



INTRODUCTION:  
THE AMUSING DISTURBANCE OF SOVIET  
LAUGHTER

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**Abstract**

This paper by the guest editors serves as an introduction to the present special issue of *Russian Literature*, entitled “Totalitarian Laughter: Images – Sounds – Performers”. It provides an overview of the contributions, which discuss laughter, the comical, humour, irony, parody and related phenomena, and their roles in Soviet cultural life and politics.

Keywords: *Laughter; Soviet Cultural Life*

Throughout its history, socialist mass culture actively employed satire, humor, and comedy to foster emotional bonds with its audience. Orchestrated by the state cultural industry, public laughter released social and political tension while maintaining a balance between ignoring and buttressing the institutions of power. In turn, late Soviet irony or the aesthetics of grotesque that evolved “from below” became instrumental in articulating a cultural distance from the values promoted by the socialist state. Despite the heterogeneity of their impact and scope, these cultures of the comic invariably re-engaged the irrationality and ludicrousness of socialist life. Whether officially approved or censored, totalitarian laughter relativized existing practices

and norms and suggested alternative models for understanding and embodying discourses and values of “really existing” socialism.

Despite their different content, these jokes of repression shared one common quality: they were made, not found. Moreover, since the early days of its existence, the Soviet government took the “problem of laughter” seriously. By stimulating perennial intellectual debates about the nature of the comic under socialism and by creating a diverse economic infrastructure (press, radio, theater, cinema, etc.), it produced a material and ideological environment broad enough to accommodate both official and non-official comedic forms. It is as impossible to imagine the Soviet Union without *anekdoty* or the ironic art of the stagnation era as it is to imagine it without Stalinist musicals.

Jarring as it might be, the structural and semantic polyphony of Soviet comic practices was also somewhat predictable. As Slavoj Žižek argued over two decades ago, attempting to link laughter with its “liberating, anti-totalitarian force” can be rather misleading: the appeal to the possibility of ironic detachment (and social distancing) is nothing more than the intellectualized outcome of a “spaghetti structuralism”: “[I]n contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, that cynical distance, laughter, irony, are so to speak, part of the game.”<sup>1</sup> Laughter, in other words, is always already totalitarian now. And not just now. More than a decade before Žižek’s radical idea of “totalitarian laughter”, Hayden White stressed in his analysis of the European historiography of the 19th century that it was the genre of comedy that consistently structured historical narratives around the theme of *reconciliation*, pushing forward integrative structures and processes.<sup>2</sup>

Against this intellectual background, the history of comic genres in Soviet Russia can be seen as a paradigmatic example of cultural production that not only incorporated the laughter of alienation (ironic or otherwise) into Soviet culture but also managed to transcode (often inadvertently) potential dissent into reconciliation. This tendency started taking shape at the very inception of Soviet rule. As early as 1920, Anatolij Lunačarskij, the first People’s Commissar of the Enlightenment, would take the time to write an article with the programmatic title “We will laugh”:

We live in a hungry and cold country that was being torn into pieces only a short time ago. But I often hear laughter, I see smiling faces on the street. [...] This means that our strength (сила) has not been depleted; for laughter is a sign of strength. More: laughter is not just a sign of strength; it is strength itself. And it should be channeled in the right direction. [...] Laughter is a sign of victory.<sup>3</sup>

Lunačarskij was rather optimistic at the time. It would take quite a while before Soviet laughter would be channeled properly: as in many other cul-

tural domains of the new Soviet state, it was not very clear which direction was unquestionably “right”. In 1923, *Krasnaja pečat’* (*The Red Press*), a leading Bolshevik magazine, published Jakov Šafir’s article, ‘Why Are We Incapable of Laughing?’, in an open polemic with Lunačarskij. Offering a pragmatic interpretation of Lunačarskij’s suggestion that laughter is a sign of strength, Šafir explained that “the most important reason we are unable to laugh is that our press [печать] has not yet discovered its own big theme, its own enemy, which would be worthy of its full attention”.<sup>4</sup> This early Soviet attempt to triangulate laughter between strength and the enemy is crucial for understanding the constitutive negativity of Soviet comic genres; yet it would be inaccurate to limit these genres solely to the search for a worthy foe. Responding to Šafir’s article a few months later, Nikolaj Kryneckij highlighted another important aspect of the production of “red laughter” in post-revolutionary Russia. Explaining the lack of laughter in the proletariat’s vocabulary of expressive means, Kryneckij wrote:

War, revolution, hunger, struggle, the degradation of industry, unemployment – the fundamental breakdown [ломка] of everything, hard conditions of existence all around – all that was not entirely conducive to laughter. Even when the worker was able to laugh, it was a brisk, short, harsh, revolutionary laughter. This type of laughter did not find its representation in the press yet, because new forms of laughter were lacking, while the old frames of feuilleton laughter did not fit anymore... We cannot – we have not – learned to write the “funny” [смешно].<sup>5</sup>

The present special issue *Totalitarian Laughter: Images – Sounds – Performers* is an attempt to trace how the Soviet regime and the Soviet people learned to write and behave in a “funny” way. Some articles included in the issue were presented at the conference *Totalitarian Laughter: Cultures of the Comic under Socialism*, which took place at Princeton University on May 8-9, 2009;<sup>6</sup> other contributors joined the project at a later stage. The issue is structured as a collection of thematic clusters, each one emphasizing a particular facet of comic genres under socialism. Along with commenting on each contribution individually, we would like to highlight a few common threads that run throughout the collection.

Dragan Kujundžić’s essay reminds us of Marx’s assertion in *The 18th Brumaire* that history is a repetition of genre. Following Marx – although not without a certain displacement – Kujundžić points out that the “second coming of history as parody is one of the predominant traits of the Soviet revolution of 1917 and the aesthetic practices that it engendered”. Indeed, parody and the parodic emerge as key concepts in this collection. In some articles they are deployed directly, in others they come in disguise: for instance, as irony, *stiob*, or “the carnival mirror”. Yet in all such cases, there is

a strong emphasis on the double structure – the dual origin, so to speak – of Soviet laughter.

Parody by definition is parasitic, grafting itself onto an already existing narrative, visual, or political structure. Yet this secondary and derivative origin of parody should not obfuscate its effect. In her influential studies of irony and parody, Linda Hutcheon develops a theory of parodic irony that addresses “multiple discursive communities” which “cannot be reduced to any single component such as class or gender”.<sup>7</sup> Using Bakhtinian genre-theory, Hutcheon suggests that a unique symbiotic (“social, choral”) relationship might emerge between the “ironist, the interpreter and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation” within a cultural context that “allows irony to happen”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the enunciative context in which creative ironic trans-contextualization takes place often results in a “bitextual synthesis” and a “dialectic of autonomy”,<sup>9</sup> mirroring the conceptual vocabulary of the Russian formalists in their efforts to theorize the genre.

Russian formalists in general and Viktor Šklovskij in particular viewed parodic irony as one of the dominant forces at work in aesthetic transformation. As a powerful tool for putting aesthetics’ “old wine” into new skins, parody was considered capable of breaking down the automatic perception with which we engage old forms via defamiliarization or estrangement (*ostranenie*). In part, this process was related to the substitution of “high” artistic forms with “lower” ones. According to Šklovskij, the initial impulse of ironic parodization is endowed with a major creative force.<sup>10</sup> As Margaret Rose has suggested,<sup>11</sup> Šklovskij’s vested interest in parody corresponds to his enduring fascination with contrast, difference, and discontinuity – devices that led him to make use of Broder Christiansen’s “perceptions of difference” (“Differenzempfindungen”).<sup>12</sup> A miracle worker, parody resurrects our cognition of the everyday. This process is not only metaphysically Christian but also conceptualist to a certain extent.

For many contributors to this volume, the parodic appropriation of dominant, official, or otherwise “external” forms presents a crucial mode of engagement through which cultural producers are able to borrow available cultural forms, while, at the same time, locating them in contexts radically different from those that were given. The related mechanism of cultural transfer and transposition is hardly original, yet it is important to keep in mind the specific dimension that parody adds to this dynamic. Jurij Tynjanov’s observations about the structural nature of the comic as produced by parody are helpful here. As Tynjanov indicated, it is “the imperfect connection” (“несовершенство связи”) between parody and parodied that results in a comic effect.<sup>13</sup> To put it somewhat differently, the comic here is not a result of the mimetic reproduction of the original; rather it is a certain consequence of the failure to do so. While reproducing the original, parody must highlight a lack of total correspondence with it; it must constantly keep its dual bases

of production apart and yet present in the same artistic space, even if only implicitly.

The derivative nature of parody, however, also introduces an important social problem. Its dual origin and double-voice are dangerously close to what might be deemed as duplicity in other contexts. Speaking about “the pure satire of modern times”, Michail Bachtin gets at the crux of the same structural issue: “The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world’s comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction.”<sup>14</sup> The problem, in other words, is locating the origin of the parodic voice. By placing himself “beyond” the object of his mockery, does not the parodist also place himself outside the existing social, political, or aesthetic system? Is parodic double-speak a purely aesthetic way of revitalizing old forms and re-energizing familiar structures, or is it also an implicit promise of alternate origins? This tendency to translate the parodic into the political can be traced throughout this issue; yet its tension is never fully resolved. The dual nature of parody keeps its promise and avoids any permanent localization. Thus, the conclusion that Anthony Qualin reaches in his discussion of Vladimir Vysockij – “it is clearly impossible to determine the extent to which Vysockij’s humor may have accelerated or delayed the fall of the USSR” – could be equally applied to almost any other contribution: parodic laughter defies a clear division between “us” and “them”, “original” and “derivative”, or “serious” and “mocking”.

This lack of clarity, this avoidance of definite epistemological, aesthetic, or political commitment unites the contributions to this volume. And, again, comic genres provide important organizational frameworks for capturing and representing precisely an experience of constitutive confusion. Francis Hutcheson, one of the founding fathers of the Scottish Enlightenment, in his *Thoughts on Laughter* (1725) thus arrived at a definition that would become common sense to the evolving theory of the comic: that laughter is a response to the perception of incongruity.<sup>15</sup> Humor frequently contains the unexpected; it often forces a sudden shift of perspective. Arguably, Russian conceptualists were among the most skillful practitioners of incongruity. They actively exploited the ironic and contradictory in order to illustrate an alternate order for social discourse. A primary link between language, laughter, and politics is the former’s capacity to delude, misguide, and generally manipulate “the masses”. This also partially relates to what Igor Smirnov once termed “visible and invisible humor” (“видимый и не видимый миру юмор”) in Vladimir Sorokin’s early conceptualist texts.<sup>16</sup> Smirnov offered an initial pattern of structuring conceptualist humor while taking into account the movement’s own interior hierarchy of created meanings.

However, the effect of this humor is firmly associated with grotesque parody in a post-Rabelaisian and post-Bakhtinian sense. Its use of shocking

devices is intended rather to precipitate a jarring – even painful – defamiliarization of the perceiver. Smirnov defines Conceptualist humor as a “Macro-comism” nourished by the forceful absurdist energy of contradiction. In his turn, Boris Groys has pointed out that nearly all the major figures of Moscow Conceptualism mocked the language of “the Soviet everyman” by “damaging” everyday utterances and displacing them from their “familiar” discursive topoi.<sup>17</sup> This practice resulted in what Groys aptly labels a “linguistic catastrophe” aimed to disturb (as well as to amuse) the knowing audience.<sup>18</sup>

*Totalitarian Laughter: Images – Sounds – Performers* presents this and other forms of amusing disturbance in Soviet laughter by organizing them into three main clusters: *Iconic Laughter* explores visual languages of the comic; *Sonorous Humor* draws attention to the comic soundscape; and *Unholy Fools* focuses on major representatives of the generation of “Soviet jesters”, to use Lunačarskij’s term.

The essays in the first section trace three distinct optics structured by the comic. Dragan Kujundžić explores an unexpected cross-cultural dialogue – a parodic relationship of sorts – between Sergej Ėjzenštejn and Walt Disney. Kujundžić claims that the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* explicitly references *Snow White*, undertaking through its imagery a process of self-deconstruction. In his biographical study of Boris Efimov, Steve Norris offers a diametrically opposed trajectory. Following Efimov’s (very) long career, Norris demonstrates how the language of the Soviet caricature gradually solidified, turning eventually itself into an auto-parody of its own visual clichés. Norris’ contribution is a vivid example of yet another important aspect of “red laughter”. As the historian demonstrates, it was the very desire to stigmatize evil, it was a constant obsession with “loathsome things” that was able to keep that satiric genre afloat. Moving from official to semi- or even non-official art, Elena Kalinsky analyzes modes of laughter deployed by Moscow Conceptualists. Following different groups of artists, Kalinsky shows how the same aesthetic strategy of relying on ready-made symbolic structures underwent a radical transformation. As the intellectualized engagement of early Conceptualists with official propaganda – their conscious attempt to detect and distort “the deep structure” – was eventually undermined by the logic of assemblage, structure gave way to surface. The parody of ossified forms was supplanted by bricolage and its attendant “visual and verbal confusion”.

The productive organization of sound is the main theme of the cluster *Sonorous Humor*. Using radically different examples, Anna Nisnevich and Il’ja Kalinin draw our attention to the same phenomenon – the kinesthetic property of laughter as stimulated by a specific organization of sound. Both explore the emergence of a corporeal approach to theater and cinematic musical comedy. In her analysis of the history of the production of Prokof’ev’s *Love for Three Oranges*, Anna Nisnevich demonstrates the composer’s

conscious attempt to evacuate teleology and coherence from the opera. Instead, the opera foregrounded affective and sensorial devices, transforming the production into an attempt to revitalize old operatic conventions. With very different material, Il'ja Kalinin observes how a similar attempt to sensorially stimulate the audience was achieved by the film genre of Soviet musical comedy. In contrast with the work of Prokof'ev, Soviet musicals were not aimed at revisiting outdated musical conventions. Rather, as Kalinin suggests, the goal was to provide a rhythmic, joyful supplement to productive (and exhausting) labor, blurring the border between the normative and performative, between labor and laughter. This condition is further analyzed by Maria Litovskaja. Focusing on *Radionjanja*, the radio-show for young school children of the 1970s, Litovskaja outlines several interesting trends. By merging learning and fun (*учение* and *увлечение*), the show publicly and forcefully offered an alternative to the strict pedagogical norms practiced in Soviet schools. The show's voice actors actively (but kindly) mocked the figure of authority (their teacher), while at the same time normalizing and legitimizing their audience's (the children's) lack of knowledge, naiveté and mischievousness. As Litovskaja suggests, the voice of authority suddenly lost its indisputable power; the traditional hierarchical relations between teachers and students became less stiff and more playful, turning education into something that might be enjoyable. Age is also a key element of the process of the comic production in Laura J. Olson's article, which explores political *častuški* composed and performed by older women in rural communities. As in Litovskaja's case, these *častuški* presented a comic critique of social hierarchies. The fun, however, was of a different sort. Sharp and barbed, these *častuški* often took the form of political satire performed collectively in a public space. As Olson points out, a collective laugh at the regime was just as important as, and even conducive to, the feeling of group solidarity produced by a performing collective.

Issues of performance, performers, and performativity inform the last section of the collection. What are the performative modes of *stio*b irony? In what cultural icons does it find its most vivid representation? The section opens up with an essay by Anthony Qualin that focuses on the songs of Vladimir Vysockij. Among other things, the essay examines the role of irony in the discursive techniques and strategies available to Vysockij's lyrical narrator. His subversive humor illustrates a very typical form of the Soviet absurd, wherein the state attempts to monitor all aspects of private life, including the most intimate. Moreover, the extraordinarily wide range of Vysockij's humor serves Qualin's argument about the function of irony quite well, as he attempts to navigate the dissonance in its tone between bitter mockery and a deep sympathy directed at the intended audience. The essay also dares to tread upon the political orientation of Vysockij's humor, while eschewing easy answers.

The following essay by Mark Yoffe on the carnivalesque traditions of Soviet rock-and-roll counterculture vividly depicts the phenomenon of Russian *stiob* – a major theme of the present volume. Drawing on a vast historical and cultural legacy stretching from Avvakum to Michail Bachtin, he also dwells on fieldwork conducted among leading figures of the Russian rock scene in the eighties and nineties.<sup>19</sup> The article offers a pioneering exploration of this phenomenon as a determining factor in *stiob*'s theoretical legacy in the English-speaking world; however, its primary purpose is to offer a comprehensive survey of its development in both “generic” and, in the Nietzschean sense, “genetic” terms. Therein, *stiob* is portrayed as a genuinely “indigenous” element of Russian culture, not to be confused with extraneous, albeit similar, forms.

This line of thought is continued in a monographic paper by Michail Klebanov on the performance of laughter in a post-totalitarian society. It may be assumed that we all know Sergej Kurechin, a cultural icon who, in one way or another, played a remarkable role in the exuberant scene of Russian Conceptualism. He performed theater and music onstage, whether solo or with his Pop-Mechanika orchestra; he appeared in interviews and on TV shows, embarking on prolonged quasi-scientific soliloquies before bemused audiences. Even his political pursuits amounted to a sort of desultory buffoonery. But all of Kurechin's modes of performance, or nearly all of them, involved laughter – and, more specifically, a politically probing laughter that reveled in the newfound freedoms of the Gorbachevian Society of Spectacle and subsequently, the Yeltsin era of, so to speak, “discarded values”. Klebanov's essay endeavors to trace the origins and uncover the subtleties of Kurechin's facetiousness from within its apparent ubiquity, with a special focus on his contribution to the peculiar Russian phenomenon of *stiob* that eventually became his instrument of choice. The argument is maintained with continuous reference to multiple aspects of Kurechin's vibrant activity, including music, performing arts, cinema, and his engagement with mass media.

The concluding paper of the issue is written by Dennis Ioffe and deals with Andrej Monastyrskij's concept of post-semiosis, the textuality of Moscow Conceptualism, and suggestive irony. The essay surveys the problem of textual expression in Moscow Conceptualism and discusses the peculiar way in which this movement constructed its pictorial art in ekphrastic terms. It seems that the key to an adequate understanding of the legacy of the Conceptualist experiment in Soviet Russia is the language of the comic and the polyphony of its agenda. Moscow Conceptualism authorizes and encourages the use of multiple medial languages in addition to the pictorial per se. The article therefore analyzes how Conceptualists juxtapose verbal textuality with more traditional “artwork”. Russian Conceptualism made extensive use of cognitive dissonance, exploiting the contradictory and incongruent as a



means to illustrate the ironies covertly undermining the official discourse. The goal was to demythologize the mainstream narrative of a happy socialist society by means of ideological mockery primarily on the basis of *stio*b. Ekphrastic representations were meant to create bitter parodies of Soviet metaphysics by travestyng the typical slogans of official propaganda. The essay explores unique mechanisms of embedding textual practice in the art of the elder conceptualist Il'ja Kabakov and his younger contemporary Andrej Monastyrskij. The latter's ironic art theory is discussed in greater detail.

This collection as a whole represents a major engagement with a diversity of subject-matters that are united by their common investment in Russia's totalitarian laughter. By probing the borders of the grotesque and parody in Russian culture, it illuminates both common and specific instances of laughter in a country where the long twentieth century arguably lasted the longest.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, 1989, pp. 27, 28.
- 2 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973, pp. 27-28.
- 3 Anatolij Lunačarskij, 'Budem smejat'sja', (1920), *Sobranie sočinenij v 8 tt.*, t. 3, Moskva, 1964, p. 76.
- 4 Jakov Šafir, 'Počemu my ne umeem smejat'sja', *Krasnaja pečat*, 1923, № 17, p. 6.
- 5 Nikolaj Kryneckij, 'O krasnom smeche (K diskussii o fel'etone)', *Krasnaja pečat*, 1923, № 20, pp. 8, 9.
- 6 This collection continues a series of publications resulting from the conference at Princeton. See also a special cluster on "Soviet Jocularitv" (*Slavic Review*, Vol. 20 [2], 2011) and on "Jokes of Repression" (*East European Politics and Society*, Vol. 25 [4], 2011) edited by Serguei Oushakine.
- 7 Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York, 1994, p. 18.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 9 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, New York, 1985.
- 10 Viktor Šklovskij, 'Parodijnyj roman. *Tristram Šendi Sterna*' (1921), *O teorii prozy*, Moskva, 1929, pp. 177-204.
- 11 Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern*, Cambridge, 1993.

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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- <sup>13</sup> Jurij Tynjanov, 'Dostoevskij i Gogol' (k teorii parodii)', *Literaturnaja evolucija: Izbrannye trudy*, Moskva, 2002, pp. 300-339.
- <sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, 2009, p. 12.
- <sup>15</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon laughter*, Bristol, 1989.
- <sup>16</sup> Igor' P. Smirnov, 'Vidimyj i nevidimyj miru jumor Sorokina', *Mesto pečati*, № 10, 1997.
- <sup>17</sup> Boris Groys, 'Communist Conceptual Art', *Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow 1960-1990*, Ostfildern, 2008, pp. 28-36.
- <sup>18</sup> Boris Groys, 'Global Conceptualism Revisited', *E-Flux*, Vol. 29, No. 11, 2011.
- <sup>19</sup> See also Mark Yoffe and Andrea Collins, *Rock 'n' Roll and Nationalism: A Multinational Perspective*, Newcastle, 2005.



“MICKEY MARX”: ÈJZENŠTEJN WITH DISNEY, AND  
OTHER FUNNY TALES FROM THE SOCIALIST REALIST  
CRYPT<sup>1</sup>

DRAGAN KUJUNDŽIĆ

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to establish a genealogy between Sergei Eizenshtein and Walt Disney, by analyzing one of the most celebrated scenes in the history of cinema, the killing of Prince Vladimir in the second part of Eizenshtein's *Ivan the Terrible*. The sleeping beauty invoked in *Ivan the Terrible* by this coded reference conjures up a resurrection of Lenin; it happens in the second part of Eizenshtein's *Ivan the Terrible*, which is staged as a repetition of a scene from *Snow White*. The intertext of Eizenshtein's film thus parodically animates the ghost of Lenin during the peak of Stalinism.

Keywords: *Laughter; Sergei Eizenshtein; Walt Disney; Karl Marx*

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

(Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*)

History as repetition of genres, such is the legacy of modernism left by Marx. The feeling that revolutions entail a certain recycling of historic forms, or that a revolution happens as an overturning of genres by which history stages itself is also a predominant trope of the Soviet Revolution binding language, aesthetics and history. Marx argued, qua Hegel and Engels, that Hegel's World Spirit guides history “from the grave” and re-enacts everything as it

were twice, “once as grand tragedy and second as a rotten farce”. Marx’s formula in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is taken up from a letter he received in London in 1851 from Engels, in which Engels noted that “on the grave of history” a *mise-en-scène* is staged, during which the grand tragedy gets to be worked through, and bio-degraded in a sense, as a “rotten farce.”<sup>2</sup> So, the appearance of forms qua repetition or revolution has a specific teleological direction, albeit forming a ruptured historical genealogy; it goes from tragedy, to farce and parody. What is taken up in the “second coming” of history is the trauma of history (“tragedy”) now uplifted as a humoristic working through, by means of parodic repetition. This parodic repetition comes as a haunting “from the grave”, from the crypt, and thus has something spectral to it. The “rotting farce” emanates the fumes by which the “world spirit” of history repeats, sublates and sublimates itself. But with a parodic difference.



The second coming of history as parody is one of the predominant traits of the Soviet Revolution of 1917 and the aesthetic practices it engendered. This uplifting of history as parodic repetition precisely in the shadow of Marx’s philosophy took place in a spectacular manner in the work of the foremost cineaste of Soviet modernism, Sergej Ėjzenštejn.

