’s ability to *express* adequately this or that set of ideas becomes compensated in aphasia with various “symbolic substitutions” (Jakobson, *Studies* 39). The inability to select an appropriate signified for a phenomenon/object, for example, can be overcome by an active description of the *environment* surrounding that object. The meaning of a given object is metonymically displaced onto other objects and signifieds. As Jacobson put it, within this linguistic behavior, “the narrative moves from one object to an adjacent one on paths of space and time or of causality; to move from the whole to the part and vice versa is only a particular instance of this process” (Jakobson, “Marginal Notes” 310). In expressive aphasia, the search for adequate means of expression is limited to an active creation of a vocabulary consisting of symbols-surrogates. Not infrequently, the shortage of one’s own discursive abilities is supplanted by a thorough elaboration of symbolic forms produced in the previous stages of a development, be it individual or collective.

Following Jacobson, I will be using the term “post-Soviet aphasia” to describe a symbolic production that combines the disintegrated ability of a discursive field to maintain an adequate interconnection between signifiers and signified, with multiple symbolic substitutions, as well as regressions to the forms of the past. The term “aphasia,” then, will designate a two-fold phenomenon in which discursive losses are linked with discursive compensations (Jakobson, *Studies* 31).

This approach helps to reveal the structural core of the “new isolation” by drawing our attention to rhetorical devices and stylistic configurations that

resulted in being at a dead end. In the first section of my essay I trace how the state of social indeterminacy has become associated in the late 1990s with a crisis of representation and identity. In the second part, I rely on several visual projects to show how this symbolic deficiency of language and subjectivity has found an expressive outlet in the active utilization of contextual and interpretational frameworks of the past. Different as they are, these materials are, nonetheless, structured by the very same principles of substitutive symbolization, demonstrating how a somewhat accidental attachment to symbolic structures of the past gradually evolved into a dominant form of cultural reproduction in post-socialist Russia.

BORROWED LANGUAGE: WITH/OUT WORDS

Among the questions that every new regime or movement tries to solve in the process of gaining recognition is the question of self-expression—or, more precisely, the question of finding a distinct linguistic style, distinct linguistic sensitivity. Social changes thus manifest themselves as discursive changes, as changes of and in language, linguistic structures and discursive practices (see for example Krongauz 18). Correspondingly, the emergence of a new political, cultural, economic or social subject is accompanied by an establishment of a “verbally constituted consciousness” (Volosinov 15), which is framed by historically specific “limits and forms of the *sayable*” (Foucault 59). Therefore, socio-political changes can be approached through the analysis of the transformation of “differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions” that has become available to a “discoursing subject” within the discursive field under construction (Foucault 58).

Historians of Soviet Russia have long been aware of such an interrelationship between social and linguistic changes. Nikolai Marr, a linguist whose theory of language for a long time dominated Soviet linguistic policy and Soviet linguistics, emphasized in 1931 that “along with construction of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics there is a new linguistic construction taking shape. All the Union has turned into a laboratory of linguistic creativity...” (Marr 6). Andrei and Tat’yana Fesenko stressed that “the Russian language... has never had a period when the two stages of its development differed as drastically as did the before- and after-October stages” (Fesenko and Fesenki 100). Afanasii Selishchev scrupulously documented various tools and products of this “reinforced

speech activity among the population involved in the revolutionary movement” between 1917-1926 (Selishchev 23).

In contrast to early Soviet history, neither a “reinforced” speech activity of the population nor a linguistic “creativity” can be associated with the post-Soviet discursive regime. Moreover, development of the regime acquires a very different dynamic. As many Russian linguists pointed out, major innovations in the Russian language are apparently brought about by the dissolution of borders and hierarchies both among different sub-systems within the language and between the Russian language and foreign languages (see, e.g., Krysin 29 and Kostomarov 3-10). The linguistic “innovations,” in other words, are the results of active borrowing from formerly marginalized or ideologically opposed communities. Russian linguist Vladimir Shaposhnikov observed one interesting paradox brought about by these changes. As Shaposhnikov concluded in 1998, changes in public discourse produced an overall effect that could be termed “euphemistic,” i.e. aimed to conceal rather than make transparent the meaning behind the borrowed terms (Shaposhnikov 104, 144).¹⁰ As in aphasia, the words here do not reflect what they say and are used technically. Crucially, meaning here has not been lost—it just has not been manifested. Vladimir Kolesov, a historian of the Russian language, also registered an obvious tendency in individual and public discourses towards a “deformed speech” manifested by a predominance of “vague and unclear... discourse.” One question that this linguist asked was this: “Have our language skills deteriorated, or is it our language itself that rejects us as its ‘native speakers’?” (Kolesov 210)

Naturally, the scope of this perceived duality of the post-Soviet dysfunction of expressive abilities and means of expression, that is to say, this crisis of a speaking subject, which was accompanied by the crisis of the discursive field itself, was not limited to the linguistic sphere. Similar observations concerning the crisis of representation saturate Russia’s humanities and social sciences. For example, already in the early 1990s, Andrei Kovalev, a prominent art critic, underscored the disparity between the expressive forms and content of Russian postmodernist art. As Kovalev put it, in the West, postmodernism’s

¹⁰ Of course, in itself the euphemistic nature of public discourse in Russia could hardly be seen as distinctively post-Soviet. What does make it distinctive, though, is the close correlation between linguistic import on the one hand and increasingly euphemistic language as a result of this import on the other. Discussing the impact of the active borrowing of foreign terms, Shaposhnikov makes an interesting observation: despite a massive presence in Russian stores of new food products, the “food section” of popular Russian language hardly demonstrates any significant changes; the new foreign food items have not been discursively digested by an average Russian speaker (Shaposhnikov, 104).

violent privileging of the “new” over the “old,” taken together with extensive appropriation of codes and conventions of the past, was closely linked with the overall socio-economical context of global capitalism that renders the existence of any coherent “style” impossible. In contrast to that, Russian postmodernism, in Kovalev’s opinion, was realized “primarily as visual eclecticism or a form of representation of one’s personal experience of the horrors of a repressive culture; which is to say, the representation of violence perpetrated against oneself and one’s own, utterly dysfunctional, language” (Kovalev 21). Devoid of its representative function and social context, the (visual) language undergoes a radical transformation—from the tool for the manipulation of images into an object of manipulation itself.

I will discuss concrete examples of this approach later; here I want to highlight one general tendency that has been identified by Kovalev, namely, a clear lack of any attempt to associate cultural production with the production of distinctively *new* aesthetic forms. As a result, either newly created forms turn out to be a pretext for a mnemonic regression toward the old content (the “experience of the horrors of a repressive culture”), or the readily available material of the past is transformed into a motley collection of a postmodern bricoleur.

This post-Soviet crisis of representation (“fully inadequate language”) not only reveals the absence of new “points of departure,” but also it demarcates the changing function of the means of expression themselves. As Boris Dubin, a leading Russian sociologist of culture, concluded recently, *new* social groups (in the field of literary production) are being shaped not by “alternative” ideas or “new cultural models” but by “communicative *techniques*.”¹¹ To put it simply, for many social and artistic movements it is not the authorship of a created text (or its artistic novelty) that functioned as a basis for producing new social configurations; instead, it was the social life of the text, the forms and methods of its dissemination, its ability to *circulate* within the networks of informational and social exchange, that shapes groups and identities now. Similar to the linguistic behavior of the aphasiac, the effect and efficacy of communicative exchanges were achieved primarily by expanding the scope of available practices of recycling and re-combination of ready-made discursive tools, not through the expansion of the variety of the tools themselves. The shortage of available symbolic

¹¹ See: Boris Dubin, “Obzhivanie raspada,” Dubin, *Intellektual’nye gruppy* 121.

forms was overcome by practically limitless possibilities for their combination. Cultural production was overshadowed by cultural derivation.¹²

The analysis of a 1996 public poll on the popularity of various types of national identity in Russia conducted by political scientists Tat'iana Kutkovets and Igor Klyamkin outlined yet another version of this urge towards "technical" and/or "euphemistic" usage of available symbolic forms in post-Soviet Russia. Based on their research, the authors stated that by the second half of the 1990s, Russian society "has created a unified political language, understandable by and accessible to all, or almost all" citizens. This common language, however, demonstrated a peculiar quality. As Kutkovets and Klyamkin concluded, this discursive commonality is formal, not substantive: "different groups of the population used the same ideas to express different, if not contrary, meanings."¹³

The unity of language, therefore, did not guarantee the unity of meaning associated with that language. The habitual connection between the signifier (idea/sign) and the signified (meaning) disintegrates. "The unified, understandable and accessible" language turns out to be a language of familiar clichés, a language of ready-made forms with hollowed-out content. Creating the effect of a closed—"shared"—symbolic space, this "technical" speech, this discourse of empty signifiers, nonetheless provided its authors and users with symbolic tools able to mark their presence in the field of symbolic exchange.

