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The Experts Conduct an Investigation—*The first edition of the novelized screenplays by Ol'ga Lavrova and Aleksandr Lavrov, published in 1994 as part of the "Retro" series.*

Crimes of Substitution: Detection in Late Soviet Society

Serguei Alex. Oushakine

In order to appear “accidental,” an element in a work of art must belong to at least two systems and must be located at their intersection. That aspect of the element which is systemic from the point of view of one structure will appear “accidental” when viewed from the vantage of the other.

*Yurii Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text**

There is no deed, in whatever unusual form you may imagine it, which is really criminal, none which may be really called virtuous.

All is relative to our manners and the climate we inhabit.

*Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom**

In his recent memoirs, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, a popular poet of the post-Stalin generation, tells a story about the early 1960s. Trying to “win over” prominent members of the Soviet intellectual elite, Nikita Khrushchev held several meetings with the intelligentsia in the Kremlin. During one such meeting, in which Khrushchev’s speech was steadily punctuated by applause, Dmitry Shostakovich—who

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sat next to Yevtushenko—was continuously writing in his notebook. When the applause resumed, the composer whispered to the poet: “I have my own method of avoiding applause. I try to produce an impression that I’m writing down all these great thoughts. Thank God, everyone can see that my hands are busy.”¹

This anecdote nicely depicts the major problem I want to discuss in this essay: In a society where the circulation of symbolic forms—including forms of public self-presentation—is heavily controlled and predetermined, how does one effectively detach oneself from the dominant symbolic order? What are the tools that allowed the Soviet subject to simultaneously produce an impression of being loyal to the regime while at least partially abstaining from its practices?

I argue that the answer lies in the mechanism of transgressive imitation so vividly demonstrated by Shostakovich. This crime of substitution, as I call it, helped maintain the apparent integrity of the (Soviet) symbolic field, yet constantly revealed a profound discordance between performance and intention. The various crimes of substitution I will examine in this essay did not attempt to counter the dominant framework of signification with an alternative, but rather unfolded within the range of already existing possibilities. Instead of challenging the symbolic order by introducing new symbolic forms, crimes of substitution focused on codes and interpretations that could be associated with these original forms. As Shostakovich’s method for dealing with the regime demonstrates, crimes of substitution have very little in common with an art of deception, impersonation, and imposture aimed to produce an expected yet misleading reaction.² Responding to Khrushchev’s speech with his own writing, Shostakovich built his tactic on a fundamental flaw that any hegemonic system of interpellation tries, if not to mask, then at least to displace: while constituting the subject in the process of hailing, interpellation fails to determine the nature of the subject’s response.³ As Michel de Certeau observes, signifying tactics that allow for this indeterminacy are rooted in the subject’s inability to assume “proper” spatial or institutional localization in relation to a clear-cut “borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality.”⁴ It is this “improper” localization or, conversely, the failure of

1. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Volchii pasport* [A wolf’s passport] (Moscow: Vagrius, 1998), 282.

2. See, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Making a Self for the Times: Impersonation and Imposition in Twentieth-Century Russia,” *Kritika* 2: 469–87.

3. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 153–54; James Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47–48.

4. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix.

the symbolic order to fully “absorb” the subject that enables tactical interventions within “vocabularies of established languages” and “prescribed syntactical forms” to articulate “the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the system in which they develop.”⁵

To explore these issues, I want to look at several sources that deal with the notion of crime in late Soviet society.⁶ I will primarily focus on Ol’ga and Aleksandr Lavrov’s *The Experts Conduct an Investigation*, a collection of short detective stories written from the 1970s through the 1990s.⁷ Over a twenty-year period, the Lavrovs produced thirty-five screenplays for the TV film series with the same title. First broadcast in 1971, *The Experts* was one of the most popular shows ever on Soviet television, surviving the stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika, and even the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. The final episode of the series was shown in 1992.⁸

By discussing Soviet detective stories in relation to Soviet censorship and semiotics research, I want to investigate a broader crisis of representation in late Soviet society. Though different, each case nonetheless appears to utilize a common substitutive logic of signification: *The Experts* reveals the failure of metonymic socialist realism to protect the symbolic order from the corrupting influence of metaphorical parallelism; while the history of Soviet censorship shows how a strategy of repression resulted in a paranoid search for hidden analogies. In a similar vein, the analysis of cultural ambivalence led Soviet semioticians to conclude that the polysemic nature of signification itself could generate the discordant modes of representation characteristic of late Soviet culture.

A Crime (Story) of Our Own

Ernest Mandel has characterized the “ideology of the crime novel” in terms of “disorder being brought into order, order falling back into disorder; irrationality

5. Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xviii.

6. Following other authors, I will use the term “late Soviet” to describe a distinctive stage in the history of the Soviet Union from the 1960s through the 1980s, when brutal repression was replaced by more subtle relations between the Soviet regime and its subjects. See Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman, eds., *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

7. Ol’ga Lavrova and Aleksandr Lavrov, *Sledstvie vedut znatoki* [The Experts conduct an investigation] (Moscow: Veche, 1994); all references to this book are given in the text.

8. Elena Usacheva, “Dzheims Bond po-russki” [James Bond, Russian-style], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 4 July 1997.

upsetting rationality, [and] rationality restored after irrational upheavals.”⁹ For Mandel, these narratives expose the bourgeoisie’s lack of confidence in the social order: by criminalizing the unwelcome but inescapable conflicts between individuals and society, crime stories reaffirm the symbolic hegemony of the social status quo.¹⁰ But what narrative structure and rhetorical strategies would be adequate to detecting and criminalizing “individual revolts” against a symbolically different status quo, namely, the Soviet one? What kind of “individual revolt” could the socialist “society of collectives” even allow? And what sort of anxiety about the fundamental instability of rules and laws did the Soviet crime story try to displace?