Karl Marx, Sergej Ėjzenštejn, the leading cinematic ideologue of the Soviet Revolution, and Walt Disney, arguably the leading cinematic ideologue of the United States, are not a triad usually combined or referenced in a title. Marx of the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, and Sergej Ėjzenštejn, particularly in his early works like *October*, each in his way, were inventors

of beautiful political and aesthetic utopias. But Walt Disney is one such creator as well. He was the author of the “degenerate utopia” (to use Louis Marin’s phrase) of an entire country, “Disneyland”, which, as Baudrillard famously said, is only a metonymy of the entire country, the United States; the quasi phantasmatic space of Disneyland exists solely, Baudrillard says, so that we believe that the rest of the country is real. Louis Marin comes to a similar conclusion when he writes that “Disneyland is an immense and displaced metaphor of the system of representations and values unique to the American society”, a “phantasmatic projection of the history of the American nation”. This utopian aspect of Disney’s ideological world has found a global icon in Mickey-Mortimer-Mouse, which gives the hallucinatory title of this essay a white glove four-finger touch.<sup>3</sup> This paper seeks to establish a genealogy between Sergej Ėjzenštejn and Walt Disney, by analyzing one of the most celebrated scenes in the history of cinema, the killing of Prince Vladimir in the second part of Sergej Ėjzenštejn’s *Ivan the Terrible*. The specters of Marx will hover in the background.



The foundations of Socialist Realism and totalitarian terror were laid in the Soviet Union, as has been discussed amply by Boris Grojs, by means of the mummification of Lenin in 1925. “The Lenin mausoleum is a synthesis between a pyramid and a museum that exhibits Lenin’s body”, a “hidden formative influence on all subsequent Stalinist Soviet culture”.<sup>4</sup> In the analysis that follows, this premise will be left intact. However, in addition to being the formative foundation of Stalinist terror, an introjected (Abraham, Torok),<sup>5</sup> unmournable body lodged in the very center of the discourse

production of Stalinism, Lenin's mummy also solicited or provoked, in an encrypted manner, a whole set of parodic responses and strategies by means of which writers and filmmakers attempted to work through this loss, and plug the wax effigy into the economy of mourning in order to dull its terrifying, terrorizing possibilities. It is not by chance that Russian modernism produced also some of the most enduring philosophies or artistic practices of laughter in the face of totalitarian terror.

More than any other "movement" in the 20th century Soviet Modernism reflected on the question of parody and parodic laughter. Jurij Tynjanov and Michail Bachtin would be two indexes of this reflection. Tynjanov's work interprets literature as in fact a parodic repetition of the literary historical tradition. In his seminal essay on parody, Tynjanov writes that "The evolution of literature happens [...] not only by inventing new forms, but by using old forms in new function. Here [...] parody plays a pedagogic role".<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Tynjanov writes that "Parody is born from the perception of the tension in a literary work. One should just enhance this tension a bit, and we have a parody".<sup>7</sup> Parody teaches us how literature functions, precisely as a dynamic succession of the sublated old historical forms transformed as or into new ones. In the work of Michail Bachtin such textual parody moved from the word into the world, as the force of historical change, often staged, as *parodia sacra*, on the graves and in the memory of the dead. For example, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "This particularly naturalistic and profaning detail – a half eaten sandwich on a grave – gives us an occasion to touch on the symbolic attribute of the carnival type: throwing bread on the ground is permitted, for that is sowing, fructification."<sup>8</sup> The parodic and carnivalesque force Bachtin discusses in Dostoevskij stems from the economy of recycling, which brings the decaying material of history ("rotten farce") into repetition, which fructifies, revives and renews, in this case in an image of a "half eaten sandwich on a grave". The crypt is a foundation on which this "mourning drama", a secular "Second Coming", stages itself as a revitalizing parody, a humoristic display of life affirming forces.

For the sake of the argument proposed below, it is not without relevance that every parodic discourse has something of an animation or conjuring up of the ghost of the original, re-launched towards a second life or its resurrection by means of parodic laughter. However, due to the particular configuration of the Soviet state and the development of open repression and terror in the thirties and on, Soviet art and literature increasingly produced comic effects by ways of encryption and secrecy. One such example, Jurij Tynjanov's 'Wax Effigy', offers a parodic response to the aesthetics of Socialist Realism.<sup>9</sup> The very foundation of the story is encrypted, it is a story purportedly about the wax effigy of Peter the Great, but by a whole series of coded indications, it actually constructs itself as a crypt within a crypt, as a secret parodic resurrection of the body of Vladimir Il'ič Lenin qua wax effi-

gy. The logic of the mortuary self-sameness of the corpse is parodied from within, by animating its ghostly, prosthetic mechanicity and juxtaposing it with other open ended artistic possibilities (a revival of the Baroque aesthetics of the story’s main protagonist, the artist Rastrelli, the sculptor of the existing wax effigy of Peter the Great).



Lenin’s mummy (wax effigy) may be seen as generating aesthetic energy and appears, as an apparition, throughout Soviet Modernism. In Vertov’s *Three Songs of Lenin* Lenin’s corpse introduced by a long take focused on his mourned body, resurrects as a techno-messianic energy of modernization (electrification, education, etc.) of the whole country. In Aleksandrov’s *Jolly Fellows*, the comic narrative bringing a malfunctioning orchestra from the provinces to glorious success in the Bolshoi Theater, passes through the casket, a crypt, in which, on a hearse, the protagonist of the musical arrives to the theater. But the most scandalous and so far not noticed resurrection of Lenin happens in the second part of Sergej Ėjzenštejn’s *Ivan the Terrible* which is staged as a repetition of a scene from *Snow White*. The evidence of this may be found in the recently re-published material testifying to Ėjzenštejn’s obsessive interest in the work of Walt Disney, and in particular the integration of *Snow White* in the final scenes of the second part of the film. The intertext of Ėjzenštejn’s film conjures up the resurrection of the sleeping beauty out of the crystal coffin, and thus parodically animates the ghost of Lenin in the second part of *Ivan the Terrible*.

The discussion of a relationship between Ėjzenštejn, Disney, and Marxism is, of course, not entirely new. The debate around Mickey Mouse in the

Frankfurt school is well known, and more than eloquently formulated and presented in Esther Leslie's *Hollywood Flatlands*;<sup>10</sup> some of the less available fragments around that debate are available in Benjamin's *Selected Works* in English – his fragment “Mickey Mouse”, for example, with the uniquely Benjaminian formula that in Disney's “world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences”. “All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is.”<sup>11</sup> In a word, already in 1931, Benjamin found in Mickey Mouse (*Maus?*), (the mouse placed in *Steamboat Willy*, for example, in the proximity of the steamboat furnace and on the chain of industrial and holocaustic [re]production), a genuine Jewish diasporic and exilic experience, echoing his work on Kafka (emblematic of this sensibility would be Kafka's story ‘Josephine the Singer and the Mouse Folk’, for example, and Benjamin's essays on Kafka from 1934 and 1938 on the massification of technical reproducibility of both art and death). Adorno's objections to Mickey Mouse and his disagreement of sorts with Benjamin on the account of Disney in a 1936 letter to Benjamin found their way into the introductory chapter of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, addressing the masochism with which Donald Duck channels the cultural repression projected onto and from the screen. The work of Miriam Hansen, ‘Of Mice and Ducks. Benjamin and Adorno on Disney’,<sup>12</sup> and that of Laurence Rickels are instructive in this regard, in particular their reminder that Hitler owned and loved *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Rickels' concluding chapter to the first volume of *Nazi Psychoanalysis*,<sup>14</sup> on the other hand, on “Mickey Marx”, is conjured up like a phantom in the above title, under the quotation marks.





Disney and Mickey Mouse are, of course, many and manifold. There is a long way from the Steamboat Willy, that encounter of technology, race, and labor alienation, to the degenerate utopia and Aladdin the thief of Baghdad, with his magic carpet and carpet bombing and the liquid gold in the cave underneath the desert sand threatening to drown him, “Aladdin the thief of Bagdad” of the first war in Iraq and, of course on.<sup>15</sup>

Less known and less read and written about than these debates on the left in the thirties (with the notable exception of Anne Nesbet’s seminal *Savage Junctures*<sup>16</sup> dedicated to them, but with an inflection different than the one proposed in the present essay) are Ėjzenštejn’s notes on Disney which he wrote during World War II, behind the Urals, where he retreated with the General Staff and where he was filming *Ivan the Terrible*. These notes have long been out of print in English, and only recently reprinted in *The Eisenstein Collection* edited by Richard Taylor.<sup>17</sup>

And it is when reading these notes that one may be struck by the profoundly improbable obsession of Sergej Ėjzenštejn with Disney. Sergej Ėjzenštejn of ‘The Montage of Attractions’, ‘The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form’, would understandably be drawn to Disney and Mickey Mouse in the twenties and thirties (and indeed when Ėjzenštejn met with Disney), when, parallel to the Frankfurt School studies on massification and technical reproducibility, mass psychosis and cinema, he was engaged in a cinematic class warfare of his own, and attempting to produce the dialectical method in his filming, whereby two juxtaposed edited shots would “explode in a concept”, which would bring the “true renewal not just of the social significance, but also the material-technical essence of cinema”.<sup>18</sup> Only, unlike the Frankfurt School, Sergej Ėjzenštejn’s theoretical writings were articulated from the perspective of the dominant revolutionary ideology that put at his disposal the entire Soviet state filming and political apparatus.

In 1927, also a little known fact and until very recently one not brought to the attention of the larger film audience, Ėjzenštejn was considering filming *The Capital*, and had written copious notes reflecting on the possibility of making a film based “on a libretto by Karl Marx”.<sup>19</sup> The script was supposed to be made in collaboration with James Joyce (with whom Ėjzenštejn met in Paris and discussed the project), and founded on *Ulysses*. The film would not only engage in the dialectics of montage, but would film “Marx’s dialectical method” itself. Most instructive are Ėjzenštejn’s notes about the motif of silk stockings, which he takes up repeatedly, and with which he wanted to elaborate visually on the nature of the use and exchange value of commodity, straight out of the fetishism and commodity chapter of *The Capital*. “To show the method of dialectics,” writes Ėjzenštejn, he would need “[...] an analysis of a centimeter of silk stockings [...]. About the silk stockings *as such* [underlined by Ėjzenštejn], fight for the short skirt. I added the competitors – the textile masters’ for long skirts. Morality. Clergy. Etc.” The motif of silk

stockings would then further be given a comic-farcical twist – his words – by showing “women’s stockings full of holes and silk in a newspaper advertisement. *Mais ces pantins* dance on a string pulled by the silk manufacturers and the garment peddlers who fight each other”. These silk stockings, like a commodity haunted by the exchange value, start to dance, not unlike the table in Marx’s analysis of fetish. And then, this *Paar seidene Strümpfe* – in German in the original, Ājzenštejn’s text itself now starts to dance in many languages – would display and solve the question of art, morality, commerce and competition, all the way to the production of silk – “Indian women forced to incubate the silk cocoon by carrying them in their armpits”.<sup>20</sup>



Sergej Ājzenštejn’s treatment notes on *The Capital* and the passage about the silk stocking have recently been taken up by a colossal cinematic project directed by Alexander Kluge, one of the leading filmmakers of the New German Cinema, and a political philosopher of Marxism in his own right.<sup>21</sup> *The News from Ideological Antiquity (Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike)*<sup>22</sup> stages a nine-hour cinematic attempt to activate these notes and figure out what Ājzenštejn could have filmed if he indeed were to make this film.

*News* can be seen as a powerhouse of new media technologies and principles: existing only in the digital (data) format, *News* is created out of a number of independent segments (modules) rather than using a continuous narrative line or procedures resembling continuity editing – through vigorous and extreme techniques of montage. While the

presence of the human agency – Kluge himself – behind the production is clearly discernible, the excessive use of found material and procedures such as split-screens (with multiplying repeated objects) gestures towards automation and problematises the issue of authorship. Finally, the various modules of *News* can be thought of as multiple versions of the same object: description, visual representation, re-enactment and so forth, versions that are often transcoded into each other.<sup>23</sup>

The first three hours of the film are a reflection on precisely the pair of silk stockings as fetish, woven into long discussions with various playwrights, film scholars (Oksana Bulgakova is interviewed for an hour, at times her voice overlaid with a baritone), Hans Magnus Enzensberger reflects on Ėjzenštejn, various actors and piano players appear in interviews or dramatic and musical interludes, including a staging of *Tristan and Isolde* in a Duisburg theater as an enactment of *The Battleship Potemkin*. Actors are reading from Marx’s *Grundrisse* (a man and a woman dressed interchangeably as sailors from the *Potemkin*, East-German police officers, or exiled intellectuals in Siberia). All of this is shot through with the neon-like colored intertitles (a nod to silent cinema), and cadenced with assonant, shrieking musical performances. There is a humorous animation of a day in the life of Marx and Wilhelm Liebknecht, a sequence on the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg, and actual filming of some of the scenes treated in Ėjzenštejn’s manuscript (a wife cooks for her husband coming from work, reminiscent of *The Strike*) shot through with documentary film material about Ėjzenštejn and the scenes from his films (still probably the best part of the film). In the later part of the film, a number of other philosophers and scholars are interviewed (Peter Sloterdijk, Oskar Negt, and Boris Grojs). In a long interview (this part of the film directed by Tom Tykwer of the *Run, Lola, Run* fame), an often visibly humorous and amused Boris Grojs responds to Kluge’s questions by evoking the philosophy of Pavel Filonov and his ideas of collective resurrection, which animated to a large degree the biopolitics of the Soviet Revolution (from Bogdanov to Ciolkovskij). The overall impression of this film has been summed up by Fredric Jameson as being a humorous “satyr play in which the [...] comedian Helge Schneider plays a variety of Marx-inspired roles, complete with wigs, false beards and other circus paraphernalia”.<sup>24</sup> The dominant feeling after watching the nine hours of this film could be summed up by Kluge himself who, in the introductory material, claims that “we must let Till Eulenspiegel pass across Marx (but also Eisenstein), in order to create a confusion allowing knowledge and emotions to be combined together in new ways” (“Man muß Till Eulenspiegel einmal über Marx [und auch Eisenstein] hinwegziehen lassen”).<sup>25</sup> The road to the authentic message of Marx and Ėjzenštejn leads through the return to classical motifs of Marxism, a classi-

cism often staged as Goth, funerary, quasi-vampiric setting in crypts and graves where a classical piano is played, while Kluge reads from Marx's works. Thus, this classical-parodic setting offers, in Jameson's view, a chance that "The category of classical antiquity may not be the least productive framework in which a global left reinvents an energizing past for itself".<sup>26</sup> In order for the communist future dreamt about by Ėjzenštejn in his notes on filming *The Capital* to revitalize itself, one has to pass, as in Kluge's version and Jameson's theorizing, via a parodic detour (Till Eulenspiegel meets Marx) through the gothic crypt.



But that Ėjzenštejn who channels directly the *Capital*, in 1927, is not the Ėjzenštejn of 1940 to 1944, when he is writing about Disney. However, a certain fascination with the spectral, phantomatic, ghostly, is at work both in his analysis of the capital, and as we shall see, in his treatment of Tsar Ivan the Terrible. The explicit thematic contrast, but with a strong underlying secret affinity, between Ėjzenštejn's obsessive themes in 1927 and 1942 could not be more striking.

Just imagine the in itself completely phantasmatic, hallucinatory situation, in which the author of *Potemkin*, *Strike* and *October*, the film theorist who claimed that "We must cut our cine-fist through to skulls, make way for cine-fist!" in "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form",<sup>27</sup> the film director who wanted to film Karl Marx's *The Capital* finds himself. As the war is raging on and some of the greatest battles in world history are fought by the Red Army (historical circumstances in which Ėjzenštejn is profoundly implicated and which directly produced the famous color dance scene in *Ivan the Terrible*, filmed not merely by some flare of creative genius in Ėjzenštejn, but due to the fact that he was given confiscated German army propaganda Agfa color film stock, brought to Ėjzenštejn on the direct orders of the Generalissimus Stalin and told to use it), so just as the battles of Kursk, the

Leningrad and Moscow sieges, and the battle of Stalingrad are being fought and millions are perishing, Sergej Ėjzenštejn writes, and this is not a joke: “Bambi, of course, must not be ignored”.<sup>28</sup> From September 1940 until June 1944, Ėjzenštejn wrote more than one hundred and fifty manuscript pages on Walt Disney. What compulsion brought him to write this unlikely document, this obsessive reflection on *Merbabies*, *Bambi*, *Willie the Singing Whale*, and *The Skeleton Dance*, not to mention *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, directly quoted in his *Ivan the Terrible*? What skeleton was Ėjzenštejn hiding in the closet (there were, undoubtedly, several), with this obsessive inscription of Disney as he is filming *Ivan the Terrible* under the most difficult material and political conditions? Yes, it is the question of a crypt, and of a ghost.



Ėjzenštejn’s career, not unlike the trajectory of the Soviet Revolution itself, was marked by a profound acceleration in and of world history, which was that of the Communist Revolution of 1917, and an immense explosion of creativity, practically out of nothing. It staged itself on the grave of history. However, with the death of Lenin, and the consolidation of power by Stalin, the revolution undergoes a period of terror and stifling – probably best exemplified by Lenin’s mummy exhibited in the mausoleum-museum – a *rigor mortis*, a mortification that affected Ėjzenštejn’s, and not only Ėjzenštejn’s career as well. After his *October* he was sent abroad to travel for three years, and upon his return he found a profoundly different, ossified and mortified country; he, the author of the celebrated *Potemkin* and *October*, had problems filming, his *Bezhin Meadow* killed by the Soviet censor. (The betrayal of the Soviet Revolution fought under the name of Marx, the Soviet Terror, Revolution eating its own children, to this day of course is the trauma that has to be worked through, nowhere more so than by those who hold dear the great Marxist philosophical and political trajectory and its promise; in

order to do that, in order to keep that spirit – if not the ghost, the specter – alive, a dose of humor is needed as well.)<sup>29</sup> The party and the state turned to Ėjzenštejn again only in the moment of dire need, at the time of the Second World War when he started filming *Ivan the Terrible*. The first part is a thinly veiled allegory of Stalin's terror, justified in the film by the foreign forces bent on destroying Russia, and Ivan the Terrible instituting terror in order for national and nationalist interests to be preserved (the motif of the *Opričnina* as the agency of the first "state of exception" in Russian history has recently been taken up parodically in Vladimir Sorokin's *Den' opričnika* [*A Day of an Opričnik*], a novella dedicated to the first Opričnik, "Skuratov, by the name of Maljuta" ["Скуратову, по прозвищу Малюта"]).<sup>30</sup> This internationalist put himself in the service of the crassest nationalist ideology, glorifying the leader reigning by pure, undiluted totalitarian terror. The film and its nationalist euphoria may be somewhat redeemed, of course, by the fact that at this particular historic moment, such nationalist contraction was to some extent defensible in the name of defensive war (however, the reversal of this Soviet genius intellectual conversant, native in French, English and German, the participant in the communist international, selling out his internationalist worldview, is profound and painful).<sup>31</sup>

However, in the second part of *Ivan the Terrible*, Ėjzenštejn as it were turned around and started reflecting on Ivan not in terms of being a glorious dictator, but rather of Ivan as a phantomatic phallus (Ėjzenštejn's words in his notes on Disney: "Ivan was from the beginning a phallus"),<sup>32</sup> inflated and deflated by a monstrous and murderous will or impotence, culminating in the murder of Prince Vladimir.

And it is precisely here that the obsessive reflections on Disney may be of help and where their ruse comes into play. Not only because of the numerous pages on history of art and animation, but due to what, strictly speaking, remains unsaid in the invocation of Disney, and may be its purloined letter (Edgar Allan Poe figures prominently in these reflections as well). The entire *Ivan the Terrible* is a drama of legitimacy of power, in which Prince Vladimir will be brutally sacrificed by Ivan. It is exactly at the moment when Vladimir goes to church where he will be killed (ending also the color episode in the film), that Ėjzenštejn superimposes onto the image of Vladimir, or invokes the image of Dopey with a candle going up the stairs to see who is sleeping in the dwarfs' beds.<sup>33</sup>

In Disney's film, as he opens the door, Dopey is confronted not with Snow White, but with what to Dopey and the viewer looks like a *ghost*, stretching across three beds (the appearance of the phallus dominates this little, all masculine economy, the phallic phantom inflated or erected over several beds; a separate analysis, on the other hand, would be warranted about the ways in which Snow White serves as the spectral exchange value to the use value economy of the seven dwarfs, living the proto-communist use

economy, mining the jewels without any intention of cashing in on them or putting them into circulation). What is of particular interest is that in another sequence, this ghost, Snow White, is laid to rest in a crystal coffin and then woken up by the prince. It is in this intertextual crypt that Ėjzenštejn seals the secret of *Ivan the Terrible*. Dopey climbing the stairs is replicated in Prince Vladimir’s walk towards the place of his murder; the candle casts a long trembling shadow, the entrances in *Ivan the Terrible* are disproportionately small, “dwarfish”, signaling the intertextual link; they both, like their shadows, tremble with terrible anticipation; *Ivan the Terrible* performs at the pinnacle of its dramatic tension a doubling of *Snow White*, the reference put on display and buried in the film, at the same time. Something like Lenin’s mummy both put on display and buried in a crypt, which is constitutive for the aesthetic operation of Socialist Realism. (It is also significant, that Ėjzenštejn choreographs one of Ivan’s “deaths” – who “dies” and “resurrects” several times in the film – after Hans Holbein’s *Dead Christ in a Tomb*, which features prominently in Dostoevskij’s novel *The Idiot* as a marker of the death of God.<sup>34</sup> Time in Ėjzenštejn is “a post-mortem time, he is using its ‘remains’”, writes Valerij Podoroga.)<sup>35</sup> And it is in the shadow of that crypt that I will, probably for the first and the last time in my life, agree with Stalin and his assessment that *Ivan the Terrible* part two is like *Hamlet*, a charge which he leveled at Ėjzenštejn before preventing the release of the film in a meeting that included Ćerkasov, Molotov, Źdanov, Ėjzenštejn and Stalin himself, after midnight in the Kremlin at the end of February 1947.<sup>36</sup>

If Ivan the Terrible is a Hamlet, he is a Hamlet in search of his specter (to invoke Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, which is a book not only about Marx, but about *Hamlet* as well), or of his ghost; as in *Hamlet*, in *Ivan the Terrible* we could say that the ghost is placed “below the deepest of plots, but in a place, upon which the scene is founded, and with it the action that takes place”.<sup>37</sup> This Ivan/Stalin/phallus is awaiting the kiss and animation (“supplying an inanimate object with life and a soul”, says Ėjzenštejn on Disney),<sup>38</sup> the breath of the *pneuma*, the rising spirit, that would bring back from the dead that other Vladimir, Vladimir Il’ič, whose place Stalin occupies without legitimacy or does so with the “legitimacy” of terror, and whom he symbolically and politically killed. And if it still seems unlikely to you that Sergej Ėjzenštejn’s obsession with Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (with numerous pages on the ghostliness of Disney’s film, and animation as the practice of giving soul to dead bodies)<sup>39</sup> figures as an encrypted symptom, as the provocation of the libidinal charge, the veiled, secret ideological kiss on the forehead of the rigid, mortified phallus of Lenin’s mummified body, then let me put the last nail in this spectral coffin by quoting Konstantin Mel’nikov’s essay ‘Architect-Agitator’, in which he describes that he made the crystal coffin for the mummified Lenin as “a crystal with a



radiant play of interior light alluding to the tale of the sleeping Snow White”.<sup>40</sup>

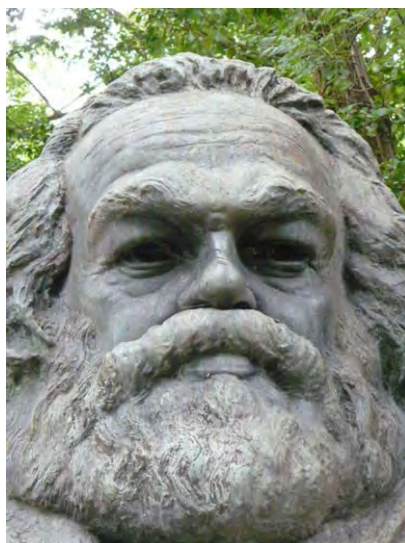


Lenin's crystal coffin conjured at the end of the film evokes the previous unfinished project by Ėjzenštejn of exactly the same period as filming *The Capital*, the *Glass House*, which in turn echoes with the Crystal Palace from the First Universal Exhibition in London in 1851 which served as an inspiration for Marx to reflect on capital and fetishism. In addition, this encrypted crystal intertext produces in an exemplary way what Gilles Deleuze would call a “crystal-image” effect, refracting and splitting the cinematic image and temporality in at least two, “one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. Time consists of this split, and it is [...] time, that we see in the crystal”.<sup>41</sup> In Ėjzenštejn, what you see is not what you get. In the ruptured genealogy of *Ivan the Terrible*, Stalin is to Lenin as the Evil Queen is to Snow White, and Ėjzenštejn enacts the role of the cinematic Prince Charming, the kiss and all, conjuring the ghost out of the cinematic crystal coffin.