Certainly, as a form of cultural production, this symbolic impotence of the new socio-political regime in Russia is hardly interesting (or new). This phenomenon, however, is an important symptom of the post-Soviet condition: it manifests a particular structural condition that brings together variously expressed forms of discursive lack ("disfigured speech," "inadequate language") and the type of subjectivity that is taking shape within this discursive field. What happens—subject-wise and discourse-wise—when such a (discursive) produc-

¹² It is remarkable that even the most interesting linguistic product of the 1990s—the so-called "new journalism" represented by such newspapers as *Nezavisimaja gazeta* (during 1990-92), *Segodnia* (1993-96), *Russkii Telegraf* (1997-98) and, to a degree, by the magazine *Itoги* (since 1996)—was formed as a conscious reaction to "the Soviet consciousness of the 1970s as reflected in language," as Oleg Proskurin puts it (Proskurin, 299). Speaking about Maksim Sokolov, the brightest representative, if not the originator, of the "new journalism style," Proskurin indicates that Sokolov's ironic play with the signifiers of the previous periods is efficient as long as the original context of these signifiers is still known. Without this knowledge, the subversive message of the style and the stylist is lost for the reader (see Proskurin, 304).

¹³ See Kutkovets & Klyamkin. 1519 people from different parts of Russia were polled; respondents were offered nine options (e.g. "Russia should be the state of Russian people" or "Russia should be a state whose strength and power is ensured by the increasing well-being of Russian people").

tion of subjectivity fails to produce a speaking subject? Does the absence of discursive forms adequate to the ongoing changes mean the absence of adequate forms of subjectivity, too? For many scholars of post-Soviet studies in the 1990s, the close link between inefficiency of discourse and problematic identity appeared to be a commonplace. For instance, the sociologist Nina Naumova, in her book about “relapsing” (*retsidiviruyushchaya*) modernization in current Russia, described the emergence of the “speechless culture” (*bezmolstvuyushchaya kul'tura*), in which silence was perceived as a reaction of the post-Soviet subject to the threatening instability of the social system, a reaction that was caused both by a lack of trust in the social system and by what Naumova defined as “a weak social identification” (Naumova 143, 162), i.e. a failure on the part of an individual to “recognize himself” in the already available repertoire of identities.

The same issue of social silence was discussed in the popular press. In 2000, *Novaya Rossiia*, a glossy—and short-lived—post-Soviet incarnation of the old propagandistic magazine *Sovetskii Soyuz*, ran a mini-discussion titled “The Silence of the Nineteen-Year-Olds.” One of the discussion’s participants defined the condition of the state of the young generation as “solipsism” developed in a situation of lacking the “constitutive backbone” (*stanovoi khrebet*). It would be impossible to find an exit from this solipsism, asserted the same source, “until we locate such a moral and ideological pillar, and begin building our lives around it”.¹⁴

Perhaps most vividly, this condition of discursive inefficiency made itself apparent in a prolonged and agonizing transformation of the new Russian national anthem. Unlike all the other republics of the Soviet Union, throughout its Soviet history the Russian Federation developed very little institutional symbolism of its own. For instance, the Federation had its own parliament (and a nominal government) but it never had its own branch of the Communist Party or the KGB. Nor did it have its own Russian anthem. In the 1990s, fighting for its independence from the Soviet Union (epitomized by Mikhail Gorbachev), the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic decided to change the situation and adopted “The Patriotic Song,” a melody by Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857), as the national anthem of the Russian Federation. The decision, however, was not unproblematic: the original text of the song glorified the Russian tsar and was hardly appropriate even for the post-communist

¹⁴ Kotov, 123; for responses to this article see *Novaya Rossiia*, vol. 1 (2000), p. 5.

situation. Numerous attempts to furnish Glinka's melody with an appropriate text produced no result. For almost a decade, public performances of the anthem were—literally—speechless. In the spring of 1999, Russia's parliament (the Duma) decided to give up ongoing searches for "a new beginning." A specially created committee of the Duma concluded that matching Glinka's complicated music with appropriate text proved to be impossible, and suggested a radical yet utterly predictable move: to replace a melody—which is "difficult even for simple reproduction," as Elena Muzulina, a member of the Duma from the Yabloko party, put it—with the less convoluted and more familiar melody of the Soviet anthem (composed by A.V. Aleksandrov in the 1940s).

The decision did not solve the problem with the lyrics, though: the old text of the anthem contained multiple references to Vladimir Lenin and the communist future. Vasili Shandybin, a deputy representing the Communist Party, was overcome with joy at this long-awaited event, and was reported as saying that "all the working people and the working class are impatiently looking forward to the situation when Russia will finally acquire its new [i.e. the Soviet] anthem," for "we were born with the words of this anthem and we shall die with them." "There is no reason to hurry with dying," a journalist commented sarcastically, "for there are no words so far" to die with (Korsunskaja).

Predictably, the new text for the old anthem did not materialize right away; new parliamentary elections pushed the discussion about symbols into the background. The debate was renewed only a year later, when in June of 2000 *Izvestia*, Russia's oldest and most important daily newspaper, ran a short opinion article in which the paper's columnist lamented the fact that, "due to some strange, almost irrational reason", the decade-long absence of an adequate national anthem did not result in any kind of serious "social uproar" (Ovchinnikov, "Poiu moe Otechestvo..."). This column stirred some emotions: in less than a month the newspaper's editorial office received a letter from the members of the *Spartak* Moscow soccer team that read:

We, the members of the Moscow-based Spartak club, its employees and its soccer-players who are also on the Russian national soccer team, have read your article. We want you to know that each and every member of the Spartak club shares your skepticism concerning the almost ten-year-old worldlessness of our country's national anthem. We do not want to remain silent, our heads bowed down like some captured guerilla fighters, when the Russian national anthem is performed at international and domestic sporting events. We agree with you that this is "the best way to lose a game before it began..." Both the Spartak Moscow club and its team want to sing the national anthem, but we are denied this opportunity.

Along with their letter (sent to the newspaper and the president of Russia), the soccer players produced two variants of the lyrics of the national anthem, one written to the Glinka melody, the other to that of Aleksandrov (Ovchinnikov, “Iz glavnoi”). Very quickly, the topic of “wordless anthem” became all the rage with the mass media, and in October, 2000, the issue of national symbols was discussed by leading politicians of the State Council (Chulaki). One month later, the State Council selected eight final proposals for the state anthem (music and lyrics included). Despite the available choices, the finalist was predictable: on December 8, 2000, the State Duma approved the old Soviet anthem as the state anthem of Russia. Sergei Mikhalkov—the same Soviet poet whose original lyrics for the Soviet anthem were edited by Stalin in 1943¹⁵—slightly amended the text, replacing Lenin with references to God, and getting rid of the utopian rhetoric.¹⁶ The desire for a proper anthem was satisfied by a virtual restoration of the old text. Expressive deficiency was compensated by stylistic regression. The fact that the list of the finalists was dominated by the works dating back to the past only reinforced the validity of the general rule: the rationale for this restoration was not really dictated by nostalgia for the Soviet period. Rather, it was the fundamental logic of post-Soviet symbolization that determined these constant gestures of return and repetition: the creation of the new was limited to the recycling of the old.¹⁷

For an anthropologist, these examples of discursive minimalism are a norm rather than a deviation. Periods of “wordlessness” have traditionally accompanied liminal processes, in the course of which both individuals and groups—“*liminars*,” as Arnold van Gennep called them (van Gennep 24)—change their social positions and functions, be it the birth of a child, a wedding ceremony or, say, a funeral. When describing a logic of transition from one structurally defined position (e.g. “adolescence”) to another (e.g. “adulthood”), the anthro-

¹⁵ For details see Mikhalkov.

¹⁶ 377 MPs (83.8%) voted in favor of the text, 53 (11.8%) voted against it, one MP (0.2%) abstained from voting, while nineteen MPs did not take part in the poll. More details are available here: <<http://www.yabloko.ru/Press/Votes/2000/1206gimn-vote.htm>>

¹⁷ Among the finalists there were only two melodies written specifically for the contest. One was created by Pavel Ovsiannikov, the head of the Russian Presidential Orchestra (that same orchestra recorded all the eight version of the national anthem submitted for the consideration of the State Council); the other was written by Alla Pugacheva, a major popstar (a Russo-Soviet edition of Cher), with even bigger cultural ambitions. Apart from these “political” finalists, the list included “God Save the Tsar” by Alexei Lvov, “Be Glorious!” and “The Patriotic Song” by Glinka, the Soviet anthem by Aleksandrov, and “Time, Forward!” by Georgy Sviridov. For details see “Vsia Rossiia zapot pod Pugachevu?”

pologist Victor Turner, for example, indicates that silence of the passenger is one of the main characteristics of this transition (Turner 103). The origin of this silence is structurally conditioned, i.e. the symbolic frame acquired by the individual during the stage that preceded the transition is to be forgotten/repressed, while the new associations, corresponding to the “post-transitional” stage, have not been formed yet. In this context, silence is an indicator of one’s agreement to deliberately “erase,” “suppress,” “jettison” one’s previous semiotic ability in order to be able to acquire new codes and a new social location.

The theory of aphasia makes it possible to trace the trajectory of a liminal subject in a situation where no “pact of forgetting” has ever been implemented, nor have new semantic codes adequate to the new condition come into being. In this particular case, the state of “wordlessness” is overcome through an activation of substitutive mechanisms of symbolization. At the same time, the state of symbolic and social indeterminacy often takes on the form of a discursive self-erasure: wordlessness manifests itself as de-personification.

I will illustrate this trend by the results of a survey I conducted in 1997-1998 canvassing 15-22-year-old Russians, high-school seniors as well as freshmen university students in the city of Barnaul (Altai Region, Siberian Federal District of Russia).¹⁸ The choice of this particular group was determined by the unique socio-cultural location of this generation. On the one hand, this is the first generation of Russians that was almost entirely formed during the post-socialist period. At the same time, the immediate environment of this generation (parents, school, public culture, architecture, etc.) continue to have significant traces of the Soviet life-style. I think it is precisely this borderline socio-cultural location that allows us to see the generation of transition both as a product of current changes and as a symbolic manifestation of these changes.