In the 1940s, Sergei Eisenstein, emphasizing the formulaic nature of the detective genre, maintained that it “lacks an ideological grasp of any kind”; therefore any cinematic attempt “to put material of the Bolshevik underground in traditional detective story forms . . . failed. When this was tried in the twenties and thirties, the result was . . . an almost naked constructivism, for a profound, serious content was squeezed into an unserious form.”¹¹ By the time of “developed socialism” in the 1970s and 1980s, the “naked constructivism” of early Soviet detective stories—called *detektiv*—was heavily dressed up in ideological clothing. Even in 1989, Geli Riabov, in the preface to his edition of *detektiv*, complained about the ideological saturation of the genre: “Casting a look at the prolific detective field of the recent past, we could hardly find anything that deserves either attention or respect: this field is rather plain, used up, deceitful, and fervent.”¹²

Yet it is apparently just this “naked” constructivism of the detective genre, supplemented by clear-cut Soviet “‘norms,’ ‘principles,’ ‘virtues,’ and ‘imperfections’ ‘approved’ from the above,” that helped the late Soviet *detektiv* draw a mass audience.¹³ Today, in the post-Soviet era, the *detektiv*’s narrative predictability and ideological overdetermination produce a nostalgic appeal. When the Lavrovs published their novelized screenplays in 1994, the book was marketed as part of a series called *Retro*. The Lavrovs evoke this appeal in their foreword:

9. Ernst Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 44.

10. Mandel, *Delightful Murder*, 8–10.

11. Sergei Eisenstein, *The Psychology of Composition*, ed. and trans. Alan Upchurch (Calcutta: Seagull, 1987), 91.

12. Geli Riabov, “Imenem zakona,” in *Imenem zakona: Sovremennyyi sovetskii detektiv* [In the name of the law: Contemporary Soviet detective stories], ed. G. Riabov (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1989), 4.

13. Riabov, “Imenem zakona,” 5.

Did you pick this book up contemplating whether to buy it or not? Go ahead and buy it! The book is wonderful—it contains stories about crimes (*detektiv*) but also about our own lives. The book's heroes have never heard the word *vautcher*,¹⁴ they have never tasted *Snickers*, and they have yet to learn how to say “*That’s your problem.*” For the period we lived through then was really incredible. The investigators were not thieves, and thieves were not bankers; members of the parliament were not yet accustomed to frequenting prison beds, and TV-viewers, after a dinner of potatoes and maybe something else (but not bananas!) would still watch how “the experts conduct the investigation.”(3)

Puzzling as it might sound, it is not the crime story per se that attracts and, perhaps, attracted readers’ interest. Nostalgia for the Soviet *detektiv* seems to be rooted in its historical verisimilitude; that is, in the specifically *Soviet* origin of the stories—their reflection of the “principles” and “imperfections” that, in fact, constituted this period. Evoking the “really incredible” Soviet era, when conflicting identities and milieus were (perceived as) one-dimensional and separate, *The Experts* promised to restore an unambiguous point of departure, a return to a neat and stable social taxonomy. Probably for this reason, the series was rebroadcast annually during the late 1990s despite the unusually poor quality of the original film. Capitalizing on this popularity, Russia’s largest TV company, First Channel, produced a sequel to the series and in February 2002 ran the first eight episodes of *The Experts Conduct an Investigation: Ten Years Later*, with more to follow.¹⁵

All of the stories in *The Experts* share the same basic format. The continuity of the series is sustained by three investigators working in the city of Moscow’s Department of Criminal Detection. The division of labor within the team is functional: Aleksandr Tomin, a chief inspector, finds clues and hunts down criminals; Zinaida Kibrit, a professional criminologist, conducts technical analysis of evidence; and the primary investigator, Pavel Pavlovich Znamenskii, interrogates criminals and checks documents. The gendered division of labor and space is

14. In 1991–92, Yeltsin’s government started a mass-scale privatization of state property, and each citizen was given a *vautcher* (voucher) meant to be invested in a piece of property. Increasingly, the *vautcher* has become a symbol of the crude and incomprehensible Westernization of post-Soviet Russia.

15. Il’ia Ognev, “Blagodaria militsioneram Tominu razreshili nosit’ baki” [Thanks to policemen, Tomin was permitted to have sideburns], *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 22 February 2002. Predictably, shortly before the sequel was shown on TV, a new (two-volume) edition of the Lavrov’s stories appeared in bookstores (see Ol’ga Lavrova and Aleksandr Lavrov, *On gde-to zdes’* [He is here somewhere] and *Do tret’ego vystrela* [Till the third shot] [Moscow: Olimp, 2001]).



Courtesy of Pervyi kanal television company

“The Experts Conduct an Investigation: Ten Years Later”—A promotional poster for the first post-Soviet episodes of *The Experts* television series distributed by Russian public television in spring 2002.

worth noting: collecting evidence is done in the field, mainly by Znamenskii and Tomin, yet the ultimate significance of their work is established by the technical expertise of Kibrit, in her laboratory. The unusually strong role of a woman in the decision-making process, her unique ability to confirm or disprove the initial hypotheses put forth by the men, is successfully neutralized by the source of Kibrit’s expertise. Unlike her male colleagues, who rely on embodied physical and intellectual capacities, Kibrit usually functions in the novels as a talking supplement to her criminological toolbox, as technical equipment with a human face, able to translate the data she receives into a common language.

The functional complementarity of the main characters is reflected on the symbolic level, too: the word *znatoki* found in the title abbreviates three protagonists’ names: *Zna*-menskii, *To*-min, and *Ki*-brit. The final combination, *zna-to-*

criminal act can, I believe, be seen as the distinctive feature of the socialist understanding of crime.

To some degree, this conclusion supports an observation made in 1962 by Ernst Kaemmel, an East German literary critic. Speculating about the detective genre's future in the socialist state, Kaemmel pointed out that it is "scarcely conceivable that the investigation of a criminal in a socialist society could be a solo performance of a private man, an outsider if necessary, against the collective work of the police and of the organs of state, indeed against the cooperation of the populace."¹⁹ What *The Experts* apparently adds to this conclusion is the idea not only that detection fails to be a "solo performance" in a socialist society, but also that crime itself ceases to be a private matter.²⁰

Certainly, the rhetorical collectivization of crime in *detektivny* participated in broader discourses found in criminology textbooks and scholarly monographs of the period. In the 1970s and 1980s, legal debates on the "essence of socialist crime" tried to bridge the logical gap between an understanding of individual behavior as socially conditioned and the general view that Soviet society had been freed from the causes of crime. The authors of *The Course of Soviet Criminology* (1985), an important textbook for law school students, laid out the terms of the paradox: "What are the causes of the individualistic (*individualisticheskoi*) position that . . . occupies the core of various crimes in socialist society? Given that neither the nature of the dominant social relations nor what Marx called a 'pure spontaneity' could make possible the very emergence of such a position, what, then, could determine the very possibility of its existence as well as its manifestation . . . ?"²¹

The "given" impossibility of the criminal(ized) "individualistic position" forced a peculiar displacement of the problem: the "socialist" criminal personality was still construed as "an accumulation of the influences of the social environment,"²²

19. Ernst Kaemmel, "Literature under the Table: The Detective Novel and Its Social Mission," in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, ed. Glenn Most and William Stowe (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 61.