Stalinist Terror served to ontologize the body of Lenin, make him forever present in one place, by sealing him in the crystal coffin and ensuring that he does not go anywhere. “As in the work of mourning, after a trauma, the conjuration has to make sure that the dead will not come back: quick, do whatever is needed to keep the cadaver localized, in a safe place, decomposing right where it was inhumed, or even embalmed as they liked to do in Moscow. Quick, a vault to which one keeps the keys!” says Derrida in *The Specters of Marx*.<sup>42</sup> Sergej Ėjzenštejn, to use Derrida's formula from *Specters*



of *Marx*, conjures up the ghost and attempts, in the second part of *Ivan the Terrible*, by having recourse to Disney’s ghosts, to “hauntologize” the corpse. This conjuring up of a specter attempts a “revitalization”, or at least a waking up of the ghost, the spirit of revolution, the “weak messianic powers” obliterated or repressed by Stalin’s terror.<sup>43</sup> This “hauntology” also presents itself as a task of re-reading Soviet modernism and culture and certainly *Ivan the Terrible* in all their radical political consequences and implications. Cinema, as Derrida says in the film *Ghost Dance*, is the science of ghosts (“Film plus psychoanalysis equals the science of phantoms”).<sup>44</sup> In *Ivan the Terrible*, and in Ėjzenštejn’s notes on Disney, indeed, a specter is haunting, the specter of communism.



By placing the coded reference to *Snow White* (Snow White as a ghost) in the crucial scene related to the death of Prince Vladimir, at the pinnacle of the Soviet cinema and arguably the majestic summit of the entire state engineered artistic project known as Socialist Realism, which is the second part of *Ivan the Terrible*, the film offers in an *encrypted* form a colossal, cosmic and comic, parodic animation and internal deconstruction (again, in the words of Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, a tele-techno-messianic “hauntologization”) of the ideological forces (“Socialist Realism”, “Stalin”) and the terror that have produced the film. Its laughter is animated, echoed and sealed in a crystal crypt. What we “see and hear” as the film *Ivan the Terrible* (its “aesthetics”) is precisely the secret haunting, aura and laughter echoing in this crypt.<sup>45</sup>




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 NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The essay is accompanied by a series of photographs titled ‘Specters of Marx’ taken by Dragan Kujundžić in the Highgate Cemetery, London, on July 26, 2011. The photographs form an integral part of this essay.
- <sup>2</sup> Marx-Engels Correspondence, Letter of Engels (in Manchester) to Marx (in London), December 3, 1851, [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1851/letters/51\\_12\\_03.htm#cite](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1851/letters/51_12_03.htm#cite), last visited September 25, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> Louis Marin, ‘Disneyland: A Degenerate Utopia’, *Glyph*, 1, Baltimore, 1977, p. 54. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, Stanford, 1988, chapter “Simulacra and Simulations”, pp. 166-184. See also Jean Baudrillard, ‘Disneyworld Company’, *Liberation*, March 6, 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> Boris Grojs, *Stil’ Stalin. Utopija i obmen*, Moskva, 1993. In English as: *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Princeton, 1992 (here pp. 66-67). For the comparison between Lenin’s mummy and Lincoln’s mechanical effigy in Disneyland (Disney is never far from this parodic scene of mourning), see Grojs’ essay from the same volume in Russian, ‘Lenin i Linkoln – obrazy sovremennoj smerti’ (‘Lenin and Lincoln: the Forms of Modern Death’). Of particular interest for comparison between Ėjzenštejn and Disney is the way in which Socialist Realism, just like Disneyland, is meant to aestheticize the political, and make the world beautiful. Disneyland is also the space in which

Americans get to enjoy an aestheticized (and anesthetized) version of the communal transportation, waiting in lines, etc., the staple of life in the Soviet Union.

5 Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, ‘Mourning and Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation’, *The Shell and the Kernel*, Volume 1, Chicago, 1994. See also ‘The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse’, from the same volume.

6 Jurij Tynjanov, *Poëtika. Istorija literatury*. Kino. Moskva, 1977, p. 293.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 539.

8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Tr. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 139.

9 I take the liberty of drawing attention to my book, *The Returns of History*, (New York, 1997) and in particular the chapter “The Wax Effigy and the Form/aldehyde of History” for the analysis of the discursive strategies by means of which Jurij Tynjanov attempted and I argue indeed succeeded in corroding, from within, the overbearing presence of the unmournable effigy of Lenin, by putting it into encrypted parodic circulation in this short story (‘Voskovaja persona’, 1932). I analyzed carnivalesque laughter in the face of Stalinist terror, as it has been elaborated by Michail Bachtin, in my ‘On Derrideology: Laughter as Otherness in Bakhtin and Derrida’ published in the same book. See also: Dragan Kujundžić, ‘Smech kak drugoj u Bachtina i Derrida’, *Bachtinskij sbornik*, 1, Moskva, 1990.

10 Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands. Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-garde*, London, 2002. See in particular the chapters “Eisenstein Shakes Mickey’s Hand in Hollywood”, and “Mickey Mouse, Utopia, and Walter Benjamin”.

11 Walter Benjamin, ‘Mickey Mouse’, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 2, Cambridge, 1999. For Benjamin on Ėjzenštejn and *Battleship Potemkin* (but also with references to “the cinema of Soviet Revolution” in comparison with “American slapstick comedy”), see Benjamin’s ‘Reply to Oscar A.H. Schmitz’, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 1, Cambridge, 1999.

12 Miriam Hansen, ‘Of Mice and Ducks. Benjamin and Adorno on Disney’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Winter 1993, Vol. 92, No. 1.

13 The Socialist-Realists of Eastern Germany (DDR) loved *Snow White* as well, making, inspired by Disney, their own version. The DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) produced *Snow White* by Gottfried Kolditz in 1961. I gratefully acknowledge the work of my undergraduate student, Rachael Counce, and her paper ‘Snow White or Communist Red?’ dedicated to this film (manuscript, Spring, 2008).

14 Laurence Rickels, *Nazi Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 3, *Psy Fi*, Minneapolis, 2002.

15 For the racist undertones of *Aladdin* and the first war in Iraq see Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (the chapter “Call me Al”), New York, 2000.

16 Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, London, 2003, p. 195. See in particular the juxtaposition in the figure 27, which reproduces the stills of ‘Dopey with

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- candle' (*Snow White*) and 'Vladimir with candle' (*Ivan the Terrible*, Part Two).
- 17 Sergei Eisenstein, 'On Disney', *The Eisenstein Collection*, Ed. Richard Taylor, London, 2006.
- 18 Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form', *The Eisenstein Reader*, London, 2008, p. 53.
- 19 Sergei Eisenstein, 'Notes for a film of *Capital*', *October*, Vol. 2, Summer 1976, p. 4. See also: 'Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital*' by Annette Michelson, *October*, Vol. 2, Summer 1976, and "Part 2" of that article in *October*, Vol. 3, Spring 1977.
- 20 Eisenstein, 'Notes for a film of *Capital*', p. 10.
- 21 See in English: Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, translated by Assenka Oksiloff and Peter Labanyo, Minneapolis, 1993. An excellent overview of Negt and Kluge's philosophy is 'History and Obstinacy: Negt and Kluge's Redemption of Labor' by Christopher Pavsek, *New German Critique*, 68, Spring-Summer 1996, pp. 137-163.
- 22 Alexander Kluge, *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike (News from Ideological Antiquity)*, 3 DVDs, Frankfurt, 2008.
- 23 Julija Vassilieva, 'Capital and Co.: Kluge/Ejzenštejn/Marx', [http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/08/capital-and-co-klugeeisenstein\\_marx/](http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/08/capital-and-co-klugeeisenstein_marx/); last accessed March 4, 2012.
- 24 Fredric Jameson, 'Marx and Montage', *New Left Review*, 58, July-August 2009, <http://newleftreview.org/view=2793>; last visited on September 25, 2011.
- 25 Kluge, *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike*, p. 16.
- 26 Jameson, 'Marx and Montage'.
- 27 Eisenstein, 'The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form', p. 55.
- 28 Eisenstein, 'On Disney', p. 146.
- 29 "Communism must have the courage to be a 'ghost' – if it wishes to recuperate an authentic reality" (Gianni Vattimo, 'Weak Communism', *The Idea of Communism*, Eds. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, London, 2010, p. 207).
- 30 Vladimir Sorokin, *Den' opričnika*, Moskva, 2008.
- 31 Ejzenštejn's complicated and conflicted "cosmopolitanism", particularly as manifested in *Ivan the Terrible*, is discussed extensively in a recent article by Katerina Clark, 'Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* and the Renaissance: An Example of Stalinist Cosmopolitanism?', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 71, No. 1, Spring 2012, pp. 49-70.
- 32 Eisenstein, 'On Disney', p. 181.
- 33 Reproduced from Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctions*, London, 2003, p. 195.
- 34 See, for example, 'Idiot i Ivan Groznyj' (August 28, 1947), Sergej Michajlovič Ejzenštejn, *Metod*, tom vtoroj, Moskva, 2000, pp. 305-315.
- 35 Valerij Podoroga, 'Materialy k psichobiografii S.M. Ejzenštejna', and 'Diskussija', *Avto-bio-grafija. K voprosu o metode. Tetradi po analitičeskoj*

*antropologii*, No. 1. Ed. Valerij Podoroga, Moskva, 2001, p. 143. Could a similar post-mortem sentiment be discerned in Disney? Having in mind in particular that Mickey Mouse’s real name is “Mortimer”.

36 See “S.M. Eisenstein’s Film”, and other chapters related to this film, in: Maureen Perrie, *The Cult of Ivan the Terrible in Stalin’s Russia*, New York, 2001, p. 174.

37 Samuel Weber, “‘Ibi et ubique’: The Incontinent Plot (*Hamlet*)”, in: *Theatricality as Medium*. New York, 2004, p. 185. See also Dragan Kujundžić, ‘Ghost Scriptum, or *Nothing to Play With*’, *Parting With, Essays on Samuel Weber*, Eds. Kevin McLaughlin and Marc Redfield, Chicago, forthcoming.

38 Eisenstein, ‘On Disney’, p. 104.

39 “The ghosts themselves, frightened by them, take off like a bullet from the ‘haunted’ house. A stroke of pure Disney charm” (Eisenstein, ‘On Disney’, p. 104). “The ghostly mask which prophesies to the witch in *Snow White* appears in [...] fire” (p. 106), etc.

40 See *The Great Utopia, the Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, New York, 1992, pp. 56-57, translation slightly modified. For the analogy between erection and resurrection in explicitly phallic terms, see the series of drawings Ėjzenštejn made in 1931, particularly the one reproduced in Michail Jampol’skij’s *O blizkom*, Moskva, 2001, pp. 72-73: “Christ is represented in the figure of phallus, kissed by a figure of a man, standing behind the cross.” For various impulses of erotic sublimation in Ėjzenštejn, see Michail Jampol’skij, ‘Sublimacija kak formoobrazovanie (Zametki ob odnoj neopublikovannoj stat’e Sergeja Ėjzenštejna)’, *Kinovedčeskie zapiski*, 43, 1999, pp. 35-66. The phantasm of the “crystal coffin” as a womb may be related to Ėjzenštejn’s notion of *Mutterleib* (MLB), a desire to return to mother’s womb enacted in a number of his films, including *Ivan the Terrible*. See for example, ‘MLB (Obraz materinskogo lona)’, Ėjzenštejn, *Metod*, pp. 296-349. The crystal coffin, on the other hand, is inevitably associated with the Crystal Palace from the World Exhibition in London during the First Universal Exhibition in 1851 (famously in the Russian tradition taken up prominently and critically in Dostoevskij’s *Notes From Underground*) which led Marx to think about the fetish dimension of the capital. Sergej Ėjzenštejn, in turn, parallel to his project of filming *The Capital*, wanted to film *The Glass House* (treatment notes published in *Iskusstvo kino*, 3, 1979, pp. 94-114). For the connection between the Crystal Palace, the Glass House project, and the notion of the spectrality of capital as developed in Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (along the lines similar to our own analysis which however adds to this line of association the crystal coffin), related to Kluge’s film on Ėjzenštejn, see Julija Vassilieva, ‘Capital and Co.: Kluge/ Ėjzenštejn/Marx’, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/08/capital-and-co-klugeeisensteinmarx/>, last accessed March 4, 2012.

41 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema*, 2, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 81. For extended analyses of the Glass House project, see Oxana Bulgakova, ‘Eisenstein, the Glass House and the Spherical Book.

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From Comedy of the Eye to a Drama of Enlightenment', <http://rouge.com.au/7/eisenstein.html> (2005), last accessed March 6, 2012.

42 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, New York, 1994, p. 97. For the implications of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and for an enthusiastic endorsement of Derrida's reading of Marx for the Marxist project (what amounts to an endorsement and inscription of Derrida into a lineage of great "Marxist" philosophers, with all the necessary distinctions respectfully noted), see Fredric Jameson's 'Marx's Purloined Letter', in his, one is tempted to call it already a classic, *Valences of the Dialectic*, New York, 2009.

43 For the communist, revolutionary implication of such a gesture, see Derrida's *Specters of Marx*; also, see Susan Buck-Morss, 'The Second Time as Farce... Historical Pragmatics and the Untimely Present', *The Idea of Communism*, London, New York, 2010, 67 ff.

44 *Ghost Dance*, directed by Ken McMullen, London, 1983. This film, incidentally, not without relevance to the questions of spectrality and revolution, features the Highgate cemetery and Marx's grave prominently, as well as that other famous Londoner obsessed with ghosts (as in Derrida's dictum from the film quoted above), Sigmund Freud. In one scene, one of the female protagonists, Leonie Mellinger, wakes up in a bed set seemingly in front of Marx's grave and monument (as we learn, a parodic *trompe l'oeil*, a large "life-size" photograph in fact), with a voiceover saying that this is not even the real grave of Marx, "it was initially in the poor men's part of the cemetery. Are you sure they got the right bones?"

45 The conclusion of the present essay finds its uncanny visual correspondence and coincidence (if not downright an illustration) in 'Lenin with Dwarfs', which superimposes the Disney cartoon characters onto Lenin's mausoleum, the dwarfs coming from work out of Lenin's mausoleum ("Hi-ho!"), in a recent caricature drawing by Sergej Elkin, published on December 14, 2011, at [http://www.polit.ru/media/photolib/2011/12/14/thumbs/lenin1777\\_1323866102.jpg.288x216\\_q85.jpg](http://www.polit.ru/media/photolib/2011/12/14/thumbs/lenin1777_1323866102.jpg.288x216_q85.jpg); last accessed on February 6, 2012.



“НАМ СМЕХ И СТРОИТЬ И ЖИТЬ ПОМОГАЕТ”:  
ПОЛИТЭКОНОМИЯ СМЕХА И СОВЕТСКАЯ  
МУЗЫКАЛЬНАЯ КОМЕДИЯ (1930-Е ГОДЫ)  
 (“LAUGHTER HELPS US TO BUILD AND LIVE”: THE POLITICAL  
ECONOMY OF LAUGHTER AND THE SOVIET MUSICAL COMEDY  
OF THE 1930S)

ИЛЬЯ КАЛИНИН  
(IL’IA KALININ)

**Abstract**

This article is devoted to the social and political aspects of laughter specific to the Soviet culture of the 1930s. Based on discussions concerning the new Soviet musical comedy it reconstructs the political economy of Soviet laughter in the analytical frame mapped out between the terms laughter and labor, laughter and goods, laughter and capital. The main thesis is that Soviet laughter of Stalin’s époque works as a structural analogue of Soviet intense shock labor that allows the Soviet mass subject to cross the border between collective and individual, ideological and psycho-physiological, physical efforts and emotional relaxation.

Keywords: *Laughter; Soviet Musical Comedy; G. Aleksandrov*

1. *Труд как высвобождение наслаждения*

В буднях великих строек,  
В веселом грохоте, в огнях и звонах...  
(‘Марш энтузиастов’)<sup>1</sup>

Разговор о не экономических феноменах в терминах политэкономии трудно назвать новым. Маркс расширил политэкономическое описание до границ антропологического горизонта человеческого существования. Фрейд использовал экономическую модель для описания человеческой психики. Бодрийяр попытался вскрыть механизмы политической экономики языка. Жижек сделал политэкономия одной из основ своего анализа повседневности, массовой культуры и идеологии. Это если ограничиваться уровнем *great books* и почти случайным выбором наиболее влиятельных фигур. Советский социокультурный опыт также не раз становился объектом описаний, в которых именно символическая экономика производства и потребления идеологии становилась ключом к пониманию специфики функционирования советского общества.<sup>2</sup> Различать случаи, когда политэкономические термины составляют лишь риторическую ткань описания, от примеров, когда политэкономия становится аналитическим методом, фундирующим интерпретацию, не так просто, как может показаться. Поскольку в любом случае перед нами превращение политэкономических понятий в концептуальные метафоры, позволяющие вскрыть в объекте смыслы, не считываемые при других способах прочтения. Вопрос скорее в том, насколько развернута и последовательна оказывается цепочка этих концептуальных метафор, скрепляющая конкретный анализ.

“Политэкономия смеха” оказывается еще одной концептуальной метафорой в ряду уже существующих, встраиваясь в общую аналитическую рамку “политэкономии соцреализма”, предложенную Е. Добренко. Его основной тезис состоит в том, что именно художественный метод оказывался единственно работающим инструментом преобразования реальности; идеология компенсировала нехватку репрессированной марксизмом “прибавочной стоимости”, создавая на уровне символической репрезентации то, что не могло быть произведено в действительности (Добренко 2008: 23-79). В каком-то смысле отношения между реальным и условным планами в этой экономической метафоре меняются местами, поскольку именно *политэкономия соцреализма* оказывается реально работающим механизмом в отличие от не укорененной в природе человека *политэкономии социализма*: “Соцреализм – это машина преобразования советской реальности в социализм” (28). Таким образом, возникает аналитическая перспектива, основанная на логике компенсации, согласно которой интенсивность идеологического производства и потребления замещает собой крах или пробуксовку реального социально-экономического строительства. Репрезентация подменяет собой отсутствующую реальность, производя меж тем реальные эффекты.

Казалось бы, советский (соцреалистический) смех вполне может быть прочитан в рамках той же самой компенсаторной модели. И это вполне характерный ход в интерпретации сталинской комедии, которая



рассматривается на синхронном фоне американского мюзикла эпохи великой депрессии или мюзикла нацистской Германии. В этой перспективе символический ландшафт советской музыкальной комедии описывается как утопическое пространство, дающее возможность эскапистского исхода из ужасов индустриализации, коллективизации и Большого Террора (см., например, Тейлор 2002: 358-371). А ее эмоциональный лиризм опознается как альтернатива идеалу коллективистского героизма “серьезной идеологии”, огораживающая сферу индивидуального переживания, противопоставляемого массовому энтузиазму.

По необходимости вынужденный многие десятилетия быть “человеком героическим”, в том числе и в быту, “советский человек”, похоже, невзирая на все препоны, пытался отстоять свое право на лирическое мироощущение, на частное пространство эмоциональной жизни, пусть и выражавшей себя в области массовой песни и оперного театра. (Раку 2009: 201)

Таким образом, советская кинокомедия интерпретируется как интимный, приватный и эмоционально притягательный вариант советской жизни, противопоставляющий лирику и героизм, возвращающий человеку соразмерный ему индивидуальный масштаб. В итоге перед нами оказывается хоть и *советская*, но *комедия*, – картина светлого будущего, но с человеческим лицом, своеобразный противовес тому официальному светлому будущему, которое императивно и бескомпромиссно призывало без остатка отдать себя делу его строительства.<sup>3</sup> В первом случае – смех и радостное веселье, во втором – труд, интенсивность которого сжигает человеческое на алтаре героизма. В первом случае – эмоция, во втором – идеологическая пропаганда. При этом в качестве аксиоматической предпосылки такого взгляда на эмоцию выступает утверждение ее частного характера, делающее ее пространством латентного сопротивления коллективистскому пафосу идеологии. В результате в такого рода оценках возникает неизбежное напряжение между утверждением компенсаторной и эскапистской функциями музыкальной комедии и песенной культуры и их встроенностью в проект советской модернизации с характерным для него преодолением оппозиции “героическое”/“лирическое”.<sup>4</sup> Иными словами, комедия одновременно описывается и как побег от ужасов социальной практики и как неотъемлемая часть тоталитарного контекста, воспроизводящая принуждение в медийных образах идеологического соблазна: “Если Большой Террор был кнутом для модернизации страны, то развлекательное кино – пряником” (Тейлор 2002: 359).

Подобная точка зрения воспроизводит характерный взгляд на “советского человека” как на социальную конструкцию, в которой гра-

ницы внешнего и внутреннего повторяют символическое распределение “советского” и “человеческого”. “Внешнее” связывается с диктатом героических коллективистских ценностей, идеологической индоктринацией и пропагандой, “обезличивающими индивидуальное мирочувствование” и превращающими человека в “винтик государственной машины”. Наоборот, “внутреннее” оказывается зоной подспудного сопротивления, в которой эмоциональная сторона человеческой жизни оказывается своеобразным противоядием от дурмана идеологии. В то же время материал показывает, что ситуация была одновременно и лучше и хуже, чем это предполагает данный взгляд. Индивидуальная эмоция была не только зоной социальной автономии. Она была также и источником мощной социальной энергии, поскольку позволяла снять барьер между внутренним и внешним, интимным и героическим, психологическим и идеологическим. И массовая песня, мощно заявившая о себе с приходом музыкальной комедии, это прекрасно демонстрирует. Ее специфика в качестве особого медиума заключается в том, что она опосредует границу между индивидуальным и коллективным, между интимным и идеологическим, между сольным и хоровым пением. Голос поющего героя музыкальной комедии удостоверяет искренность поющего, то есть проницаемость этой границы. Его расширение в хоровом пении вплетает индивидуальный лиризм в гармонию коллектива.<sup>5</sup> Анализируя фильм *Волга-Волга* в связи с природой музыки по отношению к другим медиа, Н. Друбек-Майер делает вывод, который можно распространить на феномен советской музыкальной комедии в целом:

Голос – это метонимический знак личности [...] Голос с его незаменимым тембром – с одной стороны, выражение искренности, знак неподдельности, с другой – это место, где сплетается официальное с родным, близким, интимным, где абстрактное слово обретает свою физическую, хоть и невидимую оболочку, оживляющую теплым дыханием. (Друбек-Майер 2006: 584)

В этом смысле песни довольно одной, лишь бы она была массовой, то есть распаивающей пространство интимного переживания радости в пространство общего социального ликования, и наоборот, превращающей социальный код идеологического послания органической частью интимного эмоционального переживания. Это именно то диалектическое отношение между идеологией и психикой, на которое указывает В. Волошинов в *Марксизме и философии языка*:

Идеологический знак жив своим психическим осуществлением так же, как и психологическое осуществление живо своим идеологическим наполнением. [...] Между психикой и идеологией существует таким образом неразрывное диалектическое взаимодействие:

психика снимает себя, уничтожается, становясь идеологией, и идеология снимает себя, становясь психикой; внутренний знак должен освободить себя от своей поглощенности психологическим контекстом (био-биографическим), перестать быть субъективным переживанием, чтобы стать идеологическим знаком; идеологический знак должен погрузить в стихию внутренних субъективных знаков, зазвучать субъективными тонами, чтобы остаться живым знаком, а не попасть в почетное положение непонятой музейной реликвии. (Волошинов 1993: 46)

Как представляется, описанная выше логика противопоставлений – реальность/идеология, пропаганда/развлечение, работа/отдых, коллективное/индивидуальное, эмоция/доктрина, внешнее/внутреннее – и стоящая за ней аксиология (оценочность которой носит вполне идеологический характер) делают заранее предсказуемыми результаты анализа. Более продуктивным кажется чтение, пытающееся следовать за логикой самой культуры, специфика которой состоит как раз в диалектическом снятии различий. И в этом смысле феномен массовой советской комедии в целом и фактура советского смеха в частности позволяет проследить, каким образом перечисленные выше противопоставления оказывались незначимыми, а смех становился не просто эмоциональной разрядкой, позволяющей отключиться от невыносимого напряжения сталинской модернизации, и даже не механизмом, вырабатывающим необходимую для этой модернизации социальную энергию, но структурным аналогом труда. И даже не просто труда, но именно интенсивного стахановского труда. Возвращаясь к обозначенной мной в заглавии метафоре “политэкономии смеха”, можно сказать, что советская комедия и советский смех работают не столько как “машина преобразования советской реальности в социализм”, сколько как машина постоянного обмена между реальностью и идеологией, пропагандой и развлечением, коллективным и индивидуальным, эмоцией и доктриной, внутренним и внешним. Что по сути, надо сказать, и есть строительство социализма.