Interested in analyzing the relationship between the available social position (e.g. “the post-Soviet”) and the symbolic forms of its articulation, I asked young Siberians to describe three types of figures—the *Soviet* man/woman, the *new (rich) Russian* man/woman and the *post-Soviet* man/woman—and then either to define their own location in regard to any of these three types or to come up with their own models. By asking the young people to perform this act of imaginary identification, I wanted to see how/where this largely post-Soviet generation

¹⁸ The finalized corpus of textual materials for my analysis was comprised of 178 written interviews and surveys, in which 15-22-year-old Russians (81 males and 97 females) described their understanding of national and gender identity.

would (or would not) locate itself on the available symbolic map. The students' responses provide an opportunity to understand how the process of "unfinished depressurization" and the "dead-end situation" were perceived at the level of individual discourses in a provincial Russian city.¹⁹

In their descriptions of "New Russia" my Siberian informants differed but slightly from the Moscow-based researches quoted above. Here too, "New Russia" seemed to be a land of uncertainty. It is revealing, however, that their descriptions of this uncertainty were extremely general in character. Frequently, what seemed unclear were not *particular* elements, notions or concepts but "everything." It was not a concrete aspect of changes that was incomprehensible; it was the very post-Soviet context that made little sense:

New Russia – now that sounds bold. New Russia means that Russia has fallen into a deep pit and won't be able to get out of it any time soon. It is as if everything has fallen apart. And the little that's left is being pilfered, too (f-21).

New Russia is one confused country (f-21).

New Russia is an incomprehensible country with an incomprehensible economy and politics. It's on the same level as the developing world (m-17).

Some students tried to overcome the vacuity of New Russia by defining its spatial or temporal limits:

New Russia is a country with an unclear future, and a hazy and contradictory present (m-17).

New Russia is an eclectic commingling of various ideas, groups, and movements. New Russia is looking ahead, backwards and sideways. It is still choosing a new ideology, new rulers, and it is doing it very passively and slowly. There is a lot of old, a lot of new, and a lot of combinations of all sorts and kinds (f-18).

The very notion of New Russia is somewhere between the past and the future (f-17).

Frequently the vagueness of "New Russia" was treated as a symptom of one's *personal* alienation. But even in that case all references to the loss of identity would, as a rule, be devoid of any detailed elaboration that could specify the nature of the loss (or the ways of overcoming it). Instead, the experience of losing "one's own self" was presented as an outcome of the domination of others:

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of this poll's results see my "The Quantity of Style: Imaginary Consumption in the Post-Soviet Russia" (97-120), "The Fatal Splitting: Symbolizing Anxiety in Post-Soviet Russia" (291-319), and "In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia" (991-1016).

New Russia is awfully Americanized; outwardly it looks like European and American countries, but it is savage nonetheless. Learning from its own mistakes, the country copycats everything indiscriminately. People try to adjust to this way of life. Somewhere, somehow, though, Russian traditions are being reborn, but for some reason they all look exotic now (f-18).

New Russia is all about copycatting. People feverishly grab anything they can lay their hands on, and the more, the merrier. In his attempt to catch up with Europe, the Russian man loses his own self. We start looking like *them!* We dress the way they dress, or we try, at least. We eat and drink the same stuff they do (if we talk about the quality, though, that point is debatable), we watch their movies, not ours. I am ashamed of this “new” Russia (f-19).

What I find essential about the informants’ responses is their persistent triangulation of the discourse (“vagueness”), the country (“New Russia”) and subjectivity (“we”). The dysfunction of the symbolic order, its inability to localize the individual within the framework of accessible and comprehensible terms, leads to a situation in which a meaningful tangibility of a “new” Russia and “new” subjectivity are achieved through description of the temporal, spatial, or national limits of these notions. The use-value of all these borders and border-lines has to do with their structural ability to outline unknown or unfamiliar phenomena without defining their internal substance: borderlines make visible the contours of a phenomenon whose precise content has yet to be discovered. This negative cartography, this imaginary construction of the areas of non-belonging allows one if not to decipher his/her own subject position, then, at least to circumscribe it by mapping out its external context.²⁰ In its own turn, the context, then, helps to trace a variety of associations by contiguity (Russia/Europe, us/them, past/future, forward/backward, etc).

Most vividly, such symbolic displacements—from objects to limits—manifest themselves in the descriptions of the “*post-Soviet* person,” with whom the majority of the informants identified themselves. In this case, the process of identification did not involve any attempt to list uniquely post-Soviet features and characteristics; rather, identification was either linked directly with the conditions of the post-Soviet person’s existence or it was construed negatively—by eliminating inappropriate traces and qualities:

The post-Soviet man and post-Soviet woman? We are them – the ones who happened to catch the demise of the Soviet Union and who live now in a Russia not yet settled down (*neustanovlennoi*) (f-18).

²⁰ For more on this see Kristeva.

The post-Soviet person is a person to be determined (*neopredelennyii*), someone who wishes that he had a lot, maybe even everything. But how to get this everything is the task that he finds most difficult to accomplish (f-18).

The post-Soviet man? Now, that would be me, who believes in the changes to come, yet longing for the past. I am a cog used in a huge construction project (m-20).

Post-Soviet person – I guess that’s me, for I cannot describe myself either as Soviet or as a new Russian (f-19).

Post-Soviet people – the ones who have not become new [rich] Russians but who are not Soviet anymore. They are the main part of the Russian population – dreaming about old times while knowing that there would be no return of the past (m-17).

A post-Soviet person does not have enough money (or chances to make it) to become a new Russian. At the same time, he cannot be a Soviet Russian either – because something has been already lost (f-18).

The post-Soviet person is the answer to the old puzzle: “if it is neither fish nor fowl, what is it? It is a lobster.” [It is the] same with post-Soviet man – he does not know where he should move – forward or backward (f-18).

Post-Soviet man is something in between a rich man and an honest one (m-17).

The post-Soviet person is not unlike people in the West; he/she is a decent person, not a businessman (f-17).

The *post-Soviet* liminality is rarely perceived here as a temporary situation, reflecting a particular stage or moment of progression. Instead, as the comments show, my informants kept construing this liminality as a default position, unable to provide any clue, directions, perspective, or alternative. There was another important aspect, too. Despite the direct availability of post-Soviet realities and details, the students were especially prolific in describing not this immediately graspable present but their Soviet past. The same informants who perceived everything post-Soviet as something totally vague and obscure would present the Soviet Union as a mixture of tangible, albeit predictable, political symbols and traits of everyday existence:

The Soviet Union – a planned economy; the five-year plan; collective farms; shock workers; walls of fame for honorable workers; everyone works in the name of the idea; they all strive to work as little as possible, they fudge it (m-17).

The Soviet Union – I personally associate this notion with the Soviet national anthem, with the red banner with the hammer and sickle on it. For me the Soviet Union is connected with Lenin, with all kinds of unpaid community work days (*subbotniki*). It’s also the food rations; sugar exchanged for coupons, the Communist Party congresses, Gorbachev and Raisa Maksimovna (and so on) (f-16).

The Soviet Union – here are my associations: construction sites; heavy construction machinery (concrete mixers and such). There had to be Young Pioneers’ red ties. And the absence of nylon stockings in stores (f-18).

In their turn, the descriptions of “*Soviet people*” almost invariably consisted of the objects representing the everyday life in the USSR:

A Soviet man? He would be chubby, with a bald spot, always fussing about something. Work would be his priority number one, above everything else. He would never refuse a shot of vodka or a bit of food. A Soviet woman? That’s a woman in whom every trace of womanhood was destroyed. Some kind of a machine, really. As a young girl, she would be terrified of men, because her parents had told her that all men want from her is that one and only thing, so she would never get intimate with anyone before marriage out of fear of being ditched. As a result, she would see sexual contacts only as a way of getting herself with kids. No joys of life. [...] Off to work at the break of dawn; after work – cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Always onward, always singing a joyous Soviet song (f-17).

A typical Soviet guy loves to get drunk, both at work and at home. He doesn’t like to work all that much. A woman: as soon as she’s done with work, she’s out running around in search of food, then she quickly goes home – to cook supper; after that she fixes her hair rollers, and off to sleep. Weekends were to be spent tending her patch of land in the country (m-20).

These descriptions of “New Russia” and “the Soviet Union” have at least one common feature: metaphorical associations and links in describing the Soviet and the post-Soviet are almost entirely missing. By describing the “borderlines” of the post-Soviet life and by listing endless examples of the Soviet daily life, my informants persistently avoided any attempt to gesture towards a novel interpretive *context*. The past and the present were seen first of all as a collection of disjointed fragments, objects, and elements.

It would be wrong to assume, though, that this “obsession” with tangible details was a reflection of my informants’ limited skills for abstract thinking. When unable to frame or define changes in Russia, the majority would have no difficulty in relying on such elusive, vague and yet utterly stereotypical notions as “soul,” “spirituality,” or “national character” without, however, elaborating on the content of these concepts. While useful for keeping afloat the process of symbolic exchange, the language of abstract clichés that those school- and university students had internalized helped little in endowing that process with any graspable meaning. As a result, speech would take on the features of a “euphemistic” discourse, mentioned earlier: while demonstrating the “mastery of everything articulated, organized, subordinated, and structured in the sentence,” this speaking subject “can never get to the heart” of what he or she has to say, hid-

ing instead behind his or her “enormous, extraordinarily articulate bla-bla-bla” (Lacan 1993, 219-20).