20. Symptomatically, the portrayal of "collectivized" crime in the novels differed radically from the Soviet authorities' official position. The very term "organized crime" was under official erasure. The first Soviet study of organized crime, written by Aleksandr Gurov, was rejected by state-owned publishing houses for nine years before it finally came out in 1985 under the title *Criminal Professionalism and the Struggle against It*. See Aleksandr Gurov, *Krasnaia mafia* [A Red mafia] (Moscow: Samotsvet, 1995), 145.

21. V. N. Kudriavtsev, I. I. Karpets, and B. V. Korobeinikov, eds. *Kurs sovetskoi kriminologii* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaya Literatura, 1985), 223.

22. Kudriavtsev et al., *Kurs sovetskoi kriminologii*, 251.

and “socialist” crime came to be seen as a result of the individual’s membership in criminally oriented “small social groups and milieus.”²³ This strategy located the “criminogenic,” while foreclosing the question of which “social environments” made groups “criminal” in the first place. Instead, legal discussions focused on the “extent of social damage” of criminal behavior on the system of social(ist) relations as a whole. Thus, Vladimir Prokhorov, author of *Crime and Responsibility* (1984), observed that Soviet “crime demonstrates its real essence only through the social relations that it violates, because . . . it acts as a substitute for the ‘normal’ link in the system of social relations. One can call this substitute a conflict relation and juxtapose it to the ‘normal’ one, or one can construe it as a social antipode (an opposite) of the normal relation.”²⁴

I shall deal later with this attempt to construe crime in Soviet society as a phenomenon whose very existence undermines the social order. For the time being, I want to stress how the Soviet *detektiv* and Soviet criminology tended to present crime as a collective activity substituting for a system of “normal social relations.”

Reversing the Order

Mysterious disappearances and deaths are not often the focus of *detektivy*; only one story in *The Experts* deals with a murder. This convention presents a formulaic dilemma: given the absence of both a detective-outsider and a mysterious murder(er), how exactly can a “social threat” be presented? The stories’ obsessive repetition of a single theme indicates one possible answer.

Of the eleven stories in *The Experts*, two are psychological dramas depicting various misfortunes, and the remaining nine stories present situations in which the Experts have to solve crimes: one depicts a disguised spy, two portray illegal networks involved in operations with foreign currency and gold, and six deal with various types of industrial and artistic forgery and counterfeiting. These

23. For example, the authors of the collective monograph *The Mechanism of Criminal Behavior* (1981) stated that the “relative independence of a small social group can result in the creation of norms of behavior and group values that do not coincide with the norms and values accepted by society and sanctioned by the state. . . . Internal group conflicts can have a damaging influence on the self-perception and behavior of the members of the group; especially when these conflicts force every member to define a clear position in regard to conflicting parts, that is, to take a side in the conflict. These conflicts may turn into a source of various transgressions of law.” V. N. Kudriavtsev, ed., *Mekhanizm prestupnogo povedeniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 23–24.

24. Vladimir Prokhorov, *Prestuplenie i otvetstvennost’* [Crime and responsibility] (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1984), 51.

themes of parallelism in *The Experts* seem to indicate that threats are associated not so much with disruptions to social relations as with the possible existence of yet another system whose latent manifestations radically decenter the universalizing claims of the dominant symbolic order. One might argue, contrary to Mandel, that the source of anxiety in the *detektiv* has little—if anything—to do with the issue of disruption. Instead, the narrative structure of Soviet detection and crime is characterized by the discord between simultaneously enacted yet non-coinciding signifying practices within a single symbolic field. In structural terms, we might say that it is the unstable connection between signifier and signified intrinsic to the phenomenon of duplication that functions as the constitutive lack of the formulaic structure of Soviet criminal narratives.²⁵ To make this point clearer, let us return to the *detektiv* themselves.

The short story “Left and Never Came Back” focuses on an economic crime typical under late socialism. As the narrator explains, “bolts of illegally made fabric were discovered in stores from several neighboring provinces (*oblasti*). The store managers established that all the bolts had been processed at the same dye factory. . . . Even though Kibrit quickly figured out the factory’s technology and Znamenskii its accounting system, they both realized that the case could not be solved promptly. It was totally unclear who stole the fabric, how it was stolen, or how much of it was stolen” (266).

This description covers most of the stereotypical features of late Soviet discourse on crime. First, criminality is associated with a surplus that reveals the internal failure of the legal system, so that crime appears to supplement rather than disrupt the existing social order. The supplementary character of this crime, undertaken by nameless factory workers, in turn produces an unidentifiable victim: hence, rather than focus on the illegal and harmful *outcome* of the crime, the investigation attends to the *process* already qualified as criminal. This preoccupation with the internal structure of the criminal process manifests an indifference to the geographical limits of the crime scene (which covers “several neighboring provinces”).

In order to map out the crime, Znamenskii traces the steps of the factory’s productive process: first, the wool is delivered in piles; then it is cleaned and processed into fabric; and, finally, the fabric is dyed and dried. He discovers that the metric applied to the incoming raw material (wool) does not correspond to

25. For more about an original “lack,” “insufficiency,” and “shortage” as constitutive elements of a formulaic story, see Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 34.

that applied to the output (dyed fabric): wool is measured in kilograms, fabric in meters. Because each shipment of wool contains varying amounts of dirt, it turns out to be impossible to establish correlations between the amount of raw material used and the quantity of fabric finally produced.

During their investigation, the Experts learn that at the final, controlling stage of the drying process, a team of workers would cut out pieces of standard as well as flawed cloth while checking the quality of the fabric. These small bolts of standard fabric would then be distributed throughout regional stores. The incommensurability between kilograms and meters enabled the workers to sustain this criminal circulation of “illegal fabric” for years.

As this story makes clear, the substitutions characteristic of Soviet crime depended on the ability to strategically apply various metrics to the same object. The pile of wool could be measured not only by weight but by length. In other words, the value of an object was based on its various patterns of use; and it was precisely the criminal’s ability to figure out a more useful path of circulation that transformed the legal commodity into an illegal one.

Reviewing a criminal case from the late 1970s, in which the managers of several Moscow stores were charged with embezzlement, Aleksandr Gurov, an expert on organized crime, concluded that “basically all three hundred thousand employees of the Moscow retail system were involved in criminal activity. The system was rather complicated, but drew on state institutions in a way that did not require any special management. For the purpose of personal enrichment, the system was just slightly modified.”²⁶ I believe that what made Soviet crimes of substitution possible in the first place was the fact that even a *slight* modification could criminalize a state-based system of relations without any “special management.” Or, as “Left and Never Came Back” suggests, crimes of substitution were possible due to the peculiar standpoint from which—to use Lotman’s idea stated in the epigraph—a sign/object could be located at the union of incommensurable codes.²⁷ Yet another story from *The Experts* gives a more detailed account of this criminal strategy.