В этом смысле природа и социальная функция советского смеха не исчерпывается классическими законами комизма, исходящими из напряжения между противоположностями: будь то столкновение механического и живого, обнаруживающее несостоятельность механизма (А. Бергсон), или экономящее психические усилия короткое замыкание между противоположными семантическими полюсами (как описывает технику остроумия З. Фрейд).<sup>6</sup> Советский смех шире сферы комического. На этот тотальный характер советского смеха указывает Н. Скрадоль: “Смеяться можно либо от всепоглощающей эмоции счастья оттого, что жизнь стала лучше, либо по конкретному поводу – но, как и

подобаает в царстве радости и счастья, таким поводом становится все, что хоть как-то связано с новыми реалиями” (Скрадоль 2011: 163). Но это означает, что советский смех связан не столько с объектом (поскольку им может стать любой объект), сколько с субъектом, с его эмоциональным состоянием, его вовлеченностью в общую атмосферу радости, бодрости и веселья. Таким образом, советский смех оказывается не столько реакцией на существующее напряжение, сколько реакцией на отсутствие полюсов, между которыми возможно какое-либо напряжение. Поскольку именно этим отсутствием и характеризуется социалистическое “царство радости и счастья”. Единственным напряжением, возникающим в связи с советским смехом, оказывается напряжение между самим смеющимся коллективом (внутри которого сняты все вышеперечисленные противоположности) и чужаком, врагом, вредителем, анахроничным или инобытийственным по отношению к данному коллективу.<sup>7</sup> Спецификой этого смеха становится особого рода заразительность, в результате которой смеющиеся субъекты входят в тесный эмоционально-телесный контакт друг с другом, преодолевая границы между внутренним и внешним, коллективным и индивидуальным, физическим и психическим. И если вновь вернуть разговор об этом интенсивном (экстатическом, – в эйзенштейновском смысле экстазиса)<sup>8</sup> обмене в область политэкономии, то смех оказывается аффектом, который одновременно и производится и потребляется одним и тем же коллективом, не становясь благодаря этому товаром, как это происходит в капиталистической индустрии развлечений, где одни смешат, а другие – смеются.<sup>9</sup> Или еще точнее: являясь эмоционально-телесной реакцией, такой смех возникает (производится) на индивидуальном уровне, но потребляется коллективно, собственно, это перетекание из сферы индивидуального производства в сферу коллективного потребления и усиливает его эффект, производя “дружный здоровый советский смех”, а не тот смех, который является индивидуальной и рациональной реакцией индивида, как это описывается у Бергсона.<sup>10</sup> И если при капиталистической системе прибавочная стоимость оказывается материальным результатом присвоенного капиталистом труда рабочего, то в случае советского смеха, прибавочная стоимость оказывается эквивалентна той общей и заразительной атмосфере веселья, которая захватывает смеющийся коллектив. Индивидуальная реакция советского человека (сопоставимая с трудовым усилием пролетария) не присваивается кем-то отдельным, но разделяется всеми. Продуктом этой работы смеха и оказывается коллектив (как это происходит, например, с музыкальным коллективом “Дружба” в фильме Г. Александра *Веселые ребята*, 1934 год). Более того, комедия позволяет производить эту прибавочную стоимость не просто на уровне идеологической индоктринации, подменяющей собой реальную практику строительства новой жизни, но на уров-

не, снимающем различие между развлечением, творчеством и трудом. Выполняя ту же функцию, что и стахановский труд, комедия позволяет добиться того же результата, но без характерной для последнего интенсивной затраты сил. И не потому, что смех и веселье *преподносятся вместо* социалистического труда, необходимость которого резко снижается благодаря тому, что комедия рисует уже достигнутое царство социализма, а потому что смех и веселье *воспроизводят имманентную структуру* социалистического труда. “Веселый грохот великих строек”, о котором поется в ‘Марше энтузиастов’, указывал именно на эту смычку социалистического труда и советского веселья: они не чередовались друг с другом, подобно смене рабочего времени и досуга, но были вписаны друг в друга, являясь физическим и эмоциональным эквивалентами, включенными в непрерывающийся взаимный обмен. Иногда этот обмен оказывается как бы дословно экранизирован. Так в кинофильме *Светлый путь*, непосредственно тематизировавшем связь между музыкальной комедией и стахановским трудом,<sup>11</sup> есть сцена, когда главная героиня, будущая ударница Татьяна Морозова, получает телеграмму от Молотова, поддержавшего ее рабочий почин, зажимаемый дирекцией завода. Татьяна заливается слезами счастья, на что секретарь заводской партийной организации говорит ей: “Чего же ты плачешь? Тебе же радоваться, смеяться надо!”. “Я и смеюсь”, – отвечает стахановка. После чего возникает сцена митинга, на котором общим смехом отмечается ее ударный труд на 16 станках вместо 8, и тем же дружным смехом сопровождается ее заявление о том, что теперь она обязуется работать на 30 станках. Таким образом, стахановский труд встраивается в рамку коллективного советского смеха, причем они соотносятся не как причина и следствие, не как последовательная смена напряжения и разрядки, а как элементы общего физического, эмоционального и идеологического подъема.

Творческая основа труда при коммунизме была одной из его базовых характеристик. При коммунизме должна была отпасть “сама основа [...] противоположности между трудом и наслаждением” (Маркс, Энгельс 1955: 206). Существовая в постоянно присутствующей перспективе коммунизма, социалистический труд также опознавался исходя из этого снятия. Вырванный из-под власти эксплуатации труд должен был обрести творческий, – то есть свободный и постоянно преобразующий свои собственные условия, – характер, а наслаждение, перестав быть практической нуждой в отдыхе после длинного рабочего дня, должно было утратить свою грубую бессодержательность, вызванную оторванностью от основ “общей жизнедеятельности” человека, а также “качественной и количественной ограниченностью доступных для пролетариев наслаждений” (419). Иными словами, труд должен был стать формой наслаждения, а наслаждение – содержанием труда. Таким

образом, труд и наслаждение не просто переставали выступать в качестве противоположностей, но становились условиями друг друга: трудовая активность производила наслаждение непосредственно (минуя медирующую стадию вознаграждения), а наслаждение снимало различие между физическим трудом, эмоциональным подъемом и развлечением: “Создан наш мир на славу, / За годы сделаны дела столетий. / Счастье берем по праву / И жарко любим и поем как дети” (так об этом поется все в том же ‘Марше энтузиастов’). Интенсивность труда, интенсивность времени, интенсивность эмоционального переживания и веселья выступают здесь как полностью тождественные друг другу общественные ценности, подлежащие обмену. Причем поскольку они обмениваются без остатка и не встраиваются в какую-либо символическую иерархию, речь не идет о рыночном обмене, в котором один товар обладает большей ценностью, нежели другой. Социалистическая экономика работает через обмен полностью эквивалентных друг другу ценностей. Об этой же чувственной привязанности к труду, благодаря которой исчезает разница между работой и развлечением, пишет и М. Горький в своих *Беседах о ремесле* (1930-1931 годы): “Культурно-историческое значение труда я понял довольно рано, как только почувствовал вкус к работе, – почувствовал, что пилить дерево, копать землю, печь хлеба можно с таким же наслаждением, как песни петь” (Горький 1949а: 309).

“Труд как творчество” становится одним из главных идеологических и художественных топосов эпохи. Но меня в данном случае интересует не столько момент его превращения в искусство (в теоретическом диапазоне от раннего формализма В. Шкловского до продукционизма Б. Арватова, или от работ по научной организации труда А. Гастева до биомеханики В. Мейерхольда), сколько момент его облегчения благодаря освоению техники и момент его интенсификации благодаря преодолению технических норм. Оба последних момента нашли выражение в стахановском движении, пафос которого подчеркивал не граничащую с самоуничтожением героическую работу как таковую, но возможность резкого увеличения производительности труда благодаря тому, что его субъектом является человек, способный преодолеть нормы, которые “стали уже старыми для наших дней, для наших новых людей” (Сталин 1935). Топика сталинской речи на I совещании стахановцев лишена революционных призывов к героизму и подвигу, наоборот, она обращалась к констатации материального благополучия, именно в ней прозвучала знаменитая фраза “Жить стало лучше, жить стало веселее”. Несколькими годами ранее М. Горький в передовице журнала *Наши достижения* также укажет на необходимость перехода от революционной риторики подвижничества к позитивной и жизне-радостной риторике строительства социализма:

Показать новых людей, героизм которых не в том, что они, надрынаясь, переносят на себе непосильные тяжести, – для этого у нас теперь существуют краны, – людей, героизм которых не в том, что они, падая от бессонницы, работают по четырнадцать часов подряд, – теперь у нас семичасовой рабочий день, – мы должны показать людей жизнерадостных, методически и упорно овладевающих техникой новых производств, строящих лучшую жизнь с глубоким чувством ответственности перед страной.  
(Горький 1949б: 381)

Речь идет не только о расширении границ труда, который распространяется за пределы полей и фабрик, пронизывая различные сферы жизни. Расширяются сами границы возможного, поскольку героизм труда заменяется жизнерадостностью трудящегося. Музыкальные комедии, герои которых поют, танцуют и смеются рядом со своими станками и тракторами, демонстрируют не просто метонимическую близость труда и жизнерадостного веселья.<sup>12</sup> Как я уже говорил, между ними существует структурная гомология. “Уничтожение противоположности между трудом умственным и трудом физическим”, о котором говорит товарищ Сталин на совещании стахановцев, в комедии реализуется в уничтожении противоположности между подъемом производительности и позитивным эмоциональным подъемом, смех в свою очередь работает как механизм, обеспечивающий возможность этого взаимного перехода. Музыкальная комедия говорит о производстве даже тогда, когда никто из ее героев не работает. Последнюю странность неоднократно отмечали исследователи. Так К. Кларк пишет о том, что в фильме *Волга-Волга* “подчеркнуто занижено значение мотива труда, центрального для сталинского этоса” (Кларк 2002: 380). Все танцуют и поют, везде и... в рабочее время. На эту же подрывную для идейно нормативного поведения особенность обращает внимание и Е. Добренко:

В *Волге-Волге* персонажи профессионально маркированы (письменосица, водовоз, дворник, милиционер, повар, официант, бухгалтер и т. д.), но никто из них не работает [...] Все это происходит в разгар рабочего дня и все занимаются своими нерабочими делами в рабочее время радостно и привычно, нормально.  
(Добренко 1993: 39)

Все дело в том, что работа, которую производят герои носит более важный характер, нежели та, что закреплена за ними их профессиональными маркерами. Танцы, пение, смех, радостное веселье связаны с производством коллектива, рождение которого возникает благодаря стихийному, эмоциональному и экзотическому преодолению индивидуумом заданных ему изначально границ (в том числе и границ про-

фессиональной идентичности). Та же Кларк отмечает, что фильм Александра “*Волга-Волга*” аллегорически изображает [...] процесс [строительства нации – И.К.], представляя государственное строительство как развлечение и *через* развлечение [выделено автором – И.К.]” (Кларк 2002: 380), абсолютно верно указывая на то, что государственное строительство может быть не только *представлено через* развлечение, но быть ему *синонимично*. Можно сказать, что перед нами даже не предъявляемое как развлечение строительство нации, но веселое строительство самого социализма, который согласно Ленину есть “живое творчество масс” (Ленин 1974: 57), то есть та самая самодеятельность, стихийному и низовому движению которой пытается помешать советский бюрократ Бывалов. В контексте нашего разговора, стремящегося связать специфику советского смеха с производительным советским трудом (и стахановским движением в частности), Кларк делает еще одно принципиально важное наблюдение: “Сюжет фильма может быть прочитан как метафора стахановского движения, в изображении которого [...] неизменно подчеркивался конфликт между осторожностью инженеров и энтузиазмом простых рабочих, перевыполнявших установленные спецами нормы в два-три раза” (Кларк 2002: 373). Различие в том, что, с моей точки зрения, можно обнаружить не только метафорическую близость между сюжетом фильма и стахановским движением, но и структурное сходство между смехом советской комедии и тем, как в рамках стахановского движения концептуализировался труд. Обозначенный парадокс между отсутствием репрезентации труда и обязательным трудовым этосом сталинской культуры снимается, если принять тезис о том, что советская комедийная эксцентрика (смех, пение, танец) – это не чистое развлечение, и даже не скрытая пропаганда, демонстрирующая реализацию псевдофольклорного социального идеала счастливого и сытого “поющего и пляшущего народа”, но структурная аллегория, эмоциональный эквивалент труда как такового. Советский смех является не столько *эффектом*, производимым благодаря механизмам комического, сколько *аффектом* коллективности. Это дружный заразительный смех, который распространяется подобно цепной реакции (кстати, именно так будет описывать Сталин характер распространения стахановского движения).<sup>13</sup> Если основа стахановского труда заключается в преодолении существующих технических норм, основа ударного советского смеха состоит в эмоциональном преодолении границ отдельного индивида, в разрушении границ между субъектом и объектом смеха и самое главное – в снятии границ между смеющимися.

Говоря о репрезентации труда в 1930-е годы, можно выделить по крайней мере два ее основных варианта. Первый связан с укорененной еще в 1920-х традицией изображения труда через “работу на износ,



экзальтированный расход производительных сил, ‘перегрев механизмов’” (Григорьева 2006: 475). Иными словами, через подвиг, аскезу, преодоление человеческого в героическом: от *Цемент* Ф. Гладкова (1925 год) до *Как закалялась сталь* Н. Островского (1932 год). Но уже в 1934 году выходят музыкальные комедии И. Савченко *Гармонь* и Г. Александрова *Веселые ребята*, в которых на первый взгляд никто не работает, а все пляшут, поют и смеются. И дело не в том, что эти комедии изображают уже построенный социализм, отменяющий необходимость труда, а в том, что сам труд начинает иначе концептуализироваться и, соответственно, иначе изображаться. Если Д. Вертов, воспроизводя общий пафос авангарда в начале 1920-х будет писать о том, что “Нам радость пляшущих пил на лесопилке понятнее и ближе радости человеческих танцулек” (Вертов 1966: 47), соцреализм отменит это противопоставление, уравнивая в правах эти два типа радости и изобразив в виде танца труд ткачихи-стахановки (Тани Морозовой из *Светлого пути*).<sup>14</sup>

То, как воспринимались комедийные фильмы, в каком направлении двигалась дискуссия относительно представленного в этих комедиях смеха, обнаруживает тесную связь между смехом (танцем, пением, весельем) и трудом. В дальнейшем эта связь будет обнажена в таких музыкальных производственных комедиях, как *Трактористы* (1939), *Свинарка и пастух* (1941) И. Пырьева и *Светлый путь* Г. Александрова (1940). Но даже тогда, когда непосредственный производственный труд будет отсутствовать на сцене, на ней будет присутствовать его структурный аналог – производительный смех, преодолевающий индивидуальное в коллективном и производящий необходимый эмоциональный подъем, то веселье, которое рассматривалось не просто как необходимое условие социалистического строительства, но как его неотъемлемая часть.

## 2. “Смех – брат силы!”: сталинский призыв

Мы можем петь и смеяться, как дети,  
Среди упорной борьбы и труда...  
(‘Марш веселых ребят’)

‘Марш веселых ребят’, прозвучавший в первой музыкальной комедии Г. Александрова, был и первым опытом совместной работы композитора И. Дунаевского и поэта В. Лебедева-Кумача, творческий тандем которых будет не только организовывать визуальные решения будущих комедий Александрова, но и выступать одним из наиболее значимых символических саунд-треков эпохи. В первой же фразе ‘Марша’, с которого начинается музыкальный фильм и появляется его поющий герой

Костя Потехин (которого играет Леонид Утесов), сразу возникает симптоматичное для нас сближение смеха, борьбы и труда. Таким образом, смех встраивается в совершенно иную социальную прагматику, нежели та, из которой исходит капиталистическая индустрия развлечений. В рамках советской политэкономии смеха он уже не предьявляется как продукт свободного времени, как товар, поставляемый индустрией развлечений, или как эффект чистого и частного индивидуального досуга. При сходстве формальных приемов и даже отчасти общих социально-утопических установок американский мюзикл эпохи великой депрессии и советская музыкальная комедия, возникшая сразу после первой ударной пятилетки, включены в принципиально разные социально-политические и политэкономические контексты, производя принципиально различные эффекты. Первый компенсирует экономический кризис, повлекший за собой остановку производства: безработица как социально фрустрирующее отсутствие возможности трудиться преобразуется мюзиклом в музыкальную паузу, – при том, что развлечение оказывается даже не столько заслуженным отдыхом, сколько подменой самого отсутствующего труда. Вторая предьявляет труд, превратившийся в радостное и свободное творчество, ставший чистым наслаждением, тотальность которого обеспечивается снятием различий между развлечением и трудом. Советский смех – это то, что делает труд радостным, борьбу – победоносной, а смерть – относящейся исключительно к индивидуальной судьбе отдельного человека (смерть выносятся за скобки изображения, буффонадно отменяется общим весельем коллектива: как это происходит с превращением похоронной процессии в репетиционную площадку оркестра “Дружба” и последующей гонкой на катафалке на концерт в Большом театре, который заканчивается их общим триумфом).

Советская музыкальная комедия задает такую смысловую конструкцию, в которой смех не противостоит борьбе и труду в качестве индивидуальной потребности в релаксации, но воспроизводит их логику на своем собственном эмоциональном и психомоторном уровне. Г. Александров так описывал свое отношение к фильму *Веселые ребята* и мотивацию его создания:

Появление кинокомедии к тому времени стало назревшей и насущной необходимостью. Страна успешно справилась с задачами первой пятилетки [...] Мне очень дорога эта картина. Она снималась в ту пору, когда зритель ждал фильмов бодрых, веселых, жизнерадостных. Фильм *Веселые ребята* был первым ответом на это требование времени. (Александров 1983: 193)

Требование времени, о котором пишет Александров, имело вполне конкретный характер. Осенью 1932 года в ЦК партии прошло совещание работников кино, на котором были выдвинуты лозунги “Даешь комедию!” и “Смех – брат силы”. На призыв ответили И. Пырьев, В. Пудовкин, А. Довженко, Г. Козинцев, Л. Трауберг, М. Ромм, С. Эйзенштейн (последний успел написать сценарий комедии *МММ*, которая так и не была поставлена). В результате этих оргусилий в 1934 году вышло пять комедий, и с тех пор вплоть до начала войны каждый год выходило от 5 до 12 комедий (Юренев 1964: 191).

Более того, требования времени имели и вполне персонифицированный характер. “Бодрых, веселых, жизнерадостных” фильмов ждал не только обобщенный советский зритель. О требованиях самого главного и первого зрителя страны в своих воспоминаниях рассказывает сам Г. Александров, приводя эпизод своей встречи со Сталиным, которая произошла на даче у М. Горького в августе 1932 года, то есть еще до совещания в ЦК и сразу после возвращения режиссера из командировки в Европу и Америку. Встреча была специально организована для того, чтобы сформулировать наказ, который через три года отольется в известную фразу, произнесенную на Первом всесоюзном совещании рабочих и работниц – стахановцев (ноябрь 1935 года). Во время этой встречи Сталин указывает на необходимость для новой советской культуры “бодрого, жизнерадостного искусства, полного смеха и веселья”. Александров приводит также следующие слова Сталина:

К сожалению, искусство отстает от темпов экономического строительства [...] Известно, что люди любят веселое радостное искусство, но Вы не хотите принимать эти желания во внимание [...] Больше того, в искусстве не перевелись люди, зажимающие все смешное. (Александров 1983: 163)

Фактически, Сталин не просто указывает на необходимость комедии, но утверждает связь между экономикой индустриального производства и коллективной экономикой желания, одним из важных механизмов которой является потребность в веселье и смехе. Собственно, искусство комедии и должно установить эту эквивалентность обмена между “экономическим строительством” и стремлением “петь и смеяться как дети”. Согласно этой логике, песня и труд, смех и борьба должны замкнуться в некий устойчивый контур социальной энергии, необходимой для строительства социализма. При этом необходимо отдавать отчет в том, что новое “веселое искусство”, за которое ратует Сталин, нельзя рассматривать как простую эскапистскую жвачку, позволяющую советскому человеку расслабиться после трудового подвига и воздействия прямой пропаганды. Речь не о “прянике”, который должен был смягчать тяготы

экономической модернизации и манить за собой, демонстрируя ее еще не существующие в реальности успехи. Речь о синхронизации темпов двух экономик, без которой под вопросом оказывался успех самого производственного “экономического строительства”. В этой перспективе “радостное и веселое искусство” выступало не в качестве клапана, выпускающего образовавшийся от перенапряжения пар, а как паровой котел, генерирующий еще большее напряжение, – только теперь это напряжение должно было носить не характер героической возгонки (как это было в первое десятилетие советской власти), а характер жизне-радостного ликования. Труд как форму жертвенного героизма должен был уравновесить труд как форма жизнеутверждающего наслаждения.