The following quotation from a student’s essay exemplifies fairly well the feeling of losing a familiar language, a familiar frame of reference, and a lack of understanding of what would compensate this loss. Describing “new” (i.e. post-Soviet) Russia, the student writes:

Rushing from one corner to another, the new Russia is about to lose – or maybe it has already lost – its face, being over-stuffed with American films and products. And yet, at the same time, behind this ostensible lack of well-being, something profound, spiritual makes itself felt. That which is being revived, coming from “the underground.” That which has been silenced off or banished. It appears that the new Russia is a battlefield between the material and the spiritual (f-19).

Besides the usual Soviet binary (the materialistic West vs. the spiritual East), the quotation is interesting first of all because of its structure. The inability to detail “the spiritual” and “the profound” in post-Soviet Russia—the materialist West is presented, at least, through its “films and products”—produces at least two consequences. Grammatically speaking, it leaves sentences without a properly defined subject (“that which...”) and the speaker without the object on which to exercise her speech skills. Agency is neither obvious nor locatable here: it is “felt” rather than exercised. Expressive deficiency of the symbolic order and the country’s political indeterminacy are personified in the figure of the subject whose existence is only indexed and whose name is yet to be determined. A lack of proper words is experienced as a lack of subjectivity; discursive failures are envisioned as failures of identification.

In a simplified form, the informants’ responses reflected the general logic of symbolic production associated with the post-Soviet “dead end.” The anthropological value of these comments has to do with the persistent confirmation of a profound interrelation between speech, subjectivity, and socio-political context. As students demonstrated again and again, the (perceived) obscurity of one component amplifies a lack of transparency of the others; in turn, a lack of reliable interpretative frameworks (“symbolic order”) turns the task of decoding the post-Soviet context into an insurmountable project.

In their failures to discern some stable signs of post-Soviet developments, my Siberian informants were not that different from their much more sophisticated (and mature) compatriots. The timing of my survey coincided with the final stages of a widely publicized search for a new “National Idea,” conducted by a “commission of consultants” chaired by Georgii Satarov, a Kremlin

adviser, in 1996-1997. When in July 1996 President Yeltsin declared an urgent necessity to elaborate “our own national ideology,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, published by the Russian parliament, started a public discussion/competition. From August 1996 until October 1997, it published more than 200 articles, essays, programs, and letters discussing the issue. Symptomatically, despite the active debate in the press, after a year of work, all that Satarov’s group was capable of producing was a digest, a catalogue, an inventory of the opinions published in Russian mass media, a digest that was not even accompanied by an analytical commentary.²¹ As if unable to translate “The Idea” into graspable metaphors and images, the group retreated to a safe old ground, namely to the obsessive aphasic reproduction of the already familiar ideas, to the metonymic cataloguing of the already available concepts and notions.²²

In Jakobson’s studies of aphasia such distancing from the metaphorical comparison is interpreted as a symptom of a loss of metalanguage (as well as of metacontext). The primacy of the metonymical detail reveals the speaker’s lack of symbolic tools that could be used for describing his/her position of enunciation. For such an aphasiac, semiotic trans-coding and symbolic equivalents, which allow the speaking subject to switch from one system of codification to another, are impossible.²³ The ability to create an analytical distance between one’s self and one’s expressive means is blocked here. As a result, “translation”—an explanation of the word of one “language” with the expressive tools of another language—is substituted here by a “transition,” which is to say by a symbolic displacement of the object of writing and speech. Hence, the content of the “post-Soviet” condition, its positive equivalent, is left undetermined. Without a map of the celestial bodies there is little use for the guiding star; all one can do is to map the path by moving—metonymically—from one contiguous fragment to another.

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS: RETROFITTING THE PAST

In the previous section I showed how “the point of indeterminacy” that was discovered (discursively) in Russia in the middle of the 1990s was perceived

²¹ See: Satarov, ed. An online version of this collection is available at <<http://iph.ras.ru/~mc/hot/sbornik/>>.

²² Such cataloguing did not last long. A “Thematic Montage of the Discussion,” which had been envisaged as an annual publication, was published only once in the summer of 1997. In September 1997, Satarov himself was dismissed, and the official search for “ideas for Russia” came to a halt. For a discussion of the plans the Satarov group set for itself, see: Tamarchenko.

²³ See: Jakobson, “Aphasia” 235. See also: Jakobson, “Two Aspects” 81-82.

as a form of symbolic deficiency, which is to say, as a recognized inability to adequately represent a new situation by relying on available repertoire of symbolic tools and actions. One of the most important consequences of this social and symbolic deficiency of the 1990s was a peculiar linking of the crisis of representation with the crisis of identity: various forms of “silence” and “deformed speech” were seen as a symptom of an unstable social position of the collective or individual subject.

The “dead end situation” in many ways overdetermined the way out—by retracing one’s steps to the forms, concepts and objects that were capable of producing some meaningful effect in the past. In the second half of the 1990s, the material culture of the Soviet period was scrutinized and catalogued in a number of TV programs (*Old Apartment* [*Staraiia kvartira*]; *Lately: Our Era* [*Namedni: nasha era*]) and popular press (e.g., *Museum of the Twentieth-Century* [*Muzei XX veka*] [which ran in the *Ogonek* weekly]), as well as in a flood of newly published and reissued memoirs.²⁴ Soviet tele-novellas were reformatted to fit the requirements of new TV standards.²⁵ The Soviet “mass song”—an integral part of the collective practices of the Soviet period—was brought back to its post-Soviet life by a special genre, “old songs about the most important,” in which contemporary pop-stars retooled old pop-hits to meet new musical, vocal, and aesthetic regimes.

Despite their intended or accidental nostalgic undertones, many of these stylistic and ethnographic returns to the past were motivated by a lack—to be more precise by a shortage of available cultural products. Konstantin Ernst, the head of Channel One, Russia’s leading TV outlet, was in many ways responsible for giving Soviet stylistics its second life on post-Soviet television. In 2004, Ernst recalled (retrospectively) that the initial idea to bring back popular songs of the 1950-1960s was motivated first of all by the scarcity of good-quality musical material that could fill up the traditional, three-hour-long timeslot for a holiday variety show on December 31, 1995 (see Kuzina). The financial default of 1998

²⁴ See, for example: Ivanova; Kobrin, 45-52 and 38-44. On the memoir boom, see materials of a roundtable “Memoir literature at the break of different epochs;” see also: Ellman & Kontorovich, 259-279. On general fascination with the tangible and objective, see my “Totality Decomposed: Objectalizing Late Socialism in Post-Soviet Biochronicles.”

²⁵ In 1998-99, the ORT channel remastered two major Soviet epics directed by Vladimir Krasnopol’skii and Valerii Usov in the 1970s: *Vechnyi zov* (*The Eternal Call*, 1973), the longest Soviet TV production, and *Teni ischezaiut v polden’* (*The Shadows Disappear at Noon*, 1971). Since original lengths of each episodes varied, all of them were reedited to fit the standard fifty-two-minute slot (Treneva).

introduced another important correction to the usual programming: the radical devolution of the ruble turned Latin American soap operas from a television staple of the 1990s into unavailable luxury. Suddenly, Soviet cultural legacy was seen in a new light.

What began as a forced stylistic regression, however, quickly became a major artistic device, a principal form of a post-Soviet cultural production. Remakes became a salient feature of post-Soviet mass cultural consumption, gradually percolating into a sphere that had traditionally been reserved for “high” culture.²⁶ For many critics such stylistic reincarnations of the past were a symptom of the political restoration that transformed the “depressurization” unfinished in the 1990s into a new edition of self-enclosure, associated with the first decade of the new millennium.²⁷ In my discussion of the new old anthem, I have suggested that a traditional politicizing critique of aesthetic forms tends to miss an important point. The historical and biographical approach that is so typical for the critics of Soviet nostalgia has traditionally been ignoring the effect of recognition that familiar contours of the past can generate in the post-Soviet present. By emphasizing the “ideological roots” of a particular cultural device or stylistic configuration, the critics of this “nostalgia” overlook the function of enframing that these remakes and reproductions perform.

In this section, I want to show that the importance of symbolic forms of the past may not be limited to their original context, meaning, or genealogy. The old form is evoked not in order to express its old meaning. Rather, this new life of old forms reveals the inability of the existing means of expression to communicate a relevant message. By discussing several visual projects of the last decade, I will demonstrate that manipulations with the resuscitated formal structures of the recent and remote past have very little to do with attempts to bring this past back. By and large, the motivation of these “manipulators” is performative, aiming to demonstrate their artistic potency rather than their political conservatism. I will show that the continuity of *formal* motives can go hand in hand with radi-

²⁶ In 2003, the Bolshoi Theater company, following the general restorative trend, staged Dmitry Shostakovich’s ballet *The Radiant Stream* (*Svetlyi ruchei*). Shostakovich wrote the music and the ballet was staged in 1935. The production provoked a hostile reaction from Soviet officials. It was deemed “false,” while Shostakovich’s music was labeled “a decadent dead-end” (*dekadentskii tupik*). See: Gerdt. For a less politically charged version of the same restorative trend see Tim Scholl’s exploration of the 1999 production of the 1890 version of *Sleeping Beauty* by the Kirov Company in St. Petersburg, Scholl 131-72.