“A Natural Loss” is set in a Moscow restaurant where Znamenskii is supervising a financial audit (*proverka*). Or, rather, two kinds of audits: a “direct” and a “reverse.” The direct audit cross-checks the amount of money deposited by the cashier with the actual prices of the dishes sold during the same period.²⁸ The

26. Gurov, *Krasnaia mafia*, 59–60.

27. Yurii Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, University of Michigan, 1977 [1971]), 59.

28. Under the Soviet regime, all prices were subject to control by Goskomsen (the state committee on prices).

reverse audit is more reliable but also more demanding, as the following excerpt illustrates:

For example, the restaurant got half a ton of veal from a supplier and for three days in a row the restaurant's special was patties with mushroom sauce.²⁹ A fried patty has a legally established weight, which can be reached only by using a large amount of the raw meat.

As soon you start checking whether the amount of veal received corresponds to the weight of the patties, it becomes clear that way too many patties showed up on the starched tablecloths. And then the second stage follows; one has to find out how that became possible: were the patties underweight or were they made from a different sort of meat altogether? Was there too little veal on the plates or did some, most likely drunk, customers eat beef instead? . . . And then, mushrooms, eggs, and fats and oils also have to be accounted for. (89)

Certainly, taken at face value, these descriptions of direct and reverse audits could hardly be expected to thrill readers. And yet, as I have suggested, the excitement of the Soviet *detektiv* did not lie in the fantasy that the dominant order could be violated. On the contrary, the Soviet *detektiv* understands crime as a sign-mediated activity that detaches value from a commodity and then uses this commodity to invest in new value. The narrator of *The Experts* describes the structural logic underlying this criminal mode of signification:

So-called "economic crimes" have a certain fascination for professional investigators. Like a criminal hiding from the chase, numbers in financial reports can sneak from one document to another, they can fade away for some time and then reemerge somewhere else or vanish forever. The adventures of some financial reports are sometimes much more complicated and confusing than the leaps and tricks of an experienced thief. More than that: hiding in different corners, numbers and reports purposefully try to keep away from each other. As a result, they all have to be traced down, caught, brought together, and only then can one attempt to prove that they belong to the "same gang." (271)

It is interesting to see here how the trajectory of the criminal is projected onto documents. Writing itself is transformed into a potential crime scene, and, by losing any referential function, numbers begin to start performing their own crimes — as if explicitly mimicking Shostakovich's tactic of asymmetric response. In adopt-

29. Restaurants and their suppliers were state-controlled properties.

ing the new ideology of crime, the regime itself reacts in a similar way: by reading inscriptions that have a purely ritual significance. Checking word by word, step by step, link by link, the investigation metonymically restored the signifying chain in its entirety, instantiating a fantasy of the completeness of the symbolic order. This is an order whose consistency can be checked both “directly” and then again in a “reverse” manner.

By reversing the usual order in the restaurant, Znamenskii reestablishes the broken correspondence between the reported numbers and the materiality of the starched tablecloths: the restaurant’s bakery actively substituted water for milk, margarine for butter, and vodka for brandy, keeping the name (and the price) of the original commodity unchanged.

The structural condition of possibility for this strategy of substitution was a heavily regulated system of exchange, distribution, and labor that lacked the mediating link of a universal monetary equivalent. The absence of any common denominator that could translate piles of wool into meters of fabric acted as a catalyst for changing the goods’ patterns of circulation. In his study of Soviet economic crime, Fridrikh Neznanskii, a former Soviet legal official, indicates that there were two major ways to conduct large-scale crimes: either “goods [were] diverted from the state-run economy into the illegal black market . . . or raw materials, equipment and labor [were] diverted clandestinely into privately organized enterprises for the production of goods.”³⁰ In an economy where the sphere of exchange ceased to bring profit, and the circulation of commodities was both limited and heavily regulated, criminals were able to divert the flow of goods while maintaining the appearance of (symbolic) order. As Michel de Certeau pointed out in a similar context, “they diverted [the system] without leaving it.”³¹

It is instructive to see how a real-life crime, similar to the one depicted in “A Natural Loss,” was commented on in a trial report. “The End of the ‘Insatiable,’” a reportage piece published in a 1978 book of true-crime stories, describes the trial of several employees of an expensive restaurant in downtown Kiev. The restaurant’s chef, Lidia Yelkina, was charged with “stealing an especially large amount of state property.”³² Describing the “world of these people” as a “some-how different world, in which everything is turned inside out,” the reporter writes:

30. Fridrikh Neznanskii, *The Prosecution of Economic Crimes in the USSR: 1954–1984* (Falls Church, Va.: Delphic Associates Inc., 1985), 99.

31. Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 32.

32. Yelkina was sentenced to fifteen years in prison; all her possessions were confiscated. Galina Uzhova, “Konets ‘nasytnykh’” [The end of the insatiable] in *Pered litsom zakona* [Before the law], ed. S. Semanov (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 135–36.

While reading the final statement of the court, I was increasingly losing myself. For patties, instead of filet of turkey, they used pork; broth was diluted with water by one-third, fruit drinks by two-thirds. They used pork fat instead of butter, a regular dough instead of the puffy one. This made it three times cheaper. They increased the weight of the final products by adding bread crumbs to patties and gelatin to aspic. For every fifty kilos of meat, they “saved” ten. In each dish they reduced the amount of sour cream and butter by two-thirds. Instead of preserved fruit, they served dill pickles. . . . From the “saved” products the thieves cooked up new orders. The most hilarious and surprising fact was that during this debauchery of crooks there was only one complaint about the food.³³

What is especially striking here is the reporter’s aside on the unsettling effect produced by these crimes—the nontransparency of a world turned “inside out,” even when it openly manifests itself. To lose one’s sense of orientation, it is enough to realize that a “proportional” relation between signifier and signified can sometimes be as low as one in three. The reason for this symbolic vertigo obviously lies in the very act of substitution, which not only violates the usual trajectory of signification but also points toward the conventionality of names and connections that were taken for granted for so long.