Таким образом, значение новой музыкальной комедии не исчерпывалось возникновением новой, light версии пропаганды, сочетающей в себе “зрелище и эмоцию, в которых одновременно отразились как чистое развлечение, так и прямая пропаганда” (Лахусен 2002: 343). Как представляется, вопрос не в том, что советской музыкальной комедии (в отличие от американского или нацистского мюзикла) удалось совместить развлечение и пропаганду, а в том, что ей удалось снять само различие между ними. Новаторство того же Г. Александрова заключалось не в том, что ему удалось внутрь развлекательного зрелища поместить пропагандистскую конструкцию, ретранслировав сквозь видимый миру смех, невидимую, но оттого лишь еще более действенную, идеологию (какого-либо отчетливого, пусть и скрытого идеологического послания в *Веселых ребятах* нет, за что его фильм и подвергся резкой критике со стороны кинематографического цеха и части партийного руководства, от которой его спасла непосредственная поддержка Сталина, Горького и председателя Государственного управления кинофотопромышленности Б. Шумяцкого). Специфика его музыкальной комедии заключается в том, что пафос труда и другие нормативные советские ценности оказываются не просто обрамлены радостным веселым ликованием, они замещены им. “Экономическое строительство”, от темпов которого, согласно Сталину, отставало искусство, отсутствует на сцене трех первых комедий Александрова и тем не менее именно к этой отсутствующей фигуре отсылает их эмоциональная зрелищность (и торжество героев на сцене Большого театра в *Веселых ребятах*; и вид Красной площади из окон Мэрион Диксон в *Цирке*, по которой в конце фильма она пройдет, обретя свою настоящую Родину; и берега канала имени Москвы, – так называемый “Сталинский зеркальный мост”, – вдоль которых герои *Волга-Волга* приближаются к Москве) и особенно принципиальный для музыкальной комедии медиум массовой песни (‘Марш веселых ребят’, ‘Песня о Родине (Широка страна моя родная)’, ‘Песня о Волге’, ‘Марш энтузиастов’). И это отсутствие должно прочитываться не в структуралистской логике значимого отсутствия или

минус-приема, но через диалектическую логику взаимного превращения и снятия противоречий. “Экономическое строительство”, тематически отсутствуя на сцене, присутствует на ней благодаря произошедшему исчезновению противопоставленности труда и наслаждения, труда и веселья, труда и смеха. Идеологический успех советской комедии заключается не в том, что она смогла протащить идеологию как заметную для зрителя нагрузку к развлечению, вроде обязательного показа киножурналов, демонстрирующих “наши достижения” на “стройках СССР” и предвещающих показ вышедших в один год *Чапаяева* или *Веселых ребят*, которые, являясь действительными объектами зрительского желания, метонимически “заряжали” соседствующие с ними пропагандистские ролики. Музыкальная комедия смогла зарифмовать труд и смех, нормативное поведение советского субъекта и радостное веселье таким образом, что фабульное отсутствие первого члена рифмы мгновенно достраивало его на уровне символического сюжета. Труд и радостное веселье в музыкальных комедиях Александрова синонимизируются подобно тому, как монтаж его фильмов, движения и реплики героев синхронизируются с музыкальным звукорядом, а эмоциональный заряд, заложенный в песенной мелодике, совпадает с ее идейным посланием. И эта политэкономическая модель советского смеха во многом оказалась парадигматической для жанра советской музыкальной комедии в целом.

Предложенная Александровым в *Веселых ребятах* комедийная эстрадная эксцентрика, лишенная непосредственного идеологического заряда (или предъясняющая его в самом общем виде, вроде воспевания дружбы народов в *Цирке* или превосходства национального самодетельного и народного творчества над казенным бюрократизмом и европейской музыкальной традицией в комедии *Волга-Волга*), тем не менее несла заряд, даже более эффективный, чем эксплицитная идеологическая программа. Она реабилитировала заразительную силу эмоции, возвращая ей ее производительную перформативную мощь. О необходимости такой реабилитации, которая бы сделала социально-полноценной эстрадную зрелищность и эмоциональность, писал и один из авторов сценария *Веселых ребят*, В. Масс, причем еще за два года до выхода фильма:

Старая эстрада обращалась непосредственно к чувствам и эмоциям зрителя. Не доверяя смеху и считая почему-то лирику как таковую привилегией разлагающейся буржуазии, новая советская эстрада стала апеллировать исключительно к нашему сознанию. [...] Лишенная лирика и смеха, она естественно стала бесплодной и скучной, потеряла свою непосредственную заразительность, всю свою притягательную силу. [...] Вовсе необязательно писать песенки о

плане 2-й пятилетки и о перспективах мировой революции. Пусть это будут песенки о любви, о всевозможных злобах дня, о самых забавных и смешных мелочах нашего быта, об анекдотических приключениях самых разнообразных советских и несоветских персонажей, лишь бы в этих песенках проявлялось наше отношение к вещам; [...]

Эстрадный аттракцион оказывается социально-полноценным только в том случае, если он пленяет нас своей яркой зрелищностью, легко воспринимаемой музыкой. (Масс 1932: 16, 10)

Отвечая на этот призыв, советская комедия смогла превратить вторую пятилетку из непосредственного предмета изображения (как это предлагал жанр производственного романа) в пронизывающую ее зрелищность фигуру, структурно воспроизводящую интенсивность труда в интенсивности эмоционального производства.

Смех, бодрость и веселье, транслируемые советской комедией, рассматривались не столько как отдых после трудового дня, сколько как заряд энергии, необходимые перед новым трудовым усилием. Вот несколько писем, присланных Александрову после просмотра *Веселых ребят*. Например, письмо известного советского полярника Р. Л. Самойловича:

В наше время, в наше удивительное время, когда социалистическое строительство проникнуто духом бодрости, живости и энергии, такие картины нужны, как нужна нам наша повседневная деятельность. На этих картинах мы отдыхаем, в них тот дух, которым проникнут весь быт Советского Союза. (Александров 1983: 219)

А вот телеграмма начальника штаба Балтийского флота И. С. Исакова:

Наши флагманы (командиры бригад и дивизионов) и начальники политотделов были приглашены на просмотр "В.р." непосредственно с кораблей, фортов и своих учреждений, т. е. прямо с работы, причем работы очень напряженной и ответственной. Именно поэтому успех картины был так значителен и в то же время закономерен [...] Полтора часа подлинного отдыха и хорошего бодрого смеха – именно то, что нужно напряженно работающему человеку, который завтра с утра опять встанет на работу. (там же)

Этот момент встроенности комедии в трудовой процесс подытоживает и глава кинематографического управления Борис Шумяцкий: "Зрителю, который посмотрит *Веселых ребят*, после него будет легче работать, фильм дает прекрасный отдых" (Шумяцкий 1935: 236). Это отдых, – не после работы, а перед ней. Точнее даже сказать, что это отдых, непосредственно встроенный в не знающий пауз трудовой процесс.

Шумяцкому же принадлежит и эксплицитная рефлексия над традицией русского смеха и над тем, чем отличается от нее новый советский смех:

Царская и капиталистическая Россия в лучших своих произведениях не знала веселого, радостного смеха. [...] смехом Гоголя, Щедрина и даже Чехова не всегда можно передать нашу советскую действительность во всей ее сложности и многообразии [...] И нам думается, что если бы Гоголь, Щедрин и Чехов жили в наши дни, самый смех их приобрел бы в Советском Союзе жизнерадостность, оптимизм и бодрость. Сатирический характер комедии в буржуазном обществе, смех сквозь слезы. Или легкие бездумные комедии, являющиеся апологетикой буржуазного строя. В стране строящегося социализма, где нет частной собственности и эксплуатации, где враждебные пролетариату классы ликвидированы, где трудящиеся объединены сознательным участием в строительстве социалистического общества [...], – в этой стране на комедию, кроме задачи обличения, возлагается и другая, более важная и ответственная задача – создания бодрого, радостного зрелища [...] Победивший класс хочет смеяться радостно. Это его право, и этот радостный советский смех советская кинематография должна дать зрителю. (246, 247, 249)

Право на смех оказывается здесь оборотной стороной уже провозглашенного советской властью права на труд.

Но вернемся к сталинскому наказу. Точнее к тому развитию, которое он получил в речи на I совещании стахановцев. Полностью знаменитая фраза Сталина звучит так: “Жить стало лучше, товарищи. Жить стало веселее. А когда весело живется, работа спорится [...] Отсюда высокие нормы выработки” (Сталин 1935). Интересующая нас симптоматика сближения смеха и интенсивного труда эксплицируется в этой формуле даже еще более непосредственно, чем в обращении к Александрову на даче у Горького. Если тогда говорилось об отставании комедии от темпов экономического роста, то теперь между собой связываются “высокие нормы выработки” и улучшение “качества жизни”, которая стала веселее. С одной стороны, эта фраза может быть прочитана как чистый императив, директивность которого была реализована в “стремительном нарастании песенного веселья, кинематографического смеха и изобразительного юмора”, захлестнувших страну во второй половине 1930-х годов (Богданов 2009: 192). С другой, она является продолжением той логики, на которую опирался Сталин в разговоре с Александровым. Характерно, что само утверждение того, что “жить стало веселее” произносится именно на съезде стахановцев, тем самым лишней раз подчеркивая связь между весельем и производительностью, причем производительностью, носящей не рациональный и машинизи-

рованный, а патетический характер. Если эксцентричный смех преодолевает нормативную и эмоционально нейтральную рациональность жеста, мимики, телесного движения, “эксцентризм” стахановского движения заключается в преодолении технических норм и нормативных возможностей человеческого тела. В обоих случаях катализатором преодоления выступает коллектив: в первом случае всеобщее заражение смехом усиливало его кумулятивный эффект, выворачивая тела смеющихся навстречу друг другу; во втором, – коллективный энтузиазм социалистического соревнования позволял достигать совокупного производственного результата, превышающего простую сумму вложенных в него индивидуальных усилий. Практика индивидуальных стахановских рекордов состояла в том, что технологические нормы, разработанные инженерами-спецами отвергались, а им противопоставлялась способность советского человека не различать частное от общего, индивидуальное от коллективного, равно как и возможное от невозможного. Вся бригада работала на рекорд, устанавливаемый одним человеком, который при этом выступал как часть бригады и репрезентировал советского человека как такового. Герой-стахановец был одновременно и персонализирован и типичен (в этом смысле Стаханов был лишь первым стахановцем; характерно и то, как в своей речи Сталин использует фамилии Стаханова, Бусыгина, Виноградова то в единственном, то во множественном числе). В свою очередь смех и веселье, производимые советской комедией, выступали как машина метонимии, не столько растворяющая индивидуальное в коллективном (как на этом настаивает тоталитарная модель интерпретации советского общества), сколько делая их смежными друг другу, включая смеющихся субъектов в интенсивную коммуникацию друг с другом (на том, что смех является одной из самых интенсивных форм коммуникации сходятся практически все существующие теории смеха, расходящиеся во многом друг от друга: А. Бергсона и Ж. Батая, М. Бахтина и Х. Плеснера, В. Проппа и О. Фрейденаберг), в результате которой коллектив возникает не как эффект внешнего принуждения, а как эффект радостного и всеобщего эмоционального заражения.

Таким образом, экономика обмена между эмоциональным воздействием комической эксцентрики и постоянно присутствующим горизонтом необходимости интенсивного труда позволяет метонимически сконденсировать (в терминах фрейдовского психоанализа) в одно целое мотив труда и мотив производительного смеха. Вот прекрасный пример такого понимания смеха, отразившийся в рецензии на эстрадные номера джазового оркестра Утесова в журнале *Рабочий театр* (от которых, собственно, и отталкивался сценарий *Веселых ребят*):



Общественная ценность номера Утесова в том-то и заключается, что, отведав бодрящего ритма его труб, саксофонов и барабанов, посмеявшись над его веселыми остротами и жестами, вкусивши безграничного оптимизма его номера, хочется с двойной энергией приниматься и за интернациональное воспитание детей [что станет темой второй комедии Александрова – И.К.], и строить силосы, и горячо помогать управдомам, и даже бороться с коррозией металлов! (Цит. по: Утесов 2006: 223)

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## ПРИМЕЧАНИЯ

- 1 'Марш энтузиастов' (слова Анатолия Д'Актиля [Френкеля], музыка Исаака Дунаевского) был написан специально для фильма Григория Александрова *Светлый путь*, 1940 год.
- 2 Наиболее общие вопросы в этой связи были поставлены в работах: Groys (1988); Гройс (2007); Рыклин (2002); Добренко (2008).
- 3 О соотношении дискурса идеологической пропаганды и форм развлекательного жанра в советской музыкальной комедии см.: Салис (2012).
- 4 Ср. "У нас героика – бытовое явление. Героическое и лирическое (бытовое) у нас тесно переплелись" (В. Э. Ферман, 'Героическое и лирическое в советской опере', Архив Государственного центрального музея музыкальной культуры им. М. И. Глинки. Ф. 288. № 3. Б.м., б.д. С. 12; цит. по: Раку (2009: 201).
- 5 Платон включает хоровое пение и умение водить хороводы в число обязательных достоинств гражданина описанного им идеального государства, более того, именно эти умения позволяют с его точки зрения совместить индивидуальные радость и удовольствие с общественным благом. См.: Платон (1994а: 157-181); Платон (1994б: 100-125).
- 6 Советский смех противостоит идее механизма уже на уровне метафоры, используемой для его описания. Если Бергсон концептуализирует смех как эффект обнаружения косности механизма, прячущегося под видимой поверхностью органического (Бергсон 1992: 10-47), Александров рассуждает о нем как о средстве преодоления этой косности: "Я бы сказал, что юмор – сок жизни. Юмор похож на масло, которое нужно для смазки машин. И действительно, всякая машина, даже тяжеловесный танк из крепчайшего металла, не пойдет без смазки [здесь можно вспомнить фильм И. Пырьева *Трактористы* – И.К.]. Смех должен быть добродушным, оптимистичным, утверждающим хорошее настроение" (Александров 1983: 194). Если согласно теории Бергсона смех возникает как регистрация отсутствия "напряженности" и "эластичности" (Бергсон 1992: 20), "бодрый и жизнерадостный" советский смех, наоборот, явля-

ется эффектом избытка витальной силы, наделяя социальное тело еще большим “количеством” напряженности и эластичности.

7 В комедиях Г. Александрова такими объектами смехового исключения из коллектива оказываются: уругвайский дирижер Коста Фраскини или представители нэпмановского мещанства (*Веселые ребята*), американский импресарио Кнейшиц (*Цирк*), бюрократ Бывалов (*Волга-Волга*), меркантильный ухажер, воспроизводящий поведение старорежимного провинциального мещанства, Петр Устинович Талдыкин (*Светлый путь*).

8 См.: Эйзенштейн (2006: 46-290).

9 Казалось бы, комедия Александрова *Цирк* воспроизводит ситуацию коммерческого производства смеха и веселья, отделяющую арену и зрительный зал, однако, непосредственным объектом изображения смех становится в тот момент, когда эта граница между цирковыми актерами и зрителями оказывается снята: зал и актеры дружно смеются над Кнейшицом, попытавшимся шокировать публику черным ребенком Мэрион Диксон.

10 Ср. “[...] комическое для полноты своего действия требует как бы кратковременной анестезии сердца. Оно обращается к чистому разуму” (Бергсон 1992: 12). В отличие от этой рациональности “буржуазного смеха” советская комедия подчеркивает эмоциональный (“сердечный”) характер смеха: “Легко на сердце от песни веселой”, – утверждается в первой же строке одной из первых советских музыкальных комедий (*Марш веселых ребят*, стихи В. Лебедева-Кумача, 1934 год).

11 Ср. “Новизна фильма заключается в том, что в нем о самом серьезном, самом главном – о социалистическом строительстве – говорилось средствами кинокомедии. Наша новая кинокомедия сверяла свой шаг со стремительным шагом энтузиастов-стахановцев” (Александров 1983: 256).

12 Об этом см.: Kenez (1993: 57); Enzensberger (1993: 98).

13 Ср. “стахановское движение разнеслось по всему лицу нашего Союза не постепенно, а с какой-то невиданной быстротой, как ураган” (Сталин 1935). В этой же речи возникают сравнения стахановского движения со снежным комом, пламенем, мгновенно распространившимся по всей стране от одной “спички, брошенной Стахановым и Бусыгиным”, с движением, прорвавшим препоны и залившим всю страну (там же).

14 О сексуальных обертонах и танцевальной кинетике в изображении труда см.: Enzensberger (1993: 97-108).

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## THE SHARP WEAPON OF SOVIET LAUGHTER: BORIS EFIMOV AND VISUAL HUMOR

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the life and work of Boris Efimov, the legendary Soviet caricaturist. Efimov's political caricatures spanned the life of the Soviet Union. He began working for the Bolsheviks during the Civil War in Ukraine, moved to Moscow in 1922, and worked for major Soviet publications until 1991. His work, as the article posits, helped to define Soviet visual culture and with it a form of visual Occidentalism. At the same time, Efimov's cartoons illustrate the connections between Soviet visual culture and Soviet power. Again and again, his caricatures were held up to be examples of how Soviet citizens needed to forge a new sense of self through the "healthy laughter" they provoked at the expense of state enemies. The Soviet caricature, the article concludes, therefore served as a powerful weapon in the state's arsenal. No one wielded it more consistently than Boris Efimov.

Keywords: *Laughter; Cartoons; Boris Efimov*

At the 2007 Moscow retrospective dedicated to Boris Efimov's work, then-Mayor Jurij Lužkov declared that Efimov's cartoons could best be understood through the laughter they invoked. The Mayor opined that Efimov is "an epoch in the life of our state", for his 50,000 caricatures published between 1917 and 1991 not only "reflected the time" in which they appeared, they also were the work of "a great satirist". His images, Lužkov wrote, revealed "the need to laugh, for stigmatizing the evil, ugly, and other loathsome

things that will never end". Efimov's prodigious output proves, in Lužkov's words, that "laughter is a sharp weapon and a powerful medicine". The laughter induced by Efimov is a reason why "good people need Boris Efimov very much", for "good people have a good sense of humor". As for those who did not possess the humor, Lužkov mentioned Joseph Goebbels, who "never laughed at Boris Efimov's cartoons and promised to hang him right after the capture of Moscow."<sup>1</sup>

Lužkov's statements are not merely the words of a politician trying to score points with his electorate. The mayor's belief that the cartoons served as a "weapon of laughter" echoed the words used to describe Efimov's work for decades. No one subject is better suited for understanding the sharp weapon of Soviet laughter than Boris Efimov. Born in 1900, Efimov published his first caricature in 1916, worked for the Bolsheviks after 1918, and had his first book of cartoons published in 1924 (it included an introduction by Lev Trockij). He worked as a cartoonist for *Izvestija* from 1922 and started drawing for *Krokodil* that same year. He continued to publish cartoons until the system collapsed. As Lužkov noted, Soviet visual humor and Soviet laughter are intimately connected with the creations of Boris Efimov. When Efimov died in October 2008, he was hailed as a symbol of the Soviet experience and his cartoons as "history lessons" for all.<sup>2</sup> Efimov's life history, when situated within the multiple social, political, and cultural worlds in which he lived, is nothing less than the story of visualizing Soviet socialism from beginning to end.<sup>3</sup>

The sharp weapon Efimov wielded mostly targeted enemies, whether external (Nazis, Americans, Zionists) or internal (Trotskyites and saboteurs). His illustrations, as his friend Genrich Borovik wrote in response to the same 2007 retrospective, are "more often full of severe and irate satire". "Being a cheery and kind person full of humor and keen on jokes," Borovik argued, "Boris Efimov dedicated almost all of his life's creation to struggle against everything he hated." His images "help us remember and understand the past century."<sup>4</sup>

Created over the course of his astonishing career, Efimov's visual worlds afford us a similar opportunity. His cartoons forged the Soviet weapon of laughter. They articulated a form of visual Occidentalism, one that built upon pre-1917 Russian visual nationhood and the traditions of caricature established in 19th-century Europe.<sup>5</sup> Efimov's weapons of laughter also provide a clear picture of the state's uses of laughter and its connections to power.<sup>6</sup> "Laughter," the Bolshevik Commissar for Enlightenment Anatolij Lunačarskij once argued, "is not an expression of power, but power itself." As the words written about Efimov's illustrations make clear, his cartoons were meant to do battle against state enemies and to provoke a healthy laughter that would define the new Soviet person.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet cartoon – printed in the Bolshevik daily newspapers and the primary image in the

satirical journal *Krokodil* – served as an important weapon in the arsenal of Soviet propaganda.<sup>8</sup> No one wielded it more than Boris Efimov.

*Stigmatizing the Evil, Ugly, and Other Loathsome Things: Sharp Weapons of Soviet Socialism*

Efimov's most consistent theme in his illustrations – one his last retrospective particularly highlighted – was the West as the enemy. As Efimov later recounted:

Cartoonists' images reflect reality, what is going on in the world, and what is going on in our country. Cartoons are a mirror to reality. In my caricatures and political drawings, I portrayed the West. Although the West is a very broad term, if you take it to mean everything outside our country, it seemed to us unfortunately for many years something of an enemy, something contradicting the order and values we had in our country. It is not because people wanted it to be that way, that we should be the opposite of the West. It just happened that way.

Efimov's prints gave concrete form to the enemy and visualized Soviet citizens guarding their socialist motherland against a laughable enemy. His caricatures provide a means to "see" the past more vividly and to bring us "face-to-face with the history" of Soviet imagery.<sup>10</sup> For 75 years, he drew the West as a laughable figure, constantly reminding viewers of the ever-present threat posed by corpulent capitalists. By ridiculing the West in this manner, Efimov attempted to create the Soviet gaze.<sup>11</sup> Looking at his cartoons, as countless commentators noted over the decades, would help viewers visualize what it meant to be a Soviet citizen.

Efimov did not receive formal training, but his work grew out of the Russian caricature tradition and the specific milieu of early 20th-century visual satire. Influenced by the *lubok* and engravings introduced under Peter the Great, caricatures emerged as a Russian genre only after 1800. While Russian artists before the nineteenth century attempted to criticize the status quo in a fashion similar to William Hogarth and other famous caricaturists in Europe, they did so primarily through the *lubok*. The popular print, as John Bowlt has written, "rarely made a direct reference to a specific dignitary or a particular order" and therefore could offer satirical images without ruffling the feathers of tsarist censors. "With the onslaught of the Napoleonic campaign of 1812," Bowlt argues, "Russian caricature flowered with exceptional strength."<sup>12</sup> As Vasilij Vereščagin commented in his 1912 three-volume work on Russian caricature, "in an atmosphere charged with malice and hate, artistic satire could only have been biting and unpleasant."<sup>13</sup> The works of Ivan Terebenev, Aleksej Venecianov, and Ivan Ivanov became famous in the months after the French invasion for the way they blended the salty humor of *lubok* prints with

the biting satire of caricatures by Rowland, Cruikshank, and others. Russian caricaturists ridiculed Napoleon, condemned French soldiers as “freaks and cripples”, and suggested French culture was effete and un-Russian.<sup>14</sup> Russian caricature therefore began as a genre that mocked the West and emphasized Russia’s national strengths, creating a tradition of images as sharp weapons to be deployed against Russia’s enemies.<sup>15</sup>

Twentieth-century Russian caricature and political cartoons grew directly out of these roots. The publication of the 1812 caricatures in Dmitrij Rovinskij’s *Russkie narodnye kartinki* (1881) introduced a new generation of artists to the techniques and themes of Terebenev and his contemporaries. Future Bolshevik poster artists such as Vladimir Majakovskij and Dmitrij Moor both drew their inspiration from 1812 caricaturists. With the relaxation of censorship laws after the 1905 Revolution, Russian satirical images flourished. Russian caricaturists working after 1905 were also inspired by the satirical cartoons in *Simplicissimus*, a German weekly journal started in 1896. Among other visual adaptations, Russian cartoonists adopted the image of the fat, top-hat wearing capitalist from their German colleagues. Moor was particularly influenced by the Norwegian artist Olaf Gulbransson, whose work regularly appeared in the German satirical magazine: contemporaries even dubbed him the “Russian Gulbransson”.<sup>16</sup> Moor’s satirical images of tsarist officials appeared in a number of the influential journals that flourished after 1905, among them *Budil’nik* and *Satirikon*. His cartoons also graced the pages of dailies such as *Russkoe slovo* and *Utro Rossii*. In his pre-1917 work, Moor became known for his cartoons that satirized the influence of the Orthodox Church in Russian politics, the ineptitude of the tsarist government, and the heroic traits of ordinary Russian soldiers.<sup>17</sup> After 1917, Moor successfully transferred his satirical style to the Bolshevik cause. In the process he served, the artist Aleksandr Dejneka later claimed, as the unofficial “commissar of propagandistic revolutionary art”.<sup>18</sup>

Efimov became a self-taught artist in this period and was heavily influenced by his older Russian colleagues and German satirical cartoons. When he was a teenager in Kiev, Efimov bought copies of *Simplicissimus* and “examined them with great interest”, particularly the works of Gulbransson and Eduard Thöny. The budding young artist studied these European masters and copied their styles, particularly their satirical prints of military figures and wealthy capitalists.<sup>19</sup> When Efimov moved to Moscow in 1922 to work for Soviet publications, a move suggested by his famous brother, Michail Kol’cov, Moor became his unofficial teacher. Efimov would later recount that his greatest influence was Moor, the “artist, philosopher, and Bolshevik” who fought enemies with “a satirist’s weapons”.<sup>20</sup> His work, therefore, represented an adaptation of European caricature traditions: the cartoons that emerged in the 19th century, seen particularly in *Simplicissimus*, tended



to mock foreign enemies in order to reveal the “true” self behind the exterior façade.<sup>21</sup>