²⁷ See, for example, Faibisovich, 45-52, and also Smith; Beumers, 378-81; Mendelson and Gerber, 92-93; Chauvier; Khrushcheva, 67-73.

cal *semantic* ruptures: old signifiers can still deliver their meaningful effect in a situation where their initial, original signifieds have become inaccessible.

The photomontages and paintings discussed below give me yet another chance to approach the state of post-Soviet aphasia from a somewhat different point of view: the limited vocabulary of visual forms and frameworks is overcome here by unorthodox recycling of ready-made visual narratives. What is crucial for me in these visual projects is the structural quality of this post-Soviet technology of artistic borrowings: time and again, post-Soviet artists adopt *general* frameworks, contexts and plots. Pointing to the core problem of the state of post-Soviet aphasia, these artists reveal the crucial absence of overarching contexts able to provide a container for multiple fragments of post-Soviet life.

I deliberately focus on visual projects that have little in common with Soviet stylistics. For all their non-Soviet iconography, these artworks quite literally retrofit contemporary content into old contours, as if inhabiting them from within.²⁸ However, sophisticated artistic appropriations are not accompanied by any desire to narrate a new tale through old discursive means. Instead, the desire to present a unique personality is overshadowed in these visual narratives by a meticulous reproduction of the details of the character's surroundings. Unlike Marcel Duchamp's, the post-Soviet aesthetics of ready-made forms is not motivated by an attempt to defamiliarize objects of aesthetic perception. The main goal of these artistic projects seems to be exactly the opposite: to make post-Soviet material identifiable by "squeezing" it into a ready-made context that could produce an automatic reaction of meaningful recognition.

My first example is *Private Collection* by Moscow media-artist Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. A daughter of a famous Soviet poet, until this exhibit Rozhdestvenskaia was not known for her artistic projects. Some remember her as a professional translator of John Steinbeck, Sidney Sheldon, and John Le Carré. Exhibited in 2002 at the Moscow House of Photography, famous for its high-brow shows of the Russian photo-avant-garde, *Private Collection* was

²⁸ Contemporary Russian literature provides, perhaps, the most elaborate array of examples in this respect. Suffice it to mention two of the more interesting instances. In 2001, Zakharov, a small but very successful Moscow publishing house that made its name by publishing quality biographies, memoirs, and detective novels written by B. Akunin, started a new series named "The New Russian Novel" ("Novyi russkii roman"). Three first publications in the series were Fedor Mikhailov's *Idiot*; Lev Nikolaev's *Anna Karenina*, and Ivan Sergeev's *Fathers and Sons*. Closely following the plots and general structures of dialogues and descriptions of the Russian classics, these new versions of old novels drastically "updated" the original language as well as the professional occupations of main characters. For a discussion see Cherniak, 187-99.

Rozhdestvenskaia's first show ever. It included 200 photomontages depicting popular performers, politicians, and celebrities in the guise of the protagonists of the famous canvasses from the past (**FIG. 1**). Despite quite expensive tickets, *Private Collection* became very popular: during the first two weeks, the show attracted ninety-five thousand viewers, and many art critics agreed that the show was the most commercially successful exhibition in the six-year history of the House (see Shapoval).

This popular acclaim, however, did not prevent experts from expressing serious objections to Rozhdenstvenskaia's main artistic method. Some journalists saw in Rozhdestvenskaia's approach a post-Soviet modification of the genre of the official Soviet portrait exemplified by the work of such painters as Il'ia Glazunov and Aleksandr Shilov. Rozhdestvenskaia's recycling of visual narratives of old paintings for framing today's celebrities was perceived as an exercise in crude flattery, seemingly inspired by a desire to equip Russia's *nouveaux riches* and newly famous with signs of unearned respect.

Apart from the ostensible disregard for the cultural hierarchy exhibited by *Private Collection* (high art vs. meretricious pop culture), the predominantly negative reception of *Private Collection* on the part of journalists and art critics was also caused by Rozhdestvenskaia's obvious and deliberate transgression of institutional borders. Before two hundred photos from *Private Collection* were enlarged and printed on canvases for display in the Moscow House of Photography, many of them appeared in smaller formats as cover art and illustrations for *Karavan istorii*, a popular glossy magazine, a Russian alternative to *Vogue* and *Burda Moden*. The use of a museum setting for an exhibition of blatantly commercial products was perceived as a violation of the basic principle on which the



Figure 1: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. *Private Collection*: Pop singer Kristina Orbakaite as Leonardo Da Vinci's *Lady with the Ermine* (1482-1483). Courtesy of the author.

very mission of a museum rests. A reporter with the Moscow newspaper *Vremia novostei*, for example, offered the following verdict in her coverage of the exhibition:

Everything was fine as long as Rozhdestvenskaia's project remained on the cover of a glossy magazine called *Karavan istroii*. Things got really ugly when the magazine covers were presented as photographs displayed in neat rows in the rooms of the Moscow House of Photography. ... Reduced to the size of the postcard, blank-and-white reproductions of famous pictures posted on the walls [next to the photomontages that they inspired] cried out: Where is their magic of space, where is the richness of colors, where are all those precious furs and textiles? Where is everything that has ensured our reputation for centuries? [...] Museum halls tend to reveal the true value of everything. With a minimal expenditure of efforts and resources, Rozhdestvenskaia managed to turn Raphaels, Dürers, Repins, Somovs, Goyas, and Vrubels into Shilovs and Glazunovs. (Balakhovskaia)

Harsh criticism notwithstanding, Rozhdestvenskaia solidified the success of her project.²⁹ The number of published photographs has exceeded two thousand, and some of them have formed the kernel of an itinerant exhibition that periodically tours cities in Russia and countries of the former Soviet Union.

Commenting on the origin of her method, Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia more than once stressed in her interviews that the most fundamental driving force of her motivation was her desire to create an alternative to the traditional glossy-magazine cover, "in which no one can discern any trace of any past." It seems, though, that the method of "discerning some past" came about rather accidentally. This is how Rozhdestvenskaia described it: "One of my friends reminded me very much of the character that Zinaida Serebriakova painted in her *At the Dressing-Table*. So I made a trip to an antique shop, stocked up with similar-looking perfume jars, hairpins, and accessories, and we put together a portrait. Not everyone saw the point of this work, but I kept on working" (Shapoval 13).

With time what started as a mere hobby evolved into an artistic method. Individual cover art images were followed by several thematic series (*Associations*, *Fantasies*, *Brothers and Sisters*, and *The Twentieth Century*). The commercial trajectory of the project eventually influenced Rozhdestvenskaia's method itself. Ironically, celebrities' *own* faces became less and less crucial for anchoring the reproduced portraits. Increasingly, *Private Collection* acted as "an abstract machine of faciality" that used famous personalities as a screen on which recognizable faces and facial traits of the past could be distributed and

²⁹ Ol'ga Orlova, *Karavan's* editor-in-chief, jokingly recognized the importance of Rozhdestvenskaia's input for the magazine: "Our monthly magazine has a very good possibility of becoming a weekly, due most of all to the industriousness of Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia" (see: Zhuk, 98).

organized.³⁰ Mundane “perfume jars and hairpins” that initially were expected only to reinforce the effect of facial resemblance became more prominent instead. Associations by contiguity dominated associations by similarity. Equally important was that in Rozhdestvenskaia’s photo-portraits the exceptional amount of attention that she paid to the details in the foreground was accompanied by a simplification of the general background. (FIGS. 2 & 3)

There is one moment that I want to emphasize in this combination of the purposeful downplay-



Фото репродукции картины Алфонса Мухи.
Обложка журнала. 1907 г.

Figure 2-3: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. *Private Collection*. TV-presenter Iana Poplavskaia (after Alfons Maria Mucha’s journal cover, 1907). Courtesy of the author.

ing of the initial “face” and the historical “background” on one hand, and the acute interest in conveying the effect of verisimilitude through the faithful reproduction of everyday details on the other. The stability of the *general* formal structure of a visual narrative, as well as an impression of authenticity that it was supposed to produce (which is to say, the general impression of “similarity/dissimilarity” of the copy in relation to the original), is accomplished through a repeated reproduction of trivial details. The fundamentally important role played by the apparently marginal “jars and pins” in the text of those portraits allows us to understand why the past’s most striking features and characteristics might not be the most significant for people who try to reconnect with it.

By singling out a limited number of “interpreting” details in order to represent the whole—“the method of Luminous Detail,” as Ezra Pound called

³⁰ On faciality see Deleuze and Guattari, 167-92. For a discussion of this process, see: Iampol’skii, 243.

it—Rozhdestvenskaia approached old portraits as sets of visual clues, whose material reproduction could ensure the recognition of the portraits themselves (Kenner 152-53). The original painting provided the photographer with the traces for reconstructing an environment, as well as the celebrity portrayed with a role model to emulate. Also, old masterpieces acted as visual prompts for the viewer, suggesting a trajectory of critical engagement: at the exhibition, as well as in the magazine, each photo was accompanied by a smaller reproduction of the original painting. The comparison of the source and its photographed incarnation was part and parcel of the show. The visual pleasure of the spectacle to a large extent came from one's ability to register formal differences and similarities between the two artifacts, two periods, and two personas. By placing the two works of art side by side, Rozhdestvenskaia gave her viewers a chance to repeat the operation of semiotic transcoding that she herself had performed earlier. Significantly, the purpose of this transcoding was seen neither in a creative interpretation of the familiar work of art, nor in an operation of "translation" of old narratives into a new expressive language. Rather, the goal seemed to be the spatial transposition of the code itself: a precise reproduction in a new location of the vocabulary and structure of the artwork that Rozhdestvenskaia had used as her source of inspiration.