In the case of the fictitious restaurant described in *The Experts*, tactical exploitation of socialist taxonomies was a source not of vertigo but of financial profit. The Soviet system of regulated prices was based on a marked difference between goods sold for “mass consumption” and “luxury goods”; for example, baked rolls were cheap and pastries were expensive regardless of how much their labor and ingredients cost. Taking the stability of price categories as a guiding principle, the pastry chef developed a special baked good that could be reported to the state as a roll but that used ingredients meant for pastries, and could be sold to the public as such. On paper, the bakery produced rolls, sold rolls, and deposited money paid for rolls. The real circulation, however, involved pastries and correspondingly different amounts of money. Again, what is remarkable here is the fact that the materiality of the product (a “baked entity”) remained intact on paper and in real life, while the cash flow was determined by an alternate encoding of the same object and by the separate circulation of its two symbolic forms (rolls and pastries). However, the two systems of circulation neither opposed nor undermined one another, each being in a state of supplementary, if discordant, coexistence.

33. Uzhova, “Konets ‘nenasytnykh,’” 137.

It might help to approach the convolutions of Soviet economic crimes by way of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. As Marx emphasizes, it is only during the process of commodity *exchange*, by establishing the *exchange-value* of a particular commodity, that individuals "try to decipher the hieroglyphic" of products in which their labor was invested.³⁴ But what happens when this value is fixed—when the answer to the hieroglyphic puzzle of the commodity, right or wrong, is prescribed in advance "from above"? How, then, does the Soviet (criminal) commodity sustain its mysterious nature, if it sustains it at all? I believe that it does, and that the *detektivy* show how the ambiguity of *use-value*—the commodity's ability to satisfy human desires—acted as the ground of both mystification and criminal substitution.

To put it somewhat differently, in a situation where the rates and rites of exchange are predetermined, the physical body of the commodity itself becomes the ultimate horizon of puzzling "subtleties" and "niceties,"³⁵ resulting in a proliferation of the commodity's modes of use. As a result, the properties of the roll from the restaurant, which was sold as a pastry made from ingredients needed for a roll, become just as unpredictable as the market behavior of Marx's wooden table.³⁶ In the absence of capital, the phantasmagoria of the *socialist* commodity-to-be, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, begins long before market exchange becomes possible: what turns an "ordinary sensuous thing" into a "ghostly" object is the inability to predict or arrest the incessant modification of a use-value that ceases to be "identical to itself."³⁷ There "are no more eternal values . . . in the things themselves," as Jean-Joseph Goux puts it, "there are only subjectivities that confer value."³⁸

In late Soviet society, this ability to exercise the individual subject's power to confer different values was, no doubt, a function of the economy of planned shortages; yet it was the shortage of signifiers available to commercial and symbolic exchange that precipitated a proliferation of value differentiation. When the functioning of the economic and, perhaps, political systems depends on the

34. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1990), 167.

35. Marx, *Capital*, 163.

36. "As soon as it emerges as a commodity, . . . [the table] not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will." Marx, *Capital*, 163–64.

37. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 159, 160.

38. Jean-Joseph Goux, "Utility: Equivocation and Demoralisation," *Discourse* 23, no. 3 (2001): 14.

impenetrability of their borders and categories, the internal structure of their elements undergoes intense changes. The limited repertoire of symbolic forms was overcome—to use the language of Soviet semiotics—mainly through an active exploitation of the figurative and metaphoric potential of these forms.³⁹ Much like an aphasic whose linguistic handicaps are counterbalanced by various strategies of symbolic compensation, the late Soviet subject often avoided symbolic constraints by increasing “internal differentiation of the sign, at times transforming it into a set of homonyms.”⁴⁰

In *The Experts*, the shortage of symbolic forms constitutive of the late Soviet order is vividly apparent in the unusual role of geography in Soviet detection.⁴¹ Numerous critics have observed that the detective genre requires social closure in order to restrict the number of suspects and clues. But crime and investigation in *The Experts* are only infrequently limited by spatial boundaries: rolls disguised as pastries circulate throughout Moscow, while “illegal” bolts of fabric easily cover several provinces—as do experts and criminals. What is limited in *The Experts* is not so much the scope of the crime scene but the symbolic system itself. The number of objects that can potentially serve as clues is seen as inherently finite. For example, in a story in which a foreign spy masquerades as a homeless person, successful detection depends on the Experts’ ability to verify whatever claims the spy makes about his identity. Every time he assumes the name of a person he met before, the Experts are able to locate the people whose names he assumes and thus disprove the criminal’s alias by reconstructing the missing links. Such a logic of universal restorability is also used to determine the fact of criminal excess: the key role in identifying the spy is played by a sign excluded from the Soviet system. Using spectral analysis, Kibrit discovers that the materials in the spy’s dental filling were not and had never been used “on our territory,” as she puts it (88). Successful detection in the (closed) Soviet universe was based on the limited number of available elements, as well as on the regime’s ability to keep this number from expanding. Geography became irrelevant as soon as the production and dissemination of symbols was under control.

39. Viacheslav Ivanov, *Ocherki po istorii semiotiki v SSSR* [Essays on the history of semiotics in the USSR] (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), 142.

40. G. S. Knabe, “Znak. Istina. Krug. (Y. M. Lotman i problema postmoderna)” [Sign. Truth. Circle. (Y. M. Lotman and the problem of postmodernism)], in *Lotmanovskii sbornik # 1* [The Lotman collection # 1], ed. E. Permiakov (Moscow: IZ-Garant, 1995), 271. I discuss aphasia as a form of symbolic production at length in my essay “In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52 (2000): 991–1016.

41. See, e.g., Ronald Arbuthnott Knox, “A Detective Story Decalogue,” in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robin Winks (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 200.

Criminal Analogies

The structuralist faith in the closed character of the signifying system and in the restorability of its links—vividly reflected by the Soviet *detektiv*—had a political foundation, as well. The Soviet system of law tried to present itself as all-encompassing and all-inclusive, rhetorically (and physically) eliminating all possibilities for nonsystemic phenomena. Law, in other words, was supposed to act as the primary object against which all other subjects, objects, and events would function as mere metonymies. In 1982, the first deputy of the chief prosecutor of the USSR explicitly formulated this view: “Sometimes one can hear people saying that the crime was committed because the person did not know the law. I want to respond to this definitively: such a thing is impossible . . . every law in our country is rooted in the very lifestyle of our society, in the ethos (*moral*’) that literally saturates all interpersonal relationships, in families, in collectives, in public space. One cannot not know this.”⁴²