While his cartoons evolved from traditions established at home and abroad, Efimov viewed the caricature as a particularly important image for the new Soviet state and its citizens, defining it “as a distinctive, whimsical, and sharp artistic form, which carries in its jolly and mischievous form a civic, purposeful meaning”.<sup>22</sup> He tended to emphasize the “national” tradition of his cartoons, referring to *Simplicissimus* in passing and stressing that his Soviet work grew out of pre-revolutionary, Russian caricatures (which also evolved out of European, particularly British, traditions). In addition to the satirical images from 1905-1906, Efimov listed Aleksej Venecianov, Ivan Terebenev, and Ivan Ivanov’s 1812 “satirical *lubki*” that depicted Russians defending their motherland against aggressors as particularly important precursors to the Soviet caricaturist’s work.<sup>23</sup> These Russian images had successfully attracted a wide audience because they tapped into a form of “national humor”.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet caricaturist provided “battle reconnaissance” for his fellow citizens by capturing “the emotions of millions of people – their ridicule or scorn, their indignation or happiness”.<sup>25</sup> Soviet cartoonists, in Efimov’s view, connected “their creative work with the life of a society”.<sup>26</sup>

The attempt to forge a link between image and audience around a shared enemy was not one Efimov undertook alone: it was both a family affair and a project undertaken by like-minded artists. His brother, Michail Kol’cov (1898-1940), became famous for his satirical articles in *Pravda* that attacked the new regime’s enemies (he would later become a victim of the Stalinist purges). Their cousin, Semen Fridljand, became a famous Soviet photographer.<sup>27</sup> Others responded to the very same calls to sharpen the weapon of satire in order to build the new socialist state. The collective known as the Kukryniksy began their careers at the same time as Efimov. The three artists – Michail Kuprijanov (1903-1991), Porfirij Krylov (1902-1990), and Nikolaj Sokolov (1903-2000) – met at VChUTEMAS (the Higher Art and Technical Studios founded in 1920). They studied under Dmitrij Moor and began to publish cartoons together in 1924, using a combination of their three names. Their work in the 1930s made them famous, when their posters and caricatures ridiculing enemies appeared in major publications such as *Krokodil*. Maksim Gor’kij would claim that their caricatures made them “heroes in the realm of socialist creativity” and described their illustrations as “sharp, well-aimed weapons” that revealed the internal deficiencies of Soviet enemies.<sup>28</sup>

The Kukryniksy acted as friendly rivals for Efimov: the four became inseparable and inspired each other’s works for the remainder of the Soviet experiment. Efimov would later write that the three possessed an unrivaled “affinity based on a shared creativity, morality, and intellectualism”.<sup>29</sup> Efimov and the Kukryniksy worked together at *Krokodil*, made wartime posters

together, traveled together to Nuremberg to act as material witnesses at the postwar trials, and made state trips together. The state also rewarded Efimov and the Kukryniksy for wielding their weapons of satire: all four became People's Artists of the Soviet Union, Heroes of Socialist Labor, and received other honorific titles.<sup>30</sup>

Efimov's career was therefore not a singular one. His life, his work, and the ways others described them could be used to evaluate Soviet satirical images as a whole. What is remarkable about Efimov's output is just how consistent it was over time and just how long he wielded his weapons. Efimov's first published cartoon appeared in a 1916 issue of *Solnce Rossii*. It mocked Michail Rodzjanko for his liberal, Western tendencies. After 1917, while still a teenager, Efimov joined the Bolshevik cause and published images in a number of Ukrainian journals. His 1920 poster, *The Pan [Polish nobles] Barge Haulers* (Figure 1), to pick one example, used Il'ja Repin's famous painting as a basis to ridicule the attempts by Poles, Ukrainian nationalists, priests, and corpulent capitalists wearing striped pants and top hats to take Kiev in the Civil War.<sup>31</sup> After he waged the Civil War using his satirical weapons, Efimov moved in 1922 to Moscow and became a caricaturist for *Izvestija*. His first cartoon for the paper lambasted British efforts to blockade the Bolshevik state.



Fig. 1. *The Pan Barge Haulers* (1920)



Сумасшедший дом «Европа».

Fig. 2. *The Madhouse of Europe* (1923)

Visualizing “the West” became the focus of Efimov’s early work; the enemy could be depicted in many guises, most clearly in his 1923 *Izvestija* caricature *Bourgeois Europe* (Figure 2), which featured a “European madhouse” of crazies on the borders. On one edge of the cartoon Benito Mussolini declares “I am Italy”. Dressed ridiculously in a Roman tunic and holding *fasces*, Efimov simultaneously mocks the Italian dictator’s political pretensions and his attempts to harness Roman symbols for his fascist system. On Mussolini’s left, Efimov lampoons the French Prime Minister, Raymond Poincaré, as an imperialistic aggressor. With an Adrian helmet on his head, the French politician clutches the Versailles treaty and spouts nonsense. Efimov characterizes Poincaré as an aggressor, reminding viewers of the French minister’s decision to violate the treaty by occupying the Ruhr in January 1923. Efimov declared that the act was “an obvious symptom of violent insanity”.<sup>32</sup> Next to Poincaré, Lord George Curzon, the British Foreign Mi-

nister, lingers toward oil in the east. Curzon, in Efimov's words, "suffers from an incurable form of madness" for he wants to "grab as much oil as possible, even Soviet oil".<sup>33</sup> Below the British politician lurks Józef Pilsudski, the "First Marshal" of Poland and the victor in the 1919-1921 war with the Bolshevik state. Recognizable because of his mustache, the Polish military man is depicted as a latter-day Napoleon, equally small and equally mad as the French Emperor. Other European fascists (Admiral Miklós Horthy stands behind Mussolini) and former tsarist officers who emigrated and therefore brought their form of "madness" to Europe surround these crazies. Efimov suggests that the individual leaders depicted in the European Madhouse should not be feared; instead, the collection of madmen on the Soviet border should be mocked. Efimov's caricature serves as a weapon that destroys imaginary authority and the imaginary greatness of the West's leaders.<sup>34</sup> It is, in short, a weapon aimed at Soviet enemies lurking abroad meant to invoke laughter from those who view it.



Fig. 3. *The Cradle of Fascism* (1940)

In his 1920s work for the newspaper and for *Krokodil*, Efimov expanded on these themes. He imagined Mussolini and fascism as the highest forms of capitalism; drew a woman enchained by the almighty dollar as a symbol of “Capitalist Europe”;<sup>35</sup> depicted pointed bayonets fixed at the young Soviet state for his *Izvestija* New Year’s cartoon; imagined Uncle Sam and John Bull fighting over oil; or simply warned viewers about “those against us”; which included the Pope, the Nazis, and corpulent Capitalists (to reference just a tiny sample of his output).<sup>36</sup>

Beginning in 1930, Efimov focused his attention on the growing threat posed by the Nazis. Hitler and his subordinates became the main embodiments of “the West” in his caricatures. In using his sharp weapon against this new threat, Efimov drew on his earlier work. Nazis wanted to conquer the world, but they were also gangsters like Americans (as 1936’s *The Connoisseur’s Opinion* stressed), or uncultured like Mickey Mouse (his untitled 1936 *Izvestija* cartoon depicted Goebbels in the form of Walt Disney’s most famous creation).<sup>37</sup> Even while the Nazi-Soviet Pact was in effect Efimov connected these themes. In 1940, Efimov’s *Blood and Business* featured American capitalists calculating their profits as a radio announced Nazi military gains, while his *The Cradle of Fascism* portrayed Western capitalists rocking Adolf Hitler in his crib (Figure 3).<sup>38</sup> Here again Efimov returned to what was already an old theme in his work: the *Simplicissimus* creation of the capitalist in top hat who lurked behind every devious plot against the socialist state. The same foe had tried to lure Poles to take Kiev in 1920; now he nursed a young Hitler and stoked his desires to conquer.

Efimov’s wartime caricatures made him nationally and internationally known. He reminded viewers of Napoleon and mocked Hitler in his July 1941 cover image for *Krokodil*; poked fun at fascist racial claims for his 1941 TASS Window; or simply drew the Nazi hierarchy as a “Berlin gang of robbers” in one of his many cartoons for *Izvestija*.<sup>39</sup> Efimov also was one of the most outspoken critics of the Allied failure to open a second front, publishing cartoons that suggested the Americans and British were all-too-willing to let the Soviets bleed. Thus, in his 1942 *Preparing for the Second Front*, Churchill and Eisenhower sit sewing buttons onto uniforms as they listen to a radio report about “violent struggles on the Nazi-Soviet front”.<sup>40</sup> Once again, Efimov emphasized the West’s flabbiness, ridiculing Churchill’s corpulence and linking it both to Western capitalists and his failure to help the Soviet war effort.

Troops wrote to him while the Stalinist leadership praised his work and awarded him prizes. The Soviet state used his images to inspire Soviet frontline soldiers and to persuade Nazi soldiers to surrender. In both uses, a healthy laughter defined Soviet citizenry. A 1942 frontline illustration series combined verses by Dem’jan Bednyj with Efimov’s cartoons that mocked Nazi leaders while Red Army soldiers resolutely defended their motherland. At the

top of the sheet a Red Army soldier launches a mortar at his Nazi enemies and laughs at them. Efimov entitled the sheet *The Laughing Weapon* [*Smechomeč*]. In his 1942 sheet distributed to Wehrmacht soldiers Efimov mocks Hitler as a Napoleon wannabe and Goebbels as a mouse-like propagandist.<sup>41</sup> After listening to Nazi promises, “Naïve Fritz” marches happily to Russia only to freeze in a snowdrift. In both drawings, Efimov asks his audience to laugh. In the case of German soldiers, he asks them to indulge in the same healthy laughter as Soviet citizens by mocking Nazis. In short, Efimov visually defined a Soviet way of life in terms of one’s ability to laugh at the enemy and asked Germans to join in. In response, Hitler placed Efimov up with the radio announcer Jurij Levitan and his fellow poster artists the Kukuryniksy as the first cultural figures to be executed when the Wehrmacht captured Moscow.

Efimov’s images became icons of the struggle against fascism and the subsequent Soviet victory, proof that his earlier warnings about the West and about the threat from fascism were correct. As he later mused:

I nurtured antipathy for our adversaries and enemies, such as [...] Hitler, Goering, Rosenberg, Ribbentrop, and others. We put all our hatred and wrath into our cartoons on these criminals; we meant to ridicule, to bash them, to show all their cruelty and meanness.<sup>42</sup>

Efimov’s depictions of the West gave him the blueprints for illustrating the war to come. He had a storehouse of images with which to cast the West after 1945 and apparently an endless reservoir of hatred and wrath. As Efimov later remembered:

When the war finished, and our allies stopped being our allies, there was created a situation where we started to depict them as a kind of enemy, as aggressors. During the war I was already caricaturing the Americans with dollar signs. It was, of course, still something both unclear and also unpleasant. But that was the politics of the Soviet Union at the time. The same was true of the politics of the West. We portrayed Churchill and Truman as aggressors and warmongers, and the West portrayed Stalin and Molotov as aggressors and warmongers as well.<sup>43</sup>

His 1947 caricature for *Izvestija* depicted Churchill’s speech in Fulton as a shadow of Nazi policies (*A Performance in Fulton: Churchill and his Predecessors*) while a second featured NATO leaders looking into a mirror and seeing a reflection of the Anti-Soviet Pact personalities (Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito).<sup>44</sup> By the end of 1949, Efimov had mapped out the visual parameters of Soviet Cold War culture. The Marshall Plan was an American Yoke ruled by fat capitalists wearing striped pants (his 1947 *Marshalled*

Italy; Figure 4);<sup>45</sup> a Trojan Horse fronting for Wall Street interests (1949's *The Trojan Horse of Wall Street*); or a smoke screen for proliferating nuclear power. Efimov visualized UN votes as American blocs (*The American Voting Machine*, 1949) while UN troops in Korea were either shielding American hypocrisy or American business interests in disguise (in 1949's *The Screen of the American Aggressors* and *In Korea*, respectively).<sup>46</sup> His cartoons depicted American support provided to Chiang Kai-Shek as *Money that Passed*, to be mourned at a funeral.<sup>47</sup> Americans, as 1949's *The American Trombone* (Figure 5) made clear, could be Nazis too. American officials lip-synched Hitler's lyrics through a trombone that had a corpulent capitalist wearing a Nazi helmet at the end. Efimov had successfully transferred his message across historical circumstances and in many ways his early Cold War images came full circle. The 1920s West was the enemy again while the Nazis had morphed into Americans, who had raised the fascist beast in the first place. Capitalists still looked funny and should still invoke ridiculing laughter. They also still wore the same clothes as they had in 1920.

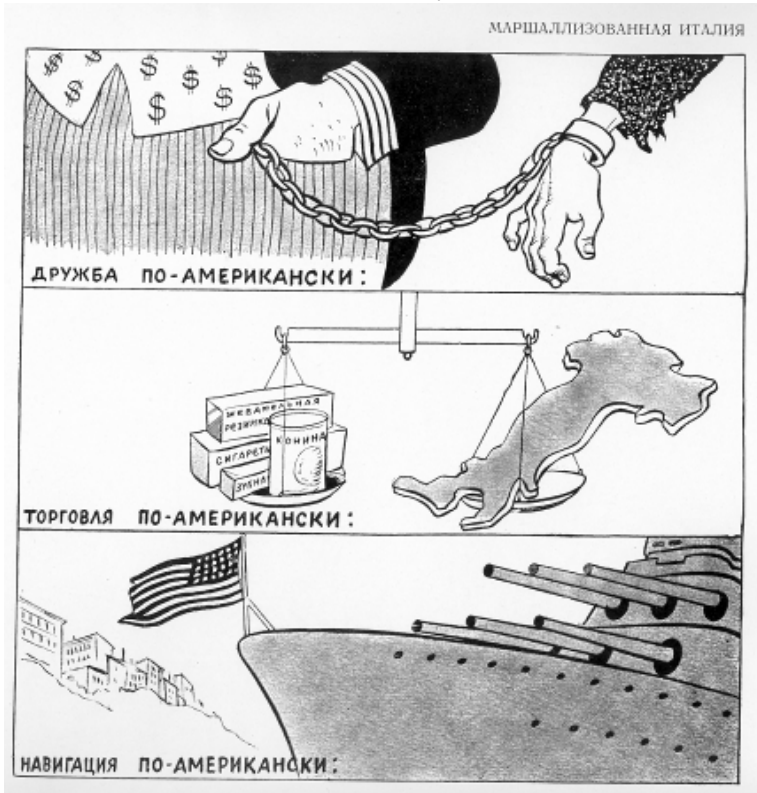


Fig. 4. *Marshalled Italy* (1947)



Fig. 5. *The American Trombone* (1949)

Efimov's cartoons waged the Cold War on all its fronts. They balanced real hotspots with more abstract representations of the West exploiting the Third World while threatening the Second. Uncle Sam could infect allies with the bacillus of capitalism in 1954 (*Vaccination of Obedient Allies*). The Peace Corps could be a Wall Street front for exploitation, while "freedom" was really a synonym for American military aims.<sup>48</sup> America intervened in Cuba using Goebbels-like Mickey Mouse creatures, as in 1961's *Cuba on Guard*, which also features Fidel Castro in classic Red Army pose. The United States rearmed the German Bundeswehr, and therefore rearmed the Nazis they had raised (as in 1962's *Bundeswehr Screen*).<sup>49</sup> The only way Efimov made sense of this continued perfidiousness on the West's part was by



returning to an old theme: 1966's *The Mad, Mad, Mad Free World* (*Bezumnnyj, bezumnnyj, bezumnnyj svobodnyj mir*; Figure 6) updated 1923's *European Madhouse*. Efimov's 1923 cartoon featured a collection of crazy European leaders. In his 1966 cartoon – which took its title from Stanley Kramer's 1963 film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (released in 1965 in the USSR as *Étot bezumnnyj, bezumnnyj, bezumnnyj mir*) – the “free world” is dominated by the United States and its allies, an acknowledgement of how the “West” had expanded in geopolitical terms.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Efimov reminded viewers that the West's intentions remained as mad as ever. Lyndon Johnson dominates the cartoon wearing a Texas cowboy hat. Although he spouts words of world peace, Johnson grips a bomb and carries soldiers headed to Vietnam in his jacket pocket. Surrounding him are American allies. To the left, Efimov drew South Africa's apartheid leadership as KKK members brandishing a “White Power” sign. American institutional racism, in other words, gave birth to the South African Republic's postwar policies just as American business interests rocked a young Adolf Hitler. Below them, West German revanchists refuse to recognize the GDR and are dressed in a combination of Bavarian lederhosen and Nazi uniforms. A West German general wearing a Nazi uniform reaches for the atomic bomb and with it the 1937 borders of the Third Reich. Meanwhile, Earl Warren, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, stands over a locked book entitled *The Truth About Kennedy's Murder* and holds a sniper's rifle behind his back. At the far right corner of the cartoon, an American military commander – a figure that evokes Efimov's earlier caricatures of Eisenhower and his more generic representations of western warmongers – beats the ground with human bones and chants “drop the atomic bomb in Vietnam”. In 1966, as in 1923, madmen threatened the Soviet Union. In this update, however, the West's craziness emanated from a single source: American perfidy. Efimov continued to employ visual hyperbole in order to humiliate the enemy, to castigate stupidity, and to expose fools as foolish.<sup>51</sup>

The West in Efimov's visual world was aggressive everywhere and always. In the 1970s, Efimov depicted the Apartheid regime as a new fascist beast rocked in the capitalist cradle (1970's *The Foundation of a Police Regime*). Wall Street interests – rendered in the familiar form of the fat capitalist wearing striped pants – encompassed South America (*Pinochet Pays Debts*, 1974; Figure 7); Africa (*Air Bridge*, a 1975 caricature about Angola); and the Middle East (*Black Forces Above Lebanon*, a 1976 example). Domestically the United States was a viper's nest, a virtual police state where the CIA directed American aggression (murder, sabotage, espionage, putches in 1975's *Viper's Nest*). The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe spewed propaganda for a Wall Street run by their CIA handlers in a pot labeled “provocation, lies, slander, fabrication”. In this 1976 cartoon, *Dirty Spring*, the foundation for American propaganda rested on the rotting filth of

Nazism.<sup>52</sup> The West had always spewed lies about the Soviet experiment, in other words, so in America's bicentennial year it just continued to revert to historical form.



Безумный, безумный, безумный, свободный мир...

Fig. 6. *The Mad, Mad, Mad Free World* (1966)



Fig. 7. Pinochet Pays Debts (1973)

By 1980, Efimov warned that Uncle Sam and its new “ally” China continued to hang onto the dead horse of the Cold War and its rhetoric (in 1980’s *Hangers On*). Ronald Reagan himself was on a crusade full of *Dangerous Mania* (1982), replacing LBJ as the crazy cowboy to fear. Efimov turned America’s Israeli allies into Nazis: *The Clear Sign of Zionism* (1982) (Figure 8) had Menachem Begin – wearing the clothes of a 1920s capitalist –

orchestrating events in Hitler's shadow. *The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem in Europe* had become *The Final Solution to the Palestinian Question* and both had been "Made in the USA". Even an 86 year-old Efimov could still poke fun at Western misunderstanding of the USSR, lambasting the initial hesitation to take Gorbachev at his word. In *Perestrojka* American capitalists who wear the same clothes as they always have ask if Gorbachev is dangerous for the USA, if he's a threat to safety, whether one should greet perestrojka optimistically or hope for its failure.<sup>53</sup>



Fig. 8. *The Clear Sign of Zionism* (1982)

Efimov's caricatures from the 1920s to the 1980s – an arsenal of visual weaponry that spanned the entire history of the Soviet Union – visualized a

Soviet Occidentalism that consistently castigated the West as corpulent capitalists funding the enemies of the Soviet state across time and space. At the same time, Efimov provided visual representations of a “Soviet way of life” that included traits such as a willingness to defend the land, a jovial spirit, and a feeling of collective resoluteness. Just as he borrowed from 19th century caricatures to illustrate the enemy, so too did he do the same for the ways in which he consistently depicted the willingness of Soviet citizens to defend their motherland.<sup>54</sup> His update for Soviet audiences, however, frequently consisted of having his defenders smile and laugh while protecting socialism. Efimov’s 1926 *Izvestija* cartoon, to give one example, *The Red Army, 1918-1926* poked fun at Sir Austen Chamberlain’s (then the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs) repeated anti-Soviet diplomatic notes.<sup>55</sup> Efimov drew a grumpy Chamberlain wearing a Scottish Tartan cap and with his preferred monocle standing behind a fence. On the other side a Red Army soldier stands guard against the British verbal assault, casually puffing a pipe and blowing smoke back across the fence. The Red Army soldier smiles. The Soviet soldier, in other words, had learned to laugh the healthy, ridiculing laughter at his enemies and to get on with building a socialist state.

Efimov returned to these characterizations in numerous images. His 1930 cartoon *Seven Disasters – One Answer* (Figure 9) features seven foreign enemies of the USSR. A Red Army soldier stands opposite and guards a poster proclaiming that the 5 Year Plan is being achieved in 4 years. The “answer” to the enemies attempting to sabotage the Soviet effort can be seen on the soldier’s face: he is laughing at them.<sup>56</sup> Efimov’s 1935 *Warm Response* visualizes the Soviet collective as an older, bearded specialist, a young, masculine worker, and a young factory woman. They hold a banner with Stalin’s claim that “life has become better, life has become more joyous”.<sup>57</sup> Below them Hitler rages at this happiness, declaring that “I’ve become sad because you feel joyful”. In response, the Soviet citizens laugh.

In other caricatures, Efimov depicted the Soviet state in the form of a soldier defending his motherland, including his 24 July 1941 cover for *Ogonek* that featured a Red Army soldier wielding a sword against the Nazi beast and “for the motherland”.<sup>58</sup> His September 1941 cover of *Krokodil* contained four Red Army soldiers smiling and laughing at a scrawny Nazi soldier they had captured.<sup>59</sup> His 20 June 1945 cover for *Krokodil* celebrated the Soviet victory in visual form with a smiling Soviet soldier playing an accordion atop a T-34 tank that bears the names of the cities he has liberated.<sup>60</sup>



Fig. 9. *Seven Disasters – One Answer* (1930)

Efimov's Cold War cartoons continued to represent the ideal Soviet citizen as a Red Army soldier or as a collective of patriotic defenders of the socialist motherland. *Indestructible Wall* (1949) features caricatures of Churchill and Truman scrambling up a cannon that is pointed at a wall.<sup>61</sup> Behind this barricade stand dozens of Soviet citizens with arms raised and holding banners that read "we don't want war" and "against warmongers". The wall itself is emblazoned with the words "united in the fight for a stable peace". That same year, Efimov drew a New Year's cartoon entitled *Kremlin Chimes* that featured the Spasskaja Tower guarded by a larger-than-life Red Army man. Grasping his Tokarev submachine gun, the soldier safeguards the words

emanating from the Kremlin tower: “glory to our free motherland, a safe stronghold of the friendship of peoples”.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, Efimov’s 1950 cartoon *Two Worlds* (Figure 10) visually represents the Cold War as one between two people. On the left sits a short, fat capitalist dressed in the same 1920s suit in which Efimov had always dressed his bourgeois enemies. The capitalist – drawn in black and white – sits atop New York skyscrapers clutching a dollar symbol in one hand and a copy of the NATO treaty in his other. An atomic bomb rounds out the visualization of the first world. On the right side of the image stands a Soviet worker drawn in full color. He clutches a hammer in his left hand and a book emblazoned with the words “peace and democracy” in his right. The Soviet worker is illuminated by the Red Star behind him.