It is remarkable, however, that the public perception of the project predominantly did not accept its carnivalesque interpretation. Instead, visual affinity was seen as synonymous to authenticity; and it is precisely the failure of incarnations to match their originals completely that structured the dominant attitude to Rozhdestvenskaia's *Collection*. Rozhdestvenskaia explained one side of this dynamic:

"As far as the [celebrities] go – sometimes they get so attached to their images that they don't want to part with them. [...] When I suggested the image of Proserpina [Greek Goddess of the Underworld] to Tat'iana Mitkova [a TV news presenter], she started reading about the character. She was getting ready for the photo session as if it was a test. Many come with such a deep knowledge about their picture that I have no answers to their question" (Shapoval 13).

The act of mimicry was taken seriously. What could have been an innocent masquerade joke turned into an earnest process of identification. Andrei Makarevich, a rock singer and a TV-show host, for instance, demonstrated that the game of visual doubling was a game only up to a certain point. Commenting on his impersonation of one of Dürer's self-portraits, Makarevich said: "I have known [for quite some time] that I resemble Dürer; and [Rozhdestvenskaia's team] was

correct in choosing this painter for me; but this particular self-portrait I picked myself” (Kabanova). (FIG. 4)

A lack of playfulness on the part of the “doubles” was paralleled by reviewers. In this case, the photographer’s attempt to follow the original as closely as possible was perceived by the critics as jarring and crass. For example, Liudmila Lunina, a leading Moscow art critic, insisted that the traumatic biographies of many original paintings were an inseparable part of their perception:

The paintings that Rozhdestvenskaia used for her play, they are not some advertising posters or a



Figure 5: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. Private Collection. The actress Inna Churikova as Nadezhda Zabel-Vrubel’ (by Mikhail Vrubel, 1904). Courtesy of the author.

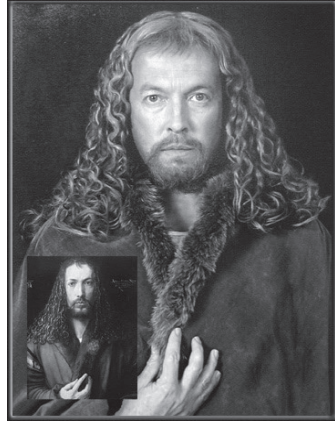


Figure 4: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. Private Collection. The rock-singer Andrei Makarevich impersonating Durer’s *Self-Portrait* (1500). Courtesy of the author.

colorful design for candy boxes. Each and every one of them hides its own history, its own suffering, its own resistance, and its own impact on the world’s progress. I am afraid I am saying the obvious but it’s all the same. Young Valentin Serov spent an entire summer working on his *Girl with Peaches*, requiring his child model Vera Mamontova to pose for him for about a hundred sessions. When it was finally exhibited, this portrait left thousands of people shocked, becoming an enormous event. What does the TV presenter Tat’iana Vedeneeva, with a black wig at an angle, have to do with all this? What does the actress Inna Churikova have to do with the great artist Mikhail Vrubel, with his gradual descent into madness – a hint at the dimming of his reason can be found in many of his works, including his portrait of his wife [that Churikova impersonated] (FIG. 5). In principle, it would have been just fine, had the photographer chosen to mark a distance between her play and her attitude toward that play. Say, by placing a mobile phone next to Valentina Tolkunova, who impersonated a nineteenth-century grand dame. But there is no distance whatsoever. Both the photographer and her protagonists are playing the game of *la dolce vita* in earnest, even with a certain degree of reckless abandon (*v nekotorem dazhe upoenii*). (Lunina)

Needless to say, there is nothing new about such a search for material details (“a mobile phone next to an impersonated grand dame”) that could assist one

in clarifying the artist's attitude toward her/his own creative work. The absence of clear signs of added value of authorship in the incarnation was perceived as perplexing not only because it blurred the distinction between the copy and the original but also because it obscured all traces of the efforts invested in these



Figure 6: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. *Twelve Months*. Many newspapers commented that the pop singer Oleg Gazmanov managed to impersonate two artifacts at once: Michelangelo's *David* (1500-4) and Malevich's *Black Square* (1915). Courtesy of the author.

again kept asking the same old question: if the history of a particular style cannot be seen anymore as the ultimate source of categories of this style's appreciation, then *where* exactly could one find a new source of meaningful interpretative tools? (FIG. 6) One journalist expressed well this general reluctance to accept the shift of interpretative responsibility from the producer onto the spectator that Rozhdestvenskaia's formal play suggested:

Free as she is of any inhibitions, Ruslana Pisanka travels back in time to the early seventeenth century in order to inflame the imagination of kings and artists with her impressive bodily dimensions (FIG. 7).

painstaking reproductions. The "seriousness" of the process of reproduction is not matched here by the seriousness of the overall purpose of the "game." To frame it differently, the overwhelming loyalty to the original's *morphology*, which the incarnations demonstrated, appears to have radically undercut the *semantic* possibilities that the original offers ("history, suffering, resistance").

Symptomatically, when Rozhdestvenskaia decided to strip her celebrity models of all supporting garments and had them impersonate famous images of nudes for her project-calendar *The Twelve Seasons*, she was confronted by the same reaction. Still trying to pick up traces of the hidden message, commentators time and



Figure 7: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. *Twelve Months*. The TV-anchor Ruslana Pisanka as Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus at a Mirror* (1615). Courtesy of the author.

Yet, judging how Ruslana posed next to her portrait during the opening of the show, it looked like she truly imagined herself to be Venus the goddess of love. A woman can dress other women up, put their makeup on, be enraptured by them. But to undress them, to invent new seductive poses for them – that’s a bit much. In order to provoke feelings or even associations, as Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia likes to do, it is not enough just to have a good eye. There must be a clear motivation that indicates for what purpose and for whom this particular woman decided to turn herself into an Eve. (Zaozerskaia)

The aesthetic dissatisfaction of critics and journalists seemed to be rooted in the shared conviction that an employment of the symbols and forms of the past inevitably presupposes an employment of their initial contexts and categories of perception. This exercise of a particular symbolic literacy, however, is possible at the expense of formal—in this case, spatial or chromatic—perception that the art object might produce. The underlying message of these critics’ struggle to retain authenticity is clear: if an appropriation of a historical symbol is to be successful, this appropriation must reproduce the original context of the symbol and original categories of its perception. Otherwise, symbols of the past can be brought to life *today* only in objectified, “archived” forms that set apart stylistic codes of the past and the present. Stylistic borrowings, in other words, must be referenced. The technique of appropriation must be demarcated. Ironically, this insistence on presenting the trace of appropriation *in* the reproduced image, this desire to discover narrative or visual quotation marks in a newly created text (say, an inserted cell phone), not only legitimizes the reproduction but also makes it obviously impossible.

Against the wishes of the critics, no such visual quotation marks ever appeared either in Rozhdestvenskaia’s series or in others discussed below. The retrofitting of forms demonstrated a persistent cultural logic: by borrowing the styles and shapes of the past, the authors of such projects had little interest in the past itself; however, these borrowings did not make obvious any ironic distancing typical of a postmodernist game with styles and languages. The border between borrowing and identification got blurred.

In order to outline the internal structure of such a dependence on the symbolic forms of the past, I want to return to the subject of aphasia one more time. In 1972 the Soviet psychologist Alexander Luria published a small book called *The Man with a Shattered World*. The book was structured as a set of Luria’s comments on notes of his patient, Lev Zasetkii, written over the course of twenty-five years. Zasetkii suffered a brain injury during World War II. Having lost most of his memory, as well as his ability to write and to read, the man suffered from aphasia. He was incapable of expressing himself, of putting his experience

and his thoughts into any symbolic form understandable to his audience. Slowly, some of his symbolic abilities were recovered, and his notes demonstrate how it happened. To quote from one entry:

The purpose of my writing is to show how I was struggling to restore my memory, which was wounded by the bullet. Sometimes I had no other choice than to gather words by listening to the radio, by reading a book, by listening to people's conversations, and later by gathering words, phrases and thoughts. I am very patient; I can wait for a long time until a necessary word emerges from the depths of my head... I immediately write this word down on a piece of paper. Then – another one. But if nothing comes from my memory, I listen to the radio and write down the words that seem to be appropriate or necessary. Later, I use all these collected words to build a sentence, and I compare this sentence with similar phrases or sentences from a book, or from a radio show. When the sentence is modified to a necessary degree, I finally write it down in my notebook. In order to write a new phrase, I always had to re-read everything I've just written, because by that time I would already forget what I wrote in the last sentence.³¹

As the case demonstrates, Zasetkii's expressive abilities are extremely limited: speech is assembled from prefabricated fragments borrowed from elsewhere. To produce a meaningful effect, the missing fragment (word) must come as ready-to-use object and fit exactly into the allocated slot. An ordinary speech flow in this case is regularly interrupted by blank spaces still missing "a right word." It is also important that an incredible difficulty with selecting an "appropriate or necessary" word was accompanied in Zasetkii's case by an unceasing effort to assemble sentence structures and to compare them with already existing phrases. Searching in the form of "waiting" is counterbalanced by writing perceived as syntactic mimicry: replication of ready-made forms is construed as the only model of meaningful activity.