What, however, should be done with those who do *not* know or do not *want* to know the obvious? Again, the solution coincides with a structuralist ideology: if the signifier becomes problematic, get rid of the signifier. As Fedor Nikitinskii, a legal journalist, wrote in 1982: “Law in our country serves the interests of its dominant part. And this is a sign of the humanism and supreme justice of the Soviet legislation. Society not only has to, it must—in the interests of the majority—throw out the ballast: hooligans, thieves, plunderers, blackmailers, bribers, speculators, killers. There is no place for them among us. Like a growing tumor, they have to be removed from the healthy body of our society.”⁴³

As these quotes indicate, the omnipresence of Soviet law is construed primarily in terms of its violation; positive knowledge of law is replaced by what one “cannot not know.” This attempt to combine the all-embracing and all-penetrating ideality of Soviet law with the need to “throw out the ballast” exemplifies the constitutive role of censorship in the reproduction and misrecognition of any structuralist project. Claims about the controlled existence of the system can be sustained only through the constant negation of all that has been relegated beyond it. However, as psychoanalysis reminds us, the logic of repression has at least two major features that render its success impossible. First of all, repression fails to control the object whose existence it denies, and second, the repressed

42. A. M. Rekunkov, “Imenem zakona,” in *Pered litsom zakona* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1978), 6.

43. Fedor Nikitinskii, “U opasnoi cherty” [At the danger line], in *Vo imia cheloveka* [In the name of the human being], ed. V. A. Beliakov and M. E. Skriabin (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1982), 88.

object tends to reappear, even if in different forms and places. For repression of the object is nothing but a negation of the cause that makes the object differentiable in the first place.⁴⁴

The history of Soviet censorship—probably one of the most consequential and persistent attempts to instantiate structuralism—nicely demonstrates this double logic of repression. Without going into an extensive discussion, I want to focus on the transformation of censorship in the 1960s and 1970s, which exhibits a logic similar to what we have seen in crimes of substitution.

In 1922, when the Chief Department of Literature and Publishing (Glavlit) was established by the first Soviet regime, its main task was to “unify” all forms of state censorship. Glavlit’s inaugurating statute banned literature that (a) agitated against Soviet power; (b) disclosed military secrets; (c) incited public opinion by disseminating false information; or (d) had “a pornographic character.”⁴⁵ This list remained practically unchanged during almost seventy years of Soviet censorship. With the minor exception of samizdat, the Soviet government successfully monopolized the circulation of publications within the Soviet Union. By limiting the number of available signifiers, that is, by eliminating all signifiers that did not meet the ideological standards of the regime, Soviet authorities appeared to create a self-contained symbolic environment.

And yet, as Glavlit documents from the 1960s and 1970s indicate, this strategy of elimination could be effective only up to a point: to produce any effect of meaning, the signifying chain must be retained, even if in a severely constrained form. Ironically, it is exactly this striving for symbolic minimalism that grounded Soviet censorship but also drastically influenced its practice. Having “eliminated” openly subversive elements, the regime became preoccupied with the very possibility of the *emergence* of such elements, as well as with their *latent*, nontransparent presence. A classified KGB memo for the Soviet government notes that artistic work containing “double-meanings, [and] full of hints and allegories” was seen as a reason for increasing concern.⁴⁶ In 1966, for instance, the head of Glavlit wrote to the minister of publishing:

The Moscow Art Theater . . . has submitted for the control of Glavlit M. Roshchin’s play *The Seventh Feat of Hercules*. Acquaintance with the

44. Lacan puts it well: “What comes under the effect of repression returns, for repression and the return of the repressed are just two sides of the same coin. The repressed is always there, expressed in a perfectly articulated manner in symptoms and a host of other phenomena.” Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 12.

45. *Istoriia sovetsskoi politicheskoi tsenzury*, 35–36.

46. *Istoriia sovetsskoi politicheskoi tsenzury*, 149.

content of the play demonstrated that the play cannot be allowed for performance due to its ideological depravity (*porochnost*). As the basis for his play the author used the myth about the feat of Hercules, an ancient Greek hero, which describes how he cleaned up the Augean stables, a symbol of extreme dirtiness and negligence. Using this mythological narrative as a literary device, M. Roshchin, in our view, blackens Soviet reality, our socio-political regime (*obshchestvenno-politicheskii stroi*). Analogies can be obviously seen behind the play's narrative constructs and the statements of its characters.⁴⁷

Predictably, many of the “depraved” analogies discovered by censors were not intentional but read into the text. A bemused Arkadii Vaksberg, whose historical essays were banned in 1970 because of such “obvious analogies,” wrote twenty years later: “when working on the book—many years ago and now, preparing it for publication—I never had in mind anybody else besides the characters whose names are in the book. . . . The author did not seek analogies and ‘substitutes’—life itself created analogies, and life, too, helped to ‘substitute’ a more recent name in place of the older one.”⁴⁸

As Roman Jakobson reminds us, metonymy resists analogy: the unnecessary duplication of sign or object; and—above all—the ambiguity of links that join or separate signifiers.⁴⁹ This resistance is specifically tied to the lack of a metalanguage. Unlike metaphoric substitution, metonymic contiguity does not permit the reflexive thematization of its code.⁵⁰ As a result, any metaphoric break in the con-

47. *Istoriia sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury*, 555–56.

48. Arkadii Vaksberg, *Ne prodaëtsia vdokhnoven'e* [Inspiration is not for sale] (Moscow: Kniga, 1990), 7.

49. Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 81.

50. Jakobson and Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, 81. Such a failure of the system to describe itself was symptomatically reflected during one of the discussions about socialist arts conducted by the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. In 1964, Il'yichev, then the chair of the commission, asked in his speech: “Why have no basics of socialist aesthetics been created yet, why has socialist realism not been worked out, why is there no textbook or a scholarly monograph or just a simple book that could serve as a basis for understanding, as a certain template from which we could judge whether the basics of socialist aesthetics, whether the basics of the socialist realism are understood? . . . We surely have principles of socialist realism. But we do not have any that are well explicated and written down in an original, attractive, thought-provoking [*publitsisticheskii*] manner.” E. S. Afanas'eva et al., *Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS: 1958–1964. Dokumenty* [The ideological commissions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, 1958–64. Documents] (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2000), 454. What is missing in this description is the fact that an attempt to describe “socialist realism” as an artistic method would imply a certain distance from it, a certain break in continuity aimed at translating practices of socialist realism (and its way of life) into a different system of representation, aimed at producing an analogical picture of the system—precisely a move of metaphoric duplication that censorship resisted.