Fig. 10. *Two Worlds* (1950)

*Two Worlds* captures the essence of Efimov's lifelong work. His capitalist's clothes and flabbiness expose the flaws of the system he works for.<sup>63</sup> Efimov's brand of Soviet Occidentalism could not be clearer: America (the latest incarnation of the West) is a land of merchants who value only money and nothing else; the Soviet state produces larger-than-life heroes who defend socialist values along with their motherland.<sup>64</sup>

Efimov's arsenal increasingly became self-referential over the course of his career. His images repeated certain themes that he had drawn before, constantly updating the Western enemy to fit the time even while the capitalist's clothes and the Soviet worker's clothes remained the same. His caricatures acted as bearers of a specific form of social memory, namely, the way in which Efimov had always drawn the enemies surrounding the fledgling state.<sup>65</sup> In 1966 – the 25th anniversary of Hitler's invasion – Efimov's *Picture about Memory* used one of his wartime cartoons where he compared Hitler to Napoleon to warn American generals and German revanchists about their ambitions. In it, Efimov reminded viewers of 1812 caricatures, 1941 caricatures, and the continued need to castigate the West. He also warned – on the 20th anniversary of Nuremberg – that current enemies of the Soviet state would be judged just as past enemies had (and included his 1946 cartoon *Nuremberg* in his 1966 *Reminder and Warning*). His front-page *Izvestija* cartoon for the 50th Anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, *International Review for the Half-Century* (Figure 11), visualized the jubilee as a collection of all the enemies the Soviet state had defeated by wielding the weapon of satire. Efimov dated this caricature 1922-1967. From Nicholas II, Aleksandr Kerenskij, and Pilsudski, all of whom threatened the Soviet state from the outset, Efimov draws a line of enemies that included familiar caricatures of Hitler, Mussolini, and Churchill alongside newer enemies such as Konrad Adenauer (who died that year) and American Air Force General Curtis Le May. Though foes familiar and unfamiliar have continuously attempted to defeat the Soviet experiment, Efimov continues to mock these pretensions.

Efimov had reached into a late 19th-early 20th century visual arsenal, pulled out his weapon aimed at the West, and reformed it in the fire of the Bolshevik Revolution. Efimov claimed that his cartoons were a mirror of reality and that he had captured the continuous threat posed by “the West” to the socialist state. The weapons Efimov wielded attempted to visualize this reality and with it, to create Soviet socialism. Efimov's remarkably consistent rendering of the West as enemy make his images not just important artifacts of Soviet socialism. To a certain extent, they *were* Soviet socialism. The identification of enemies and the visualization of the West as a corpulent capitalist figure were important visual components to the ongoing processes of defining the enemies of socialism and the qualities of the new Soviet person. Efimov's visual Occidentalism appeared before and outlasted even



Socialist Realism, which Evgeny Dobrenko has provocatively argued served as an aesthetic system that did not try to beautify reality, but to create it. As Dobrenko notes, to remove Socialist Realism – its novels, films, poems, art – from our mental image of socialism would be to leave us “with nothing left that could properly be called socialism”.<sup>66</sup> This argument needs an addition: Efimov’s visual weapons consistently served as sharp arrows aimed at identifying the West’s evil intentions against the socialist state. The perfidious West visualized in contrast to the heroic Soviet citizen who laughed at this enemy became a central component of Soviet visual culture and with it, Soviet socialism.<sup>67</sup> To make this weapon as sharp as possible, however, required some help from others.



Fig. 11. *International Review for the Half-Century* (1967)

*“The Healthy Laughter of a Soviet Citizen”: Sharpening the Weapon of Satire*

In 1961, Efimov published *The Fundamentals of Understanding the Caricature*. He began by affirming that the satirical cartoon was a weapon that “battles for or subverts something”.<sup>68</sup> A Soviet caricature, however, does more. For Efimov, Soviet imagery has an intimate relationship with Soviet society. A good caricature “mercilessly strikes, combats, and exposes all that is hostile and dangerous to its [societal] spirit and morals”.<sup>69</sup> More importantly, “the secret” of a Soviet caricature rests with the laughter it evokes, “without which, even correctly aimed, ideologically sound satire turns out to be weak, anemic, and helpless”.<sup>70</sup> Good Soviet satire, as Efimov defined it, created a connection between the artist and his audience: “It depends, first of all, on the skill of the artist/satirist to see and to reveal what is funny and to force the reader or spectator to appreciate this funny feeling and to accept how it will be used for the general mockery of anyone that deserves this mockery.”<sup>71</sup> The job of a Soviet cartoonist, in short, was to “create laughter” by mocking the enemy. This kind of laughter is not a temporary feeling; this ability to laugh at something serious is for Efimov a specifically Soviet trait that demonstrates political consciousness.<sup>72</sup> The difference between good Soviet citizens and their enemies, in other words, was that good Soviet citizens could laugh.

Efimov’s words invoked a concept that had developed in the 1920s and that sought to define Soviet satire by the healthy laughter it invoked. Anatolij Lunačarskij’s 1920 article ‘We Are Going to Laugh’ initiated this concept. In it, he wrote that he heard Soviet citizens laugh again and again as he toured the new socialist state. In spite of hardship, war, and hunger, he would observe, Soviet citizens chuckled. For the Commissar of Enlightenment, Soviet laughter “indicates that we have a major reserve of strength within us since laughter is a sign of strength. It is not only a sign of strength, but strength itself [...] it is a sign of victory”.<sup>73</sup> Laughter could therefore serve as an “expression of the triumph of progressive values over reactionary enemies”.<sup>74</sup> Soviet writers would apply Lunačarskij’s ideas to Efimov’s work again and again. In the process, important figures from Trockij to the Danish cartoonist Herluf Bidstrup would sharpen Efimov’s weapon of laughter for him. Over the course of the Soviet Union’s existence, Efimov’s caricatures were held up as examples of a “healthy form of humor”, one that could produce a “moral laughter” where viewers could derive satisfaction and pleasure from “seeing that evil is exposed, disgraced, and punished”.<sup>75</sup> The caricature aimed at enemies could not only be a source of Soviet strength, but Soviet victory in building socialism.

Efimov’s weapons got noticed early on. The editor of *Izvestija*, Jurij Steklov, published a collection of Efimov’s cartoons in 1924. Trockij wrote

the introduction and called Efimov “the most political among our graphic artists. He knows politics, loves politics, and penetrates the details of politics” in his work. For Trockij, the key to Efimov’s cartoons rested with the artist’s ability to inject irony and sarcasm into his politically correct works.<sup>76</sup> By the mid-1930s, Efimov’s work was already the subject of several published collections. “Sovetskij pisatel” published a 1935 retrospective of Efimov’s cartoons. E. Gnedin, who wrote the introduction, argued that “Efimov’s figures concern the serious facts, the most significant questions, and the most acute problems of the present. [...] Efimov solves these problems not through a plan of inoffensive jokes and not by attempting to lower himself to vulgar themes. On the contrary, he prompts the reader to find a grain of truth, to look into the eyes of reality.”<sup>77</sup> He goes on: “The effect Efimov achieves is because of a special feeling of healthy humor, which, in our opinion, forms the distinguishing feature of his creative work. This is the humor of an optimist in the deep, philosophical sense of the word.”<sup>78</sup> Efimov, as Gnedin clarified, poked fun at enemies for serious reasons. By exposing the foibles of the Soviet Union’s foes through the weapons of irony and satire, Efimov created a sense that socialism would prevail. For Gnedin, Efimov’s creative output harnessed satire and humor to the larger goal of building socialism.<sup>79</sup>

Apparently the right slice of Soviet society understood Efimov’s humor. Gnedin quotes a letter to Efimov from 6-year old Jura Petrov, explaining that he wants to be an artist too after viewing his “funny” work.<sup>80</sup> Adults also wrote to the cartoonist, asking him to clarify his themes or thanking him on behalf of the “millions of people” who liked them. For Gnedin, these “enthusiasts” point to the proper reaction a Soviet citizen should have after viewing Efimov’s work. Much like Trockij articulated a belief that Efimov’s cartoons are more politically instructive than funny, so too did Gnedin do the same ten years later. Good Soviet people understood and appreciated Efimov’s satire; bad, anti-Soviet people did not. One viewer wrote the following:

Good day, comrade Efimov. Although you are very busy with your great work, which is necessary and useful for the republic, I nevertheless decided today to send you a letter and take up a few minutes of your time. I have been an active reader of *Izvestija* for several years already and became acquainted with the paper while in the Red Army [RKKA]. Today I cannot live without *Izvestija*, I love it and value it, and I will say frankly that *Izvestija* not only introduces me to many things, with all that is important in our internal life and in life abroad, it also often entertains me – it makes me laugh the healthy laughter of a healthy person. Who is guilty in this? You are guilty, Bor. Efimov. It is difficult, while looking at your drawings, to remain calm [...] It is indisputable, that they would not give you a place on the pages of

*Izvestija* if your drawings did not educate the reader politically. Your drawing is the arrow that flies into the enemy's heart, striking or heavily wounding him.<sup>81</sup>

The letter – and others like it – exemplifies how Efimov's work acted as a sharp weapon that could produce a “moral laughter”. This response is the “healthy laughter of normal persons” that in turn serves as “a sign of victory of what they consider to be the truth”.<sup>82</sup>

Soviet soldiers – the very embodiment of the Soviet way of life Efimov visualized – also learned to laugh at his cartoons. During the war, a letter addressed to Efimov from frontline soldiers – one republished in a postwar collection of his caricatures – contained striking similar sentiments to those expressed by the viewer above:

Dear Boris Efimovič! Keep on with your drawings! Your cartoons not only bring a smile to our faces, but they strengthen our contempt and hatred toward the enemy. Bludgeon the fascists even more strongly with your weapons of satire. Draw them, the devils, with even more ridicule! And we will pull our triggers more merrily, we will shoot down those airborne pirates with greater accuracy, we will fight with greater strength and destroy that confounded Hitlerite mob and we will bring about the day when we will see the chiefs of Nazi Germany hanging upside down on a German Christmas tree. Frontline soldiers Leont'ev, Telešov, Vorob'ev, and others.<sup>83</sup>

After striking at the Nazis during World War II and at Nuremberg, Efimov continued to be the subject of official published collections that lauded his socialist labor. In the 1952 collection of Efimov's work published by “Iskusstvo”, M. Ioffe opened with the sentence: “Boris Efimovič Efimov is known and loved by the Soviet people. His drawings are truthful chronicles of current international affairs put into the graphic language of political satire.”<sup>84</sup> Ioffe expands:

This [his work] is well-aimed and accurate portraits of imperialistic predators and their servants; portraits that expose the malicious greediness and sanctimonious hypocrisy of peace and democracy's enemies. Mercilessly ridiculing bourgeois politicians and their masters, Efimov knows how to show clearly and convincingly the essence of the Soviet Union's wise and consistent policy – the steadfast advocacy of peace and justice. [...]

Soviet caricature is a strong weapon in our political fight and an efficient means in the ideological training of the masses. The understanding of these tasks' importance permeates the creations of our outstanding master of Soviet satire, Boris Efimov. They breathe anger and express contempt for the dark forces of reaction and oppression.

They reflect the aspirations and feelings of the entire Soviet people and it is understandable why they are so close to the widest masses.<sup>85</sup>

The ultimate meaning of Efimov's work, at least as Ioffe defined it for readers and viewers alike, was a significant one. Ioffe explained:

The creative method of satirical art as an entirely Soviet art, Efimov correctly notes, is socialist realism, which affirms the indissolubility and the adequacy of the content and form of the artistic work. The intrinsic ideological content of the caricature cannot be separated from its artistic quality and from the degree of its emotional influence. In his artistic statements, Efimov consistently carried forward thoughts about the lofty responsibility a Soviet caricaturist had for the people [народ]. [...]

One of the basic qualities of a political caricature, he says, is in its accessibility, its clearness, and in the national character [народность] of its graphic language. This is Efimov's most important creative principle.<sup>86</sup>

Ioffe refers to Efimov's work as "everyday life caricatures [бытовые карикатуры]", for they reveal "Soviet reality" and are beloved by viewers. "The Soviet people," Ioffe argues, "always note when an artist departs from a lifelike truth and they do not pardon errors in an image by an artist familiar with its realities." As far as the "everyday realities" dear to Soviet citizens that caricaturists must capture, Ioffe offers an intriguing perspective. What matters to Soviet citizens are clear artistic revelations that identify enemies. Capitalists, Ioffe claims, aim to prevent the creation of a "communist society". A Soviet caricaturist must create satirical weapons that poke fun at these attempts and therefore combat "the indiscriminate criticizing, mocking, and deliberate distorting of our people".<sup>87</sup>

According to Ioffe, Efimov is the best Soviet caricaturist because he uses satire as a weapon aimed at the enemy best and because his emotional influence is the most profound among all Soviet caricaturists. To illustrate his greatness, Ioffe quotes Efimov's view on the work his cartoons accomplish:

The force of Soviet satire rests not with its mocking and its explanations, which in fact are also characteristic of bourgeois satire, but in the life-asserting, healthy laughter of a strong and cheerful people; this laughter is the source of the Soviet people's bright optimism, their confidence in the future, and the consciousness of their moral and ideological superiority over the arrogant, dull, and malicious enemy.<sup>88</sup>

Efimov's reputation did not suffer after Stalin's death. The Soviet government continued to employ his arsenal. For the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, *Izvestija* filled the front page with Efimov's cartoon

mentioned above and published a lavish edition of his work for the paper.<sup>89</sup> The newspaper commissioned Herluf Bidstrup, the Danish cartoonist who became a communist propagandist, to write the introduction. Bidstrup opened with the following observations:

Certainly Efimov the person is somewhat older [than the USSR], but Efimov the satirist without doubt was born and matured with Soviet power.

For nearly fifty years Efimov's illustrations have exposed and ridiculed the Soviet Union's enemies, they jeer at them. Capitalism, militarism, imperialism, and fascism – these are the big themes of his caricatures. He completely deserved the acknowledgement, which he has already received long ago, as a people's artist.<sup>90</sup>

After surveying his work, Bidstrup concludes that Efimov is the most popular artist in the USSR, a status achieved not because he is the oldest colleague working for *Izvestija* and *Krokodil*, but also because “his pencil [has always] served to protect the interests of peace, socialism, and the happiness of workers”.<sup>91</sup> As an artist, Efimov by 1967 had learned to make his caricatures coherent, easily understood, and easily recognizable, largely through his re-fashioning of earlier weapons and re-employing the consistent words about healthy laughter to sharpen his satirical arrows.

Just as Efimov's cartoons became increasingly self-referential by the time of the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, so too had the words used to describe his work become ritualized. After 1967, various exhibitions, books, and articles linked Efimov's work to the entire history of building socialism by wielding the “weapons of satire” or the “weapon of laughter”. The cartoonist and his cartoons came to be viewed as “living history”, a direct connection to the arrows slung by Moor and other early Bolshevik artists.<sup>92</sup> Manuil Semenov and Isaak Abramskij entitled a 1967 collection of cartoons *The Weapons of Satire* and specifically linked early work by Dmitrij Moor to Efimov's ongoing output.<sup>93</sup> Efimov himself would refer to a 1967 exhibition featuring his works alongside those of Moor, the Kukryniksy, and others as one where viewers could see “the weapons of satire” wielded across time.<sup>94</sup> The 1972 exhibition held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Krokodil* began with Moor's works and ended with Efimov's collection entitled *Enemies and Friends in the Mirror of Krokodil, 1922-1972*.<sup>95</sup> *Pravda* celebrated Efimov's 80th birthday with an article about him entitled ‘Satire's Sharp Weapon’.<sup>96</sup> Reporting on a 1984 Moscow exhibition, “Satire and the Struggle for Peace”, an exhibition that contained his work, Efimov would entitle his review ‘The Weapons of Laughter’ and connect the works in the retrospective with the history of the Soviet state and its use for caricatures.<sup>97</sup>

Efimov defined his drawings as weapons in the struggle to build Soviet socialism. Official publications did the same, and added that viewers should find them funny. Efimov's weaponry attempted to provoke a healthy, moral laughter that would meet the state's goal of creating new citizens. The repeated sharpening of Efimov's weapon of laughter, to employ Vladimir Propp's terms, represented a way to turn healthy laughter into ritual laughter.<sup>98</sup> To be a good, healthy, Soviet citizen, Ioffe and others would claim from the 1920s through the 1980s, one had to laugh at Efimov's caricatures.

In a 2006 book devoted to the history of Russian caricature, Efimov received an entire chapter. The editors of the book noted that the cartoonist's work fit within the evolution of Russian visual satire since 1812 but also deserved a special chapter in this history. His work, as they wrote, "achieved the main objective set before Soviet artists – to depict the enemy in as nasty a form as possible." "Following the general party line," they concluded, "Boris Efimov created thousands of images of socialism's enemies that were circulated in the millions across the entire country."<sup>99</sup> His images of the West, in short, ensured that the era of socialism in Russia was also the era of Boris Efimov.

Thus, when Jurij Lužkov pronounced Efimov's work as an "epoch of our history" that reflected "the need to laugh", he echoed the words used by Trockij, Ioffe, Bidstrup, and others over the decades. Lužkov had absorbed the lessons of Efimov's works well. By gazing at Efimov's work and by mocking Soviet enemies again, Lužkov sharpened Efimov's weapon one more time and, in doing so, laughed the laughter of a healthy Soviet citizen.

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## NOTES

The author would like to thank Brigid O'Keeffe and Serguei Oushakine for offering comments on this essay and to Chris Mizelle for sending me the catalogue to Efimov's last retrospective.

<sup>1</sup> Jurij Lužkov, 'Master i vremena', *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach*, Moskva, 2007, pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> The title of his 2007 Moscow retrospective was *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach* (20th Century History Lessons in Caricatures).

<sup>3</sup> See David Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography', *American Historical Review*, 114/3, June 2009, p. 574. Nasaw's comments that historians are not just interested in charting individual lives but examining a life in multiple contexts introduces a special roundtable on biography. I borrow the term "life history",

in place of “biography” from Judith Brown’s article in the forum: “‘Life Histories’ and the History of Modern South Asia”, *Ibid.*, pp. 587-594.

4 Genrich Borovik, “Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach Borisa Efimova”,  
5 *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach*, pp. 7-8.

6 In their book on Occidentalism, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit explore a form of Russian Occidentalism that fused German Romanticism with Russian Slavophilism. Although this form of Russian Occidentalism stressed the rationalism of the West as inherently bad, it also tended to be cast as a contest “about character” with Victory belonging to “the side with the stronger will”. See their *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, New York, 2004, pp. 93-94. The book dust jacket came emblazoned with Viktor Deni’s 1919 poster *Capital*, which featured a fat, beastly capitalist spinning his web of exploitation.

7 Scholars of Soviet laughter have tended to focus on the ways that humor negotiated the demands placed on Soviet citizens or even offered a pressure valve of sorts. In this sense, humor provoked “resonant dissonance”, “reflective laughter”, or a chance to mock Soviet leaders. See, among others, Lesley Milne, Ed., *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, London, 2004; Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context*, Evanston, 2009; Karen Ryan, *Stalin in Russian Satire, 1917-1991*, Madison, 2009. For more on how laughter served the state or state interests, see Natalia Skradol, ‘Laughing with Comrade Stalin: An Analysis of Laughter in a Soviet Newspaper Report’, *Russian Review*, 68/1, January 2009, pp. 26-48; Boris Groys, ‘Meždu Stalinym i Dionisom’, *Sintaksis*, 25, Paris, 1989, pp. 92-97; Evgenij Dobrenko, ‘Karnaval èpochi Moskvošeja’, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 79, 2006, pp. 69-72, and Mikhail Ryklin, ‘Bodies of Terror: Theses Toward a Logic of Violence’, *New Literary History*, 24/1, 1993, pp. 51-74.

8 Igal Halfin has argued that “language was the turf on which the Bolsheviks did battle” and explored how the Party conducted politics discursively through labeling its enemies before rejecting them. Just as the Party waged war over words and who had the right to wield them, so too did Efimov’s images perform a similar, visual role. See Igal Halfin, *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918-1928*, Pittsburgh, 2007, p. 86.

9 The Soviet political caricature has not been the subject of serious study. The excellent works by Peter Kenez, Stephen White, and Victoria Bonnell on Soviet visual propaganda focus almost exclusively on the poster. See Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Cambridge, 1985; Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, New Haven, 1988; and Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley, 1997.

10 ‘Interview with Boris Efimov’ for PBS series *Red Files*, 1999, [http://www.pbs.org/redfiles/prop/deep/interv/p\\_int\\_boris\\_efimov.htm](http://www.pbs.org/redfiles/prop/deep/interv/p_int_boris_efimov.htm).

Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Ithaca, 2001, p. 13. Burke quotes Stephen Bann in his “face-to-face with



history". See Bann's 'Face-to-Face with History', *New Literary History*, 29/2, 1998, pp. 235-246.

11 Here I invoke Norman Bryson's adaptation of Lacan's concept of the gaze and its applications for images: *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven, 1983.

12 John Bowlt, 'Nineteenth-Century Russian Caricature', Theofanis George Stavrou, Ed., *Art and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, Bloomington, 1983, pp. 224-225.

13 V.A. Vereščagin, *Russkaja karikatura*, II, *Otečestvennaja vojna: Terebenev, Venecianov, Ivanov*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1912, p. 97.

14 See Bowlt, 'Nineteenth-Century Russian Caricature', and Stephen M. Norris, *A War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture, and National Identity, 1812-1945*, DeKalb, 2006, pp. 11-35.

15 It is worth noting that this 19th century tradition developed out of what Dmitrij Lichačev and Aleksandr Pančenko termed the "смеховой мир" of early modern Russia. This culture, visually expressed in the 18th century *lubok*, developed around the holy fool. See D.S. Lichačev and A.M. Pančenko, "*Smechovoj mir*" *drevnej rusi*, Leningrad, 1976.

16 Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, New Haven, 1988, p. 43. Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley, 1997, pp. 200-201. For more on *Simplicissimus*, see Ann Taylor Allen, *Satire and Society in Wilhelmitic Germany: 'Kladderadatsch' and 'Simplicissimus', 1890-1914*, Lexington, 1984. For the influence of the journal on Russian artists and the interest German artists had in their Russian counterparts, see I.P. Abramskij, *Smech sil'nych: o chudožnikach žurnala 'Krokodil'*, Moskva, 1977, pp. 24-26; and Lennart Kjelberg, 'Der *Simplicissimus* und die Slaven, 1896-1914', *Scando-Slavica*, 28, 1982, pp. 69-90.

17 White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, pp. 41-43. See also Norris, *A War of Images*, Chapters 7 and 8.

18 Quoted in White, *The Bolshevik Poster*, p. 43.

19 Boris Efimov, *Desjat' desjatiletij: o tom, čto videl, perežil, zapomnil*, Moskva, 2000, p. 34.

20 Boris Efimov, 'Dmitrij Moor: Chudožnik, Filosof, Bol'shevik', *Moi vstreči*, Moskva, 2005, pp. 258-263. See also Efimov's stories about his fellow caricaturists, including Moor, in his book, *Rasskazy o chudožnikach-satirikach*, Moskva, 1963.

21 W.A. Coupe, 'Observations on a Theory of Political Caricature', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 11/1, January 1969, p. 86. Coupe suggests that this function of caricature may also mask real fear of the person or society being mocked.

22 *Bor. Efimov v "Izvestijach"*, Moskva, 1969, p. 223.

23 Efimov, *Desjat' desjatiletij*, pp. 573-577.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Bor. Efimov v "Izvestijach"*, p. 224.