This example helps to illuminate the structure that underlies various strategies of symbolic appropriation. Not unlike Zasetkii's verbal exercises, Rozhdestvenskaia's *Private Collection* is a type of symbolic production that makes extensive use of structures "borrowed" from a particular "radio." Perceived metonymically, as a network of spatial clues, these visual structures are slowly inhabited—step by step, sign by sign, jar by jar. This symbolic inhabiting of ready-made collections, however, is effective as long as it keeps intact the overall shape of the borrowed structure. And Rozhdestvenskaia is not alone in following this rule. The newly-built Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow or recently finished Amber Room in the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo exhibit

³¹ Luria, *Romanticheskie esse* 171. For a slightly different version see Luria, *The Man with a Shattered World*.

the same logic: painstaking reproduction of the external shapes of these signifiers of the past is called upon to hide in these *novodely* (newly-made replicas) various current modifications of their internal structures.³²

The point of this cultural industry is not to create something *new*; nor is it to demonstrate the uniqueness of the author's relation to borrowed artifacts. Instead, what is revealed here is one's ability to achieve a certain meaningful effect by "occupying" a recognizable form from the past. The author's own motivation, his/her aesthetic or ideological program remains unarticulated, and, perhaps, unrecognized. Action here, as Jakobson put it, is "hidden by topography" (Jakobson, "Marginal Notes" 313). To frame it somewhat differently: the core reason for endless remakes produced by post-Soviet aphasia is hardly determined by a search for forms of individual or collective self-expression. Rather, it is a combination of two structural characteristics of the discursive field that defines this mode of cultural production: the already mentioned lack of new expressive forms is reinforced here by perceived gaps in the historical landscape, which *novodely* are aimed to fill up. The main task of impeccably imitated old structures is to produce an already known and previously encountered effect of recognition, to evoke a shared experience, to point toward a common vocabulary of symbolic gestures. In this situation, subjectivity emerges as an outcome of manipulation with signs and objects for which one bears no authorship.

The absence of an overall code—stylistic or ideological—is compensated by an order of a different kind. Hierarchy is replaced by horizontal seriality: a repeated application of the same artistic method in time and space links newly made replicas together. Thus, in *Private Collection* the very act of impersonation is the only meta-discursive principle that unifies all retrofitted masterpieces; no other thematic or stylistic organization has been attempted. In her more recent projects Rozhdestvenskaia has tried to find additional visual plots that could allow her to escape the organizing hegemony of a single artistic method. In the absence of ready-made frameworks of famous masterpieces, the effect of verisimilitude was achieved here through a thorough metonymic reproduction of material clichés of past decades—a red kerchief, a signature military hat (*budenovka*), or a typical military blouse (*gimnasterka*). In this aesthetic of temporal cross-dressing, recognizable elements of the daily life not only prop up, but also frame current pop stars. In *The Twentieth Century* major Russian personalities

³² For more on *novodely* as a cultural strategy in Russia see, for example, Safonov.

were dressed up as stereotypical models from a particular time-period: the revolutionary 1910s, the decadent 1920s, the militarized 1940s, or the hippie 1960s, and so on. (FIG. 8)

In these series, as in her earlier projects, Rozhdestvenskaia used no quotation marks to reveal her attitude to styles and narratives borrowed from the past: no distance between the original and its incarnation was ever manifested. As I have been suggesting throughout this essay, such a lack of distancing is not accidental: distancing—as well as irony, parody or self-reflection that are usually associated with it—requires a subject position *external*



Figure 8: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia. *The Twentieth Century*. The actress Ludmila Gurchenko and the Bolshoi's dancer Nikolai Tsiskaridze imagining the revolutionary 1910s. Courtesy of the author.

in regard to the dominant code.³³ The dead-end situation, liminality without progression, a situation of a political and aesthetic paralysis that became associated with Russia since the second half of the 1990s, in many ways prevents the emergence of any dominant code capable of bringing the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present together in a coherent or at least non-antagonistic manner. As a result, many individuals and groups responded to the radical transformation of the basic norms and rules in Russia by de-contextualizing ideas, objects, phenomena and personalities of the recent past.

In Rozhdestvenskaia's project such de-contextualization of the past and re-contextualization of the present did not extend beyond the limits of entertainment; her followers quickly discovered its political and commercial potential. Contours of the past were used not only to frame but also to contextualize the uncertainty of the present. However, despite their obvious stylistic differences, Rozhdestvenskaia's followers similarly produced their aesthetic effects through a repetitive reproduction of a borrowed language.

³³ For a detailed discussion, see Hutcheon, 1-49.

On October 23, 2002, three weeks after Rozhdestvenskaia opened her show in the Moscow House of Photography, the State Council, an advisory board to the President that includes selected governors, started its session in the Grand Kremlin Palace. The meeting had an unusual staging: in the middle of St. George Hall there was a one-picture exhibition: a canvas by the realist painter Il'ia Repin. Commissioned by the tsar in 1901, *The Ceremonial Session of the State Council Conducted on May 7, 1901, the Day of the Centennial Anniversary of the Council's Establishment* was finished in 1903. The huge canvas—9m wide and 4m high—presented eighty-one state officials of prerevolutionary Russia. Describing the event, the news magazine *Kommersant-Vlast'* concluded that the genre of the group portrait of the Russian political elite died in the 1940s. Not without an ironic twist, the magazine asked what seemed to be a purely rhetorical question: “Will the current ceremonial exhibition of Repin’s classics inspire new life in this dead genre? Should we be waiting for new canvases depicting the State Parliament, the Collegium of the Ministry of the Interior or, say, the Board of the Russian Electric Grid Company?” (see Lepskikh)

The answer came from an unexpected corner and in an unexpected form. In the fall of 2002, Farid Bogdalov and Sergei Kalinin, two Russian artists, decided to replicate the Repin painting. Using the original visual arrangement, they replaced the now forgotten politicians of the previous century with the faces of the current political elite. Unlike Repin, who insisted on having a mandatory face-to-face forty-minute session for each character, the two artists realistically admitted that politicians would not have time to sit for the picture, and decided to rely on photo sessions only (see Barabash). After two years of work the canvas was finally exhibited—first in Moscow (September 2004) and



Figure 9: Farid Bogdalov and Sergei Kalinin. *Session of the Federal Assembly*. Oil on canvas. 9m X 4m, 2004. Courtesy of the Kolodzei Art Foundation.

later in St. Petersburg (February 2005). Titled with the name of a nonexistent political body, *Session of the Federal Assembly* brought together a diverse group of politicians—from Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin to Egor Gaidar, Mikhail Khodorkovskii and Boris Berezovskii. There were several surprise appearances, too: the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the musician Mstislav Rostropovich, and the artist Zurab Tseretelli are in the picture, as are Bogdalov and Kalinin themselves. (FIG. 9)

During the Moscow show, Vladimir Zhirinovskii (also depicted on the canvas) formulated his opinion of this work of art:

We politicians like this picture a lot. It reminds us of a glorious period of Russia's might as a state. New reforms that the authorities are implementing are taking us back to what we had. The artists conveyed the psychological mood of everyone pretty well. Only [the leader of the Communist Party] Ziuganov is far too well fed and satisfied (*sytyi i dovol'nyi*). And our president, he looks as if he is thinking "How should we live now?" The painting should be included in history textbooks. It reflects the whole period of modern-day life. (Golovchenko) (FIG. 10)

Sergei Kalinin, one of the two co-authors, followed the same line of reasoning: "This is didactic material. In several years, people would learn from it who was making history in 2003 [in Russia]" (see Barabash). Irina Khakamada, an active critic of Putin's government, did not sound as optimistic regarding the didactic value of *Session of the Federal Assembly*, even though she too was in the painting:

I am not familiar with these artists, but I can say for sure: our political leadership (*vlast'*) and the artists who are so eager to please it, are suffering from a historical insanity (*istoricheskii marazm*). [...] Given the timing and the situation, it is hardly appropriate to portray in such a manner our worthless leadership that has totally lost the country (*proigralo stranu*). (Solov'ev)



Figure 10: Farid Bogdalov and Sergei Kalinin. A study for *Session of the Federal Assembly*. 2004. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Kolodzei Art Foundation

The post-Soviet reincarnation of Repin's painting, obviously, is not that different from the reincarnations in Rozhdestvenskaia's *Private Collection*. The symbolic object of the past provides a morphological frame and syntactic structure

for a reproduction, but it can determine neither the content nor the perception of this replica. What the State Council project demonstrates perhaps more clearly is how intricate the adjustment of the internal structure of the reproduced frame is. The signifiers are not just borrowed from the “radio,” so to speak; they are duplicated. However, these duplicates are not copies, they are examples of mimicry. That is to say, there are examples of an active formal integration of a new object/individual with the available background. The point of this transformative mimicry, as the retrofitting of Repin suggests, is to become a *part* of the visual landscape. Jacques Lacan’s discussion of mimicry explains much here. As the psychoanalyst pointed out, the purpose of mimicry is far from being adaptive. The effect of camouflage that mimicry produces should be taken literally—as an aggressive technique aimed to ensure “the inscription of the subject in the picture” (Lacan 1981, 99). The reproduction of signifiers of the past seems to be a necessary device through which an individual can be exposed to the gaze of the outsider in a situation where other symbolic frameworks or tools are unavailable or ineffective.