tinuity of reference amounts to a break with the system itself. For Soviet censors, analogy was thus the primary site of anxious investment. During a meeting with Soviet intellectuals and artists, Leonid Fedorovich Illyichev, chair of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, expressed the attitude clearly: “The principal sin of [supposedly] deep analysis [of socialist artworks] is that an event that took place under one set of circumstances is transplanted into another. This is anti-historical. This is depraved, detrimental, and wrong. From the ideological point of view it is damned worthless (*ni k chertu ne goditsia*).”⁵¹

As I have tried to show, the crimes of substitution depicted in *The Experts* parallel Glavlit’s “search for allusions”—its desperate attempts to establish the hegemony of the Soviet metonymic order—by making “as necessary as possible the contingent links on which its articulating power [was] based.”⁵² But, as “A Natural Loss” and Soviet history suggest, limiting the availability of symbolic forms does not thereby foreclose their meaningful excess. Unable to transact directly with banned signifiers, a potential criminal could break the established link between signifier and signified in order to smuggle baked goods called “pastries” as baked goods called “rolls.” This act of smuggling did more than appropriate a power of naming otherwise denied to individuals; the metaphoric substitution of one name or thing for another isolated the given name and exposed the signifying chain as a set of separated elements joined together.⁵³

Hypocrisy of a Chameleon

Censorship and detective writing were not the only genres to reflect the internal contradictions of late Soviet culture. One would also want to pay attention to academic work, such as the Tartu semiotic school of “secondary modeling systems,” which emerged in 1964 with Yurii Lotman (of the University of Tartu in Estonia) as its leader. The Tartu school’s efforts to apply cybernetic models to the humanities immediately drew accusations that it was promoting a poetics of templates and clichés (*poetika trafaretov*).⁵⁴ In response, Isaak Revzin, a Moscow scholar closely associated with the Tartu school, pointed out that “building the ‘models of

51. Afanas'eva et al., *Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS*, 429.

52. Ernesto Laclau, *The Politics of Rhetoric* (Colchester, England: Department of Government, University of Essex, 1998), 13.

53. See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 152.

54. I. Revzin, “O tseliakh strukturnogo izucheniia khudozhestvennogo tvorchestva” [On purposes of the structural study of art], *Voprosy literatury* 6 (1965): 85.

templates' (*modeli trafaretov*) could and should become a powerful tool [for] literary criticism" that deals with emergent forms of artistic production whose aesthetic value must reflect "creativity within the limits of the given model."⁵⁵

The school's apparently theoretical interest in multiplying possibilities for meaning "through [an] internal recoding" of cultural texts can be read as a political project of sorts.⁵⁶ Unlike in other crimes of substitution I have discussed, the school openly and reflexively called into question the stability of any given model.⁵⁷ Of special interest here are the school's persistent claims, first, that "incomplete intelligibility, ambiguity and polysemy" were inherent to "laws and social precepts," meaning that these laws and precepts were necessarily interpretable;⁵⁸ second, that the exchange of information is not the "passive transfer of a message" but always an act of translation, during which "the striving for adequacy enters into dramatic conflict with the impossibility of its complete realization";⁵⁹ and, finally and most importantly, that such a "drama" of translation might result in "a message's sender and receiver mak[ing] use of essentially different 'languages' that, nonetheless, have *the same external means of expression*."⁶⁰ The Tartu school's theory of meaning formalized the underlying logic of economic crimes of substitution. Both interventions circumvented an inability to activate the exchange-value of symbolic forms by modifying the internal qualities of these same forms through operations of "pragmatic transcoding."⁶¹

For our purposes, the most interesting theoretical contribution of the school is Lotman's conceptualization of *ambivalence*. In 1974, following Mikhail Bakhtin's studies of the polyphony of the word, Lotman wrote:⁶²

55. Revzin, "O tseliakh strukturnogo izucheniia," 85–86. See also Peter Seyffert, *Soviet Literary Structuralism: Background, Debate, Issues* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1985), 200–204.

56. Lotman, *Structure of the Artistic Text*, 35.

57. The school did perform its own crime of substitution; its revolutionary, by Soviet standards, academic commentaries and typologies of cultural practices ostensibly lacked examples from Soviet cultural reality. For more on the school's self-distancing from Soviet reality, see Boris Gasparov, "Tartuskaya shkola 1960-kh godov kak semioticheskii fenomen"[The Tartu school of the 1960s as a semiotic phenomenon], *Wiener Slavistischer Almanach* 23 (1989): 7–21.

58. Yurii Lotman and A. M. Pjatigorskij, "Text and Function," in *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, ed. Daniel Lucid (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 130.

59. Yurii Lotman, "Primary and Secondary Communication-Modeling Systems," in *Soviet Semiotics*, ed. Daniel Lucid (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 98.

60. A. V. Uspenskij, "Historia Sub Specie Semioticae," in *Soviet Semiotics*, ed. Daniel Lucid (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 108; italics added.

61. The term was coined by Yurii Lotman in 1965. See Ann Shukman, *Literature and Semiotics: A Study of the Writings of Yurii M. Lotman* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1977), 81.

62. On the uneasy relationship between Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Lotman's semiotics, see David M. Bethea, "Yurii Lotman in the 1980s: The Code and Its Relation to Literary Biography," in

The state of ambivalence arises in two possible ways: as the relationship of a text to a system now not operative but preserved in cultural memory . . . and as the relationship of a text to two mutually unconnected systems, when, in the light of one system, the text is permitted, but, in the light of the other, forbidden.

Ambivalence is possible because in a culture's memory (i.e., the memory of any cultural collective, including the individual) there is preserved not one, but a whole set of metasystems regulating its behavior. These systems can be mutually un-connected and can possess different degrees of actuality. This makes it possible, by altering the place of one system or another on the scale of actuality and obligation, to translate a text from incorrect to correct, from forbidden to permissible. The functioning of ambivalence as the dynamic mechanism of culture, however, lies in the fact that the memory of the system in light of which the text was forbidden, does not fade, but is preserved on the periphery of the system's regulators.

In this way, it is possible to shift and reposition on the metalevels, thus altering the interpretation of the text, and also to reposition the text itself in relation to the metasystems.⁶³

The stability of ambivalence is construed here as essential to culture and cultural memory. Any attempt to pin down the meaning of a sign is doomed from the start due to its polysemic nature; any attempt to stabilize its valence will be challenged by the multiplicity of available signifying structures and the sign's translatability across these systems. Each sign or, following Bakhtin, each word, becomes the potential object of "lexical enlargement"⁶⁴—a "word with a loophole" (*slovo s lazeikoi*) preserving "the possibility of altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's words."⁶⁵

The obsession of late Soviet official discourse and institutions with "hints," "allusions," and "allegories," along with the Tartu school's seemingly academic insistence on multiply coded, unstable, "floating" texts, indicates a deeper anxiety

Reconstructing the Canon: Russian Writing in the 1980s, ed. Arnold McMillin (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 2000), 9–31.