The Bogdalov-Kalinin painting also demonstrates an important evolution of public perception. As the artists revealed in interviews, politicians’ initial reaction to the idea of the remake was largely negative. The project was perceived as yet another example of Sots-art ironic doublespeak—at the expense of the politicians who were cleverly exposed as the butt of a not-so-obvious joke (see “Gospoda klassiki I sovremenniki”). Yet the finished picture was perceived quite differently. After its initial exhibition in the Zurab Tseretelli Gallery in Moscow, the painting was displayed in the Kremlin. In November 2005, trying to capitalize on the positive reaction, Bogdalov and Kalinin even decided to auction the painting in the *Metropol Hotel* in Moscow. Nobody offered the asking price of \$1,000,000, but out of ninety-seven smaller studies and individual portraits, sixty-eight were sold very quickly (two small portraits of Putin were sold for \$48,000). What started as an oversized postmodern joke was turned into a relatively profitable “new Russian realism.”³⁴

And not only Russian. The Moscow artist Nikas Safronov, responsible for flooding bookstores and state offices all over the country with reproductions of his official portrait of Vladimir Putin, recently publicized a new project called

³⁴ See: “Sovkom prodaet ‘Zasedanie Federal’nogo sobraniia’”. For an interview with the artists recorded in the studios of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Russian “Radio ‘Svoboda’”) on August 23, 2003, see: (<<http://archive.svoboda.org/ll/cult/0803/ll.082303-1.asp>>).

The River of Times.³⁵ The series includes about three dozen portraits of “distinguished contemporaries” (*vydaiushchiesia sovremenniki*), from George Bush, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Madonna to the film director Nikita Mikhalkov, a leading minister, Sergei Ivanov, and Vladimir Putin. All of them are depicted as real or mythical heroes of the past—kings, queens, nobles, warriors, or religious hierarchs. (FIG. 11 & 12)

In some cases, this art of retrofitting is used to visualize a more pointed political commentary. Over the last fifteen years the Moscow artist Andrei Budaev has been creating several series in which he



Figure 11: Nikas Safronov. *The River of Time*. A portrait of Vladimir Putin in a costume of Francis I. 2006. Courtesy of the author.

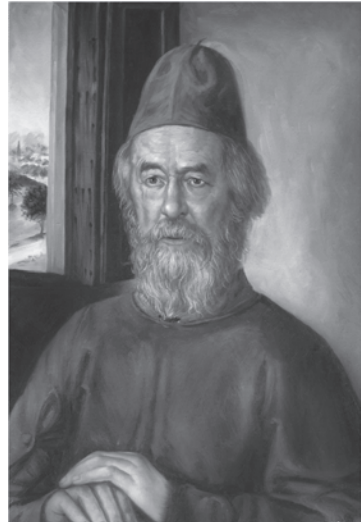


Figure 12: Nikas Safronov. *The River of Time*. A portrait of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2008. Courtesy of the author.

modifies digitized images of world masterpieces to fit the faces and figures of Russian politicians. Satirical and grotesque, Budaev’s art is usually framed within the genre of caricature, and has no pretense of achieving any physical or stylistic resemblance to the original. Yet, like all the other projects discussed here, Budaev’s approach indicates the same desire for a familiar *form*, for a *frame*, for a certain recognizable *structure* within which the individual’s presence could acquire some meaning.³⁶ (FIG. 13)

My last example shows how this practice of self-inscribing in recognizable visual narratives of the past may be realized on a mass scale. In this case the metonymic appropriation of historical detail, pioneered by Rozhdestvenskaia, is

³⁵ <<http://www.nikas-s.ru/en/gallery/category/4-timeriver.html>>.

³⁶ See details here: <<http://budaev.ru/galery.htm>>.



Figure 13: Andrei Budaev. *Returning to the Kremlin*. Canvas, print, 100 x 150 cm, 2000. www.budaev.ru. Courtesy of the author.

combined with the desire of local elites for a dignifying symbolic setting.

In the summer of 2004 several TV channels and popular newspapers covered an exhibition of work by Mikhail Fel'dman, an artist from Nizhny Novgorod. The creative approach of the artist is simple: he produces portraits of contemporary “VIPs in a historical environment of choice.” Most of Fel'dman's patrons were local bureaucrats. For instance, Serguei Kirienko, the envoy of the President in the region at the time, picked for his portrait the uniform of a nineteenth-century Hungarian cornet (after reviewing seven other options, a portrait of Bonaparte included). One of the customers, the head of the regional Emergency Service, picked as his artistic environment Vasilii Perov's *Resting Hunters* (*Okhotniki na privale*, 1871). The officer explained his

choice: “First of all, this is my favorite picture. I even went twice to the Tretyakov Gallery to see it. Second, this is not for *Playboy* magazine, after all.”

The business of superimposing contemporary faces onto historical bodies is not without its challenges. In an interview Fel'dman described the main difficulty of working with his clientele: “They ask for more state decorations (*ordena*), regalia, status. I would not name the names, but it happened. My exhibition was about to open, and a person would call and say: Give me a different uniform, give me totally different clothing. So, [because of that] I visited them all and they all signed the agreement” (“Segodnia”). Some customers, however, turned out to be more discriminating in picking their incarnation. Dmitry Birman, a local entrepreneur, was offered an image of Lieutenant Rzhevskii, a fictitious womanizer and a troublemaker from a joke cycle about the nineteenth-century aristocracy. Birman rejected the offer and picked instead a likeness of Pushkin painted by Orest Kiprensky (1827). The retrofitting of a famous image, however, required the image's reformatting. As Birman put it: “Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin had very small feminine hands. And here you even could see that he had a manicure, he had these long nails. So, I asked to cut the nails, as

it were. Yes, I did. Because in the original the nails are much longer. [So I asked to cut the nails] and get rid of the manicure” (“Segodnia”). (FIG. 14)

From start to finish, it takes Fel’dman about two weeks to complete a portrait. Depending on the size and quality of the paper, an individual “por:trait-imitation in the historical setting” could cost from \$60 to \$200, according to a local news-



Figure 14: The businessman Dmitry Birman next to his portrait as the Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin. Courtesy of the Telekompania NTV, the program “Segodnia,” Russia.

paper’s report. According to the artist himself, he is particularly good at creating portraits in the style of Leonardo, Briullov and Kiprensky. Fel’dman does collective portraits as well: his current project is Repin’s *Barge Haulers on the Volga River* (*Burlaki na Volge*), and the main heroes are deputies of the local parliament (“Segodnia”; see also “Kak stat’ marianinom za tysiachu baksov”).

It is tempting to see in this stencil art yet another historical variation of traditional popular genres. To a certain extent, computer play with digitized depictions of the past and present certainly remind us of cardboard cutouts offering spectators the opportunity to add their own faces to the bodies portrayed on pre-fabricated templates (FIG. 15).

The method of retrofitting is not alien to yet another figurative tradition



Figure 15: Cutout on the Old Arbat. Moscow, 2004. Author’s photo.

running through Russian art. For centuries, the ornamented metal cover (*basma*, *oklad* or surcoat) on Orthodox Christian icons performed the service of such a visual prompter that directed and organized the painter’s work. (FIG. 16) It is hardly accidental that already in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries surcoats were frequently added not to protect the

painted surface of the icon, but rather to obscure the inadequacies (and sometimes the absence) of any depiction underneath them (see Espinola 20).

A historical link between these forms of employment of ready-made narrative structures and the state of post-Soviet aphasia, which has been the focus of this essay, may, however, not be of principal importance. What is important is the autonomy of the “form” and “content” that stencil art so effectively demonstrates. Borrowed from the past, contours and outlines are helpful in organizing the present, without necessarily determining its directions or characteristics. This regression to the old and proven, as I have tried to show, is compensatory in its



Figure 16: Icon Oklad. Moscow, 1910. The Andrei Rublev Museum, Moscow.

nature. It is less important as a sign of intentional or accidental desires to restore the bygone symbolic order. But it is a crucial symptom that draws our attention again and again to the absence of discursive forms that could adequately describe the condition of institutional and identificatory flax.

Precipitated by the “state of indeterminacy” in the 1990s, the new isolation was expressed and experienced as a discursive dysfunction, if not paralysis. The fragmentation of a relatively homogenized field of Soviet cultural production and the radical multiplication of interpretative strategies that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union have not automatically erased the feeling of a shared symbolic experience that had been cultivated by the Soviet culture industry for decades. Nor has this post-Soviet polyphony produced an effective symbolic framework capable of a meaningful integration of the Soviet and post-Soviet parts of one’s biography.

The vocabularies and contours of the past hardly provide adequate tools for elucidating the meaning and significance of the ongoing changes. Yet, they do retain their ability to create an effect of recognition, a feeling of (visual) familiarity, and a sense of predictability—even if only on the level of the form. Signifiers of the past, these elements and details of previous historical periods

are turned into ready-made objects, able to produce an appearance of historical continuity and stylistic coherence within the limits of one's "private collection."

It would be a mistake, of course, to narrow all the variety of the discursive developments in post-Soviet Russia down to the manifestations of substitutive symbolization. Yet the theory of aphasia helps us understand why the *retrospective* longing becomes such a prominent feature of *postsocialism*.³⁷ By reinvigorating old forms, by performing acts of transformative mimicry, and by inhabiting already existing structures, actors and authors of various incarnations of the past pursue the same major goal—to become an integral "part" of the picture, of the symbolic environment that might have lost its original meaning but that still retains its recognizable outlines.

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³⁷ For a sample discussion devoted to retro-tendencies in other post-Soviet countries, go to Velikonja, Bach, Gries, Scribner.

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