63. Yurii Lotman, "The Dynamic Model of a Semiotic System," *Semiotica* 21, no. 3/4 (1977): 204–5.

64. Goux, "Utility: Equivocation and Demoralisation," 6.

65. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 233; for a discussion, see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 159–61.

about the ever present detachment of meaning from its appearance and practical realization. I want to finish this essay with another story from *The Experts*, in which the semiotic multivocality of the late Soviet symbolic field is especially prominent.

“Young Shepherd with Cucumber” begins in the Moscow International Airport customs office. *Young Shepherd with Cucumber*, a painting legally bought by a foreign tourist from a Moscow antique store with a certificate of authenticity, is taken for X-ray analysis. The X-ray shows that *Young Shepherd* was painted over *Young Girl with Apple*, an original work by Diego Velázquez that belongs to a provincial art museum. Tomin, trying to return the original *Young Girl*, phones the museum, only to learn that another *Young Girl* is hanging on its wall. Back at the antique store, Tomin is told that the painting seized in the airport, notwithstanding the certificate of authenticity presented by the tourist, is only a poor copy of the original *Young Shepherd*, which the store sold some time ago having certified its authenticity. In spite of Tomin’s efforts, the original *Young Shepherd* was never discovered. Meanwhile, an X-ray test of the *Young Girl* hanging in the art museum confirms that it is indeed a recently produced copy. Eventually, the director of the museum admits that there was a robbery several months earlier during which several paintings disappeared, but they were apparently recovered almost immediately from a nearby storehouse.

Detective work in Moscow leads Tomin to the Boborykin family. He learns that the family patriarch, a famous art dealer, occasionally hangs good imitations of famous Russian artworks (which he sells as originals) next to the old masterpieces in his collection in order to increase the prices of the former.⁶⁶ Boborykin’s daughter Muza, an expert on Fabergé, has published an article, “The Golden Age of Fabergé’s Silver,” in which she praises previously unknown works from Fabergé’s workshop that have started appearing on the Moscow antique market. From her husband’s friend, she has purchased a silver ashtray that she declares to be one of the most “talented” pieces in Fabergé’s legacy. Yet a chemical analysis of the “newly discovered” work, undertaken by Kibrit, reveals that it is at most only several weeks old, even though its authenticating seal is identical with those found on Fabergé artifacts in the Kremlin Armory and Diamond Fund. Tomin finally establishes that Boborykin himself has used an original seal, bought long ago from a relative of Fabergé’s student, to authenticate the newly made silver sculptures.

66. There was no independent art market in the Soviet Union; or rather, the only market that existed was official. Artworks that did not have the sanction of the regime were usually sold or exchanged through quasi-legal informal gatherings in people’s apartments.

In collaboration with the art museum, Tomin discovers that some time before the robbery, a group of art students was allowed to copy several pictures displayed in the museum, including *Young Girl*. An official letter from a local restaurant, found in the museum's records, states that all of the copies were purchased by the restaurant for interior decoration. Further investigation reveals that the letter, though written on official letterhead, was fabricated and that the restaurant never intended to acquire even a single copy of the picture. Almost accidentally, Tomin discovers that Muza's husband engineered the theft, forgery, and replacement of the museum's paintings with copies that were easily found right after the robbery. The stolen paintings, in turn, were intended to be sold to foreigners who would smuggle them out of the country. The plan was that the originals from the museum would be painted over with copies of less valuable pictures, which foreigners could then purchase in antique stores with the certificate of authenticity needed for taking the picture out of the country.

Though exaggerated, this proliferation of appearances within the Soviet symbolic order—an old painting is covered over by a recent one, which in turn is the copy of an even older painting—is an excellent illustration of the point I have been trying to make. The symbolic field of late Soviet society underwent a fundamental transformation from the 1960s to the 1980s that to a large degree relieved notions of “authenticity,” “copy,” “original,” “representation,” “disguise,” and “expertise” of their normative meanings and regulating functions. The original might well be a copy, a copy might bear the signs of authenticity, and even profound expertise could not eliminate the possibility of misrecognition, that is, of seeing something one could not actually see.

It is no accident that the similarly multilayered, convoluted, and free-floating properties of the symbolic order were described by Soviet semiotics as not only inherent to the text or sign itself, but also as the result of individual activity. Many Soviet semioticians pointed out that subjects respond to a lack of correspondence between themselves and the world by “semioticing . . . [their] surrounding reality.”⁶⁷ To frame it slightly differently, the proliferation of codes and ways of reading reality might be seen as a manifestation of just this partial detachment from reality. Or, to invert the proposition, it can be seen as the dominant symbolic order's failure to fully absorb its subjects and entirely determine their modes of response. A popular political joke from the late 1970s and early 1980s nicely cap-

67. A. M. Pjatigorskij and B. A. Uspenskij, “The Classification of Personality As a Semiotic Problem,” in *Soviet Semiotics*, ed. Daniel Lucid (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 147.

tures the period's discord: A patient goes to the doctor and describes his symptoms. "Doctor," he says, "Something strange is happening to me: I think about one thing, I say something else, and what I do is totally different from both. Help me, doctor!" Without missing a beat, the doctor replies: "We do not treat Communism."

Yet this structural discordance of the late Soviet symbolic field did not produce "alternative" strategies of signification or systems of signs. Instead, the symbolic field increasingly relied on various forms of substitutive practice performed by a Soviet subject who was "perfectly capable of manipulating the signified without, however, forgetting that he is anchored in the signifier that carries him, and that he—a speaker attentive to the materiality of his language—always hears and understands."⁶⁸

At the very beginning of *The Experts*, Tomin contemplates the nature of his job, recalling a lesson he was taught by one of his teachers many years ago. The detective service is not a theater—he was told—one slip of the tongue, one false move, and you might not survive. Epitomizing the philosophy of the time, Tomin asks himself: "Can one call a chameleon hypocritical? Even if hypocrisy is the only condition of its existence?" (4). Can one?

Serguei Alex. Oushakine, an associate professor in the Department of Cultural Studies at Altai State Technical University in Barnaul, Siberia (Russia), is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at Columbia University. He is the author of "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* (spring 2001), and "The Fatal Splitting: Symbolizing Anxiety in Post-Soviet Russia," *Ethnos* (November 2001).

68. Julia Kristeva, *Language—the Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistics*, trans. Anne M. Menke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 53.