26 *Ibid.*

- 27 For more on Kol'cov, see Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Formation of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*, Cambridge, MA, 2011. For Fridljand, see David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*, New Brunswick, NJ, 2011.
- 28 Boris Efimov, *Moi vstreči*, Moskva, 2005, p. 190.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Efimov would even write the introduction to Sokolov's memoirs: Boris Efimov, 'O vospominaniyah Niksa', N.A. Sokolov, *Nabroski po pamjati*, Moskva, 1984, pp. 5-9.
- 31 The image is reproduced in Boris Efimov, *Sorok let: zapiski chudožnika-satirika*, Moskva, 1961, p. 57.
- 32 Boris Efimov, *Bor. Efimov v "Izvestijach": karikatury za polveka*, Moskva, 1969, p. 16.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 This role of satire is described in Vladimir Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*, edited and translated by Jean-Patrick Debbèche and Paul Perron, Toronto, 2009, p. 28.
- 35 His 1926 'Capitalistic Europe Goes Forward' reproduced in *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach*, p. 22.
- 36 The last two cartoons are 1928's *The More the Sadder* and 1929's *Deputy of Christ at His Place*, *ibid.*, pp. 25, 31.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 90.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 117.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 41 Both images appear in his *Rabota, vospominaniya, vstreči*, Moskva, 1963, pp. 74-75.
- 42 Mikhail Ivanov, 'The Century's Son', *Russian Life*, 42/5, August/September 1999, p. 51.
- 43 'Interview with Boris Efimov': [http://www.pbs.org/redfiles/prop/deep/interv/p\\_int\\_boris\\_efimov.htm](http://www.pbs.org/redfiles/prop/deep/interv/p_int_boris_efimov.htm).
- 44 *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach*, pp. 167, 169.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 184. The caricature features a fat American general sitting in a Roman plaza having his boots polished by the Italian PM, Alcide De Gasperi. One boot is labeled "Italy" and the polish is marked "made in USA".
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 179, 205. *In Korea*, to take one of these cartoons, features a UN soldier carrying South Korean President Syngman Rhee in a knapsack. Behind them, UN Secretary General Trygve Lee waves a white UN flag. The other side of the flag is a US flag emblazoned with the words "for Wall Street's interests" on it.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 224, 232.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 234.

- 50 My thanks to Kevin M.F. Platt for pointing out this film and its connection to Efimov's caricature.
- 51 Concepts explored in Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*, pp. 66, 85.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 261, 265, 271, 275, 277, 278.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 290, 293, 294, 297.
- 54 For more on 19th century popular prints that stressed this theme, see Norris, *A War of Images*.
- 55 The image was reproduced in *Bor. Efimov v "Izvestijach"*, pp. 38-39.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 61. Efimov's 1932 cartoon *Unconquerable Guard of Revolution* contains the same visual theme: a group of enemies at the bottom scream at a Soviet factory project guarded by a Red Army soldier who looks down on them, smiling.
- 57 *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach*, p. 71.
- 58 Efimov, *Rabota, vospominanija, vstreči*, p. 34.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- 61 *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v karikaturach*, p. 201.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 63 Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*, p. 44.
- 64 The image captures one classic Occidentalist position, perhaps articulated most powerfully in Werner Sombart's *Händler und Helden: patriotische Besinnungen (Merchants and Heroes: Patriotic Meditations)*, which appeared in 1915. In it, Sombart contrasted the English mentality – which he viewed as one shaped by shopkeepers and merchants – with the more superior German mentality – one shaped by heroes ready to sacrifice themselves for higher ideals. See Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism*, pp. 52-53. Sombart – a former German socialist who turned to the right in World War I – developed his Occidentalist ideas in the same milieu as the artists of *Simplicissimus*.
- 65 Here I am inspired by Alon Confino's call for historians to adapt Aby Warburg's writings on images as bearers of social memory. See Alon Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method', *AHR*, December 1997, pp. 1390-1391.
- 66 Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, New Haven, 2007, pp. 4-5.
- 67 Stephen Lovell has argued that "the best way to characterize the official face of Soviet socialism is in terms of what it claimed not to be"; namely, the West and its culture. No one person made this characterization clearer than Efimov. Lovell, *Destination in Doubt: Russia Since 1989*, London, 2006, p. 12.
- 68 Boris Efimov, *Osnovy ponimanija karikatury*, Moskva, 1961, p. 5.
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9. See also his article from the following year entitled 'The Weapon of Laughter': Boris Efimov, 'Oružie smeča', *Voprosy literatury*, 1962, No. 1, p. 22.

- 73 Quoted in Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*, p. 154. The entire article  
appears in English translation in *Slavic and East European Performance*,  
26/1, 2006.
- 74 Daniel Gerould, 'Lunacharsky on Revolutionary Laughter', *Slavic and East  
European Performance*, 26/1, 2006.
- 75 Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*, p. 145.
- 76 Lev Trockij, 'Chudožnik Boris Efimov', Boris Efimov, *Karikatury*, Moskva,  
1924, pp. vii-viii.
- 77 E. Gnedin, 'Boris Efimov', Boris Efimov, *Političeskie karikatury, 1924-1934*,  
Moskva, 1935, p. 5.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 81 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15. The letter writer echoes Anatolij Lunačarskij, who wrote that  
laughing at Soviet enemies "is cheeky, is blasphemous, and kills with  
poisoned arrows". Anatolij Lunačarskij, 'Budem smejat'sja', *Sobranie soči-  
nenij*, Vol. 3, *Dorevoljucionnyj teatr. Sovetskij teatr. Stat'i, reči, recenzii*,  
1904-1933, Moskva, 1964, p. 77.
- 82 Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*, p. 146.
- 83 Quoted in Efimov, *Rabota, vospominanija, vstreči*, Moskva, 1963, p. 39.
- 84 M. Ioffe, 'Boris Efimovič Efimov', *Boris Efimov: Uroki istorii XX veka v  
karikaturach*, Moskva, 1952, p. 3.
- 85 *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
- 86 *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
- 87 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 88 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 89 *Bor. Efimov v "Izvestijach"*. Before this collection appeared, Efimov publish-  
ed his first autobiographical account of his work: *Rabota, vospominanija*,  
*vstreči*, Moskva, 1963. In it, Efimov characterizes the dominant view of his  
work as "the weapons of satire", "satirical weapons", or "the weapons of  
laughter" (p. 16).
- 90 Chersluf [Herluf] Bidstrup, 'Boris Efimov', *Bor. Efimov v "Izvestijach"*, pp. 7-  
8.
- 91 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 92 See Ark. Vasil'ev, 'Živaja istorija', *Pravda*, 15 October 1967, p. 6.
- 93 M.G. Semenov and I.P. Abramskij, *Oružiem satiry*, Moskva, 1967.
- 94 Bor. Efimov and M. Abramov, 'Oružiem satiry', *Pravda*, 19 November 1967,  
p. 3.
- 95 O. Ivanov, 'S točnym pricelom', *Pravda*, 2 October 1972, p. 4.
- 96 'Satiry ostroe oružie', *Pravda*, 30 September 1980, p. 6.
- 97 Boris Efimov, 'Oružiem smeča', *Pravda*, 12 January 1984, p. 3.
- 98 Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*, pp. 129-132.
- 99 *Russkaja karikatura. 1812-1985*, Moskva, 2006, p. 208.



## USELESS ACTIONS AND SENSELESS LAUGHTER: ON MOSCOW CONCEPTUALIST ART AND POLITICS

YELENA KALINSKY

### Abstract

Through a series of close readings of an album by Il'ia Kabakov and actions by the groups Collective Actions (*Kollektivnye deistviia*) and Mukhomor, this article considers the place of laughter in the work of the Moscow Conceptualist circle. Distinguishing between a metaphysically-oriented laughter in the 1970s and a carnivalesque or kynic laughter in the 1980s, the article rejects the easy identification of Moscow Conceptualism's ironic laughter with a social and political critique of the Soviet Union, and instead locates these different strains of Moscow Conceptualist practice in the shifting artistic and political contexts of the last two Soviet decades.

Keywords: *Laughter; Il'ia Kabakov; Kollektivnye deistviia; Mukhomor; Moscow Conceptualism*

Moscow Conceptualism, the late-Soviet art movement, is often said to be characterized by an ironic laughter, which critics trace by a genetic connection to the comic stories of Gogol' and the absurdist poetry of Chlebnikov and Obériu. This identification of Moscow Conceptualism with irony and satire is buttressed by comparisons with the critical strategies of North American and West European conceptual art, which employed tautology and institutional critique to shed light on the limits of art's prevailing definitions and the vested interests of artistic institutions. Such links with Russian literary satire and Western Conceptualism, while illuminating in certain

respects, risk casting Moscow Conceptualism as an art of social and political critique, inviting us to read its ironic laughter as a strategy of enlightenment pointed at Soviet ideology.<sup>1</sup> For although they shared Western Conceptualism's mistrust of the High Modernist art object and claimed Gogol', Chlebnikov, and Charms as forefathers, most Moscow Conceptualist artists at the height of the movement in the 1970s sidestepped a materialist critique of culture in favor of the immaterial. Examined closely, many paradigmatic Moscow Conceptualist works that begin with laughter end up in the realm of metaphysics. But rather than expressing individual spiritual visions as did, for example, the metaphysically-oriented painters in the 1960s and 1970s, or the collective utopian impulses of the Russian avant-garde, Moscow Conceptualism used laughter, among other aesthetic strategies, to gesture towards the presence of metaphysical questions and to create spaces for their collective discursive elaboration.

This essay will explore the echoes of ironic laughter in the activities of conceptual artists in Moscow from the late-1960s through the mid-1980s.<sup>2</sup> In order to avoid over-generalization, it is important to consider the artistic and institutional conditions that shaped the Moscow Conceptualist phenomenon in the visual arts, including generational and social groupings; artists' changing relationships to exhibition spaces and publics; and the shifting meaning of the aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> The move away from expressionist abstraction, surrealism, and other Thaw-era modernisms in Russia began in the late 1960s and early 1970s among the *Sretenskij Bul'var* circle and the Sots-Art collaboration of Vitalij Komar and Aleksandr Melamid.<sup>4</sup> This trend intensified after 1974, when a violent confrontation between authorities and artists over an unsanctioned public outdoor exhibition led to stronger divisions into distinct artistic groupings.<sup>5</sup> One strand of Moscow Conceptualist activity in the visual arts can be traced from the overtly ironic Sots-Art tendencies of the collaborative duo Komar and Melamid to their students in the Nest group (*Gnezdo*; Gennadij Donskoj, Michail Rošal', and Viktor Skersis), whose brief creative alliance produced a number of works explicitly thematizing and critiquing political conditions in the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> Another strand associated with the Collective Actions group (*Kollektivnye dejstvija*; Andrej Monastyrskij, Nikita Alekseev, Georgij Kizeval'ter, Nikolaj Panitkov, Elena Elagina, Igor' Makarevič, Sergej Romaško, and Sabine Hänsen); and husband-and-wife teams Rimma and Valerij Gerlovin and Totart (Natal'ja Abalakova and Anatolij Žigalov), among others, assumed prominence alongside Kabakov and the *Sretenskij Bul'var* circle through their use of text, Cagean chance procedures, and the insertion of features of the everyday into overtly Modernist forms.<sup>7</sup> By the beginning of the 1980s, nearly a decade of conceptually-oriented painting, albums, performances, and projects had produced an acknowledged conceptualist tradition centered around regular gatherings in artists' studios and apartments and organized actions outside the city.<sup>8</sup> It was around this

time that a still younger generation appeared on the Moscow scene. This new wave ushered in a distinctly lighter mood; their playful and pugnacious drawings and actions showed disdain for all seriousness and philosophical pretension, and their colorful paintings embraced painterly *faktura* (texture) and self-conscious naïveté.<sup>9</sup>

Moscow Conceptualism was far from a monolithic movement, and a concise definition and precise roster of artists have proved notoriously difficult to produce.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in-depth art historical studies and translations of primary sources into English are only just beginning to emerge, following the movement's initial introduction to a wider audience through gallery and museum exhibitions in the late-1980s and early-1990s and more recent shows in the last decade.<sup>11</sup> This situation has so far resulted in a generalized treatment that has favored scope and clarity at the expense of a more complicated treatment of relationships between different parts of Moscow's unofficial art world and shifts in artists' strategies within the movement over time. What makes a subject like ironic laughter suggestive in this regard is that it has the potential to expose the variety of approaches and self-definitions among artists who would normally subscribe to a single group affiliation. A recent conversation between two key figures of Moscow Conceptualism, Nikolaj Panitkov and Andrej Monastyrskij, reveals one such fault-line at play within the movement.

Prompted by Monastyrskij on the subject of a distinct Moscow Conceptualist strategy or technique, Panitkov defines the method at work in the mid-to-late 1970s as a kind of cultural combinatorics:

*Н.П.* [...] можно взять из этой культурной традиции предмет. [...] Взять, подумать сильно, взять из другой какой-то, попытаться совместить органично и вот вибрация создавала нечто третье, какой-то образ, и это была работа художников-концептуалистов.

*N.P.* [...] you can take an object from one cultural tradition. [...] Take it, think hard about it, take something from another, try to combine them organically, and then this vibration created some third thing, some kind of image, and this was the work of the artists-conceptualists.

For Panitkov, this carefully developed montage technique was eventually challenged at the end of the decade by the younger *Muchomor* (Toadstool) group, whose work he describes as a careless pastiche driven by parody and laughter:

*Н.П.* [...] Вдруг прибежали “Мухоморы”, посмотрели как мы все это делаем...

*А.М.* 78-й год, уже поздно.

*Н.П.* Да, да. Ну, мы все это время разрабатывали метод... [...] Прибежали “Мухоморы”, посмотрели, похихикали и начали лепить одно на другое. И все, поехало тогда. Я понял, что с этим нельзя... они ничего не думают, они просто...

*А.М.* Это хохот начался.

*Н.П.* Да, это хохот и начали лепить одно на другое: рожу нарисовали, чего-то написали. И я в ужасе был от них...

*А.М.* Капустник начался.

*Н.П.* Просто в ужасе от такого бреда. Была интеллектуальная работа, Рубинштейн прекрасные тексты составлял, у тебя тоже были какие-то схемы. [...] Интересно было.

*А.М.* И акции тонкие, структурные...

*Н.П.* После этих “Мухоморов”, после того, как они заполнили пространство безумной, кретинской этой продукцией, я перестал что-либо понимать.

*N.P.* [...] All of a sudden, the *Muchomors* showed up, took a look at how we do all this...

*A.M.* 1978, that’s late already.

*N.P.* Yes, yes. We were developing the method all this time [...] The *Muchomors* showed up, took a look, had a laugh, and began to stick one thing on top of the other. And that’s when everything went downhill. I understood that you can have nothing to do with this... they do not think about anything, they simply...

*A.M.* That was the start of the laughter.

*N.P.* Yes, the laughter, and they began to stick one thing on top the other: drew a face, scribbled something. I was horror-stricken by them...

*A.M.* An amateur variety show.

*N.P.* Just horror-stricken from this kind of drivel. There had been intellectual work, [Lev] Rubinštejn composed fine texts, you too had some kind of diagrams. [...] Things were interesting.

*A.M.* The [Collective Actions’] actions were subtle, structural.

*N.P.* After these *Muchomors*, after they filled the space with their nonsensical, cretinous output, I ceased to understand anything whatsoever.<sup>12</sup>

In this retrospective exchange Panitkov, with Monastyrskij’s help, paints a picture of a discrete movement engaged in developing an aesthetic method to explore shared concerns. The work of the artists-conceptualists, in Panitkov’s account, is distinguished by the deep intellectual effort of composing subtle, structural texts, diagrams, and actions to produce meaningful new images. The old notion of artistic craftsmanship is transformed into the intellectual craftsmanship of conceptualist montage whose effect is pure “vibration”, uncoupled from specific cultural traditions and seemingly suspended in a purely aesthetic space. As if on cue, this delicate balance of conceptualist



production is disrupted by a new wave of young artist-anarchists at the end of the decade, exemplified by the *Muchomors*, whose nonsensical laughter ruptures its pure effects.

Significantly, the word that Panitkov and Monastyrskij use to mark the difference between Conceptualism and this new wave is *chóchot*, laughter. Unlike *smech*, the more common word for laughter in Russian, *chóchot* has an explosive, corporeal quality that connotes a kind of infectious expressiveness. According to *Vasmer's Etymological Dictionary*, *smech* comes from the Proto-Slavic for “to laugh, joke, or ridicule”, and is closely related to the words for “to smile” or “to cause to smile”. *Chóchot*, on the other hand, is onomatopoeic. Like the verbs *chochotát’*, *chichíkat’* (which Panitkov also applies in his polemic), and *cháchat’*, which all mean “to laugh, to be a well-spring, or to bubble or seethe”, *chóchot* represents the physical emanation of laughter from the laugher’s throat.<sup>13</sup> If *smech* refers to an instance of individual amusement, in oneself or caused in another, then *chóchot*, as the very sound or instance of laughter, is implicitly public, a ringing in the audience’s ears.<sup>14</sup> Counter to the common identification of Moscow Conceptualism with ironic laughter, then, Panitkov presents the movement’s seriousness and apparent depth in stark opposition to the *Muchomors’* shallow, exhibitionist *chóchot*. What is at stake in these different definitions of laughter? What is it about the *Muchomors’* particular form of laughter that is counter to subtlety and structure, that precludes Panitkov from “understanding anything whatsoever”? Is laughter the heart of Moscow Conceptualism or its undoing?

### *Kabakov's "Jokes"*

While Panitkov’s remarks are useful for casting light on certain generational and periodic distinctions in the movement, it would be a mistake to take them as objective history by ignoring the pointedness of his polemic. Public address, absurdism, and irony did not appear *ex nihilo* in the 1980s, but were prevalent in the earliest examples of Moscow Conceptualism by Il’ja Kabakov. Paintings, such as *Ruka i reprodukcija Rejsdalja* (*Arm and a Reproduction of a Ruysdael*, 1965); *Golova s šarom* (*Head with a Balloon*, 1965); and *Avtomat i cypljata* (*Machine Gun and Chicks*, 1966), both physically transgress the flat surface of the picture plane into the viewer’s space and display odd combinations of disparate elements that hover somewhere between Surrealism and Pop. Matthew Jesse Jackson has analyzed these and many of Kabakov’s drawings from this time as walking the line between artworks and things-in-the-world, driving a sharp critique of both official Socialist Realist painting and the expressionist modernism of the sixties generation.<sup>15</sup> It might be argued, however, that even more than his paintings, it is Kabakov’s albums – a genre he invented around 1970-1971 and went on to explore throughout the better part of the decade – that were foundational to

the aesthetics of Moscow Conceptualism.<sup>16</sup> The albums' introduction of fictional characters like *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov* and *Agonizing Surikov*; insertion of commentaries from imaginary outside observers into the albums' narrative and pictorial structures; and performance in Kabakov's attic studio for audiences of artists and friends inaugurated some of Moscow Conceptualism's characteristic operations and exhibition strategies. For Kabakov, the albums were a way of bringing to the surface what he has called the "темы-образы" (theme-images) that had filled his mind since childhood, "мифемы' комплексов, неврозоа-проблем или даже истеризмов" ("the 'mythemes' of complexes, neurotic problems, or even hystericism").<sup>17</sup> Although this language suggests a subjective plumbing of the artist's psyche, the settings, dramas, and everyday details depicted in the albums are firmly embedded in collective Soviet experience.<sup>18</sup> One album in particular, *Šutnik Goročov* (*The Joker Goročov*; the second in the *Desjat' personazej* [*Ten Characters*] cycle, 1970-1975), addresses the theme of laughter directly.<sup>19</sup> Its succession of visual puns and trick-the-eye coincidences serves up a series of curious occasions for audience laughter.

Alternatively jokey and sinister, this album resembles the kind of imaginative play with words and images that one might find in illustrated children's books. Bandits in a canyon turn into a fantasy of children bunking on tree branches. A woman from the Petrovsk region going to work at a kindergarten in 1973 turns up on the next page as the Countess Anna Myškova visiting the Zuevs' country estate in 1843 (see Figures 1-2). Indeed, prior to his emigration from the Soviet Union in 1988, Kabakov was a successful children's book illustrator, a position that afforded him a legitimate occupation, supplies, and a studio where he could make and show his work to fellow artists and friends. And like some of the best children's literature, Kabakov's albums are not as innocent as they at first appear. Despite the story-book imagery, *Šutnik Goročov* hints at an ominous aspect of humor in Soviet society: the unstable range of potentially political readings and the danger of being informed upon for participating in their circulation.<sup>20</sup> This is not noted outright, but a joke like Goročov's opening gambit elicits a chill as the morbid political reality behind its laughter fails to conceal itself (see Figure 3):

Смешно.

– А вам почему не смешно?

– Я из другой организации.

Анекдот.

That's funny.

– How come you do not find it funny?

– I'm from a different organization.

A joke.<sup>21</sup>

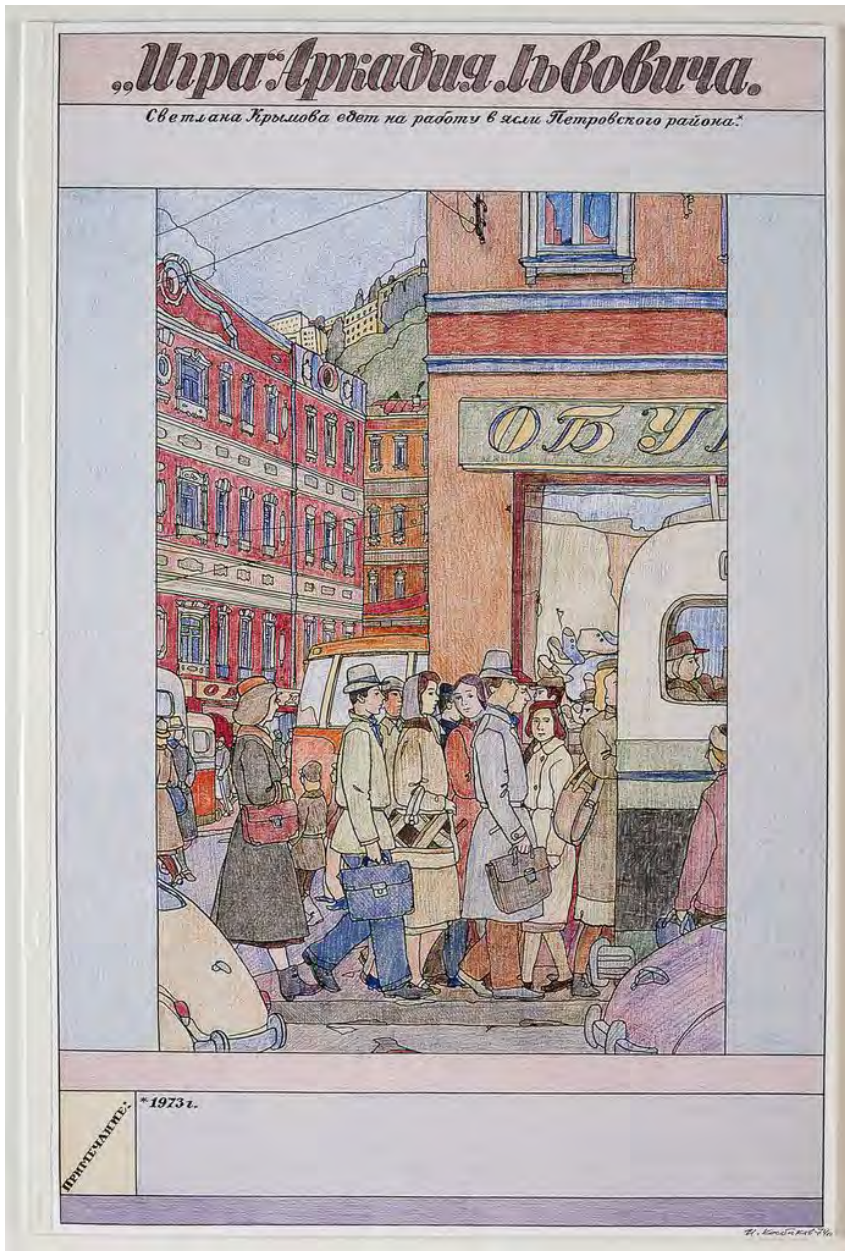


Fig. 1. Il'ja Kabakov, *Svetlana Krymova edet na rabotu v jasli Petrovskogo rajona*, 1974, from the album *Šutnik Gorochov*.



Fig. 2. Il'ja Kabakov, *Gr. Anna Myškova v gostjach u Zuevych v ich zagorodnom imenii*, 1974, from the album *Šutnik Gorochov*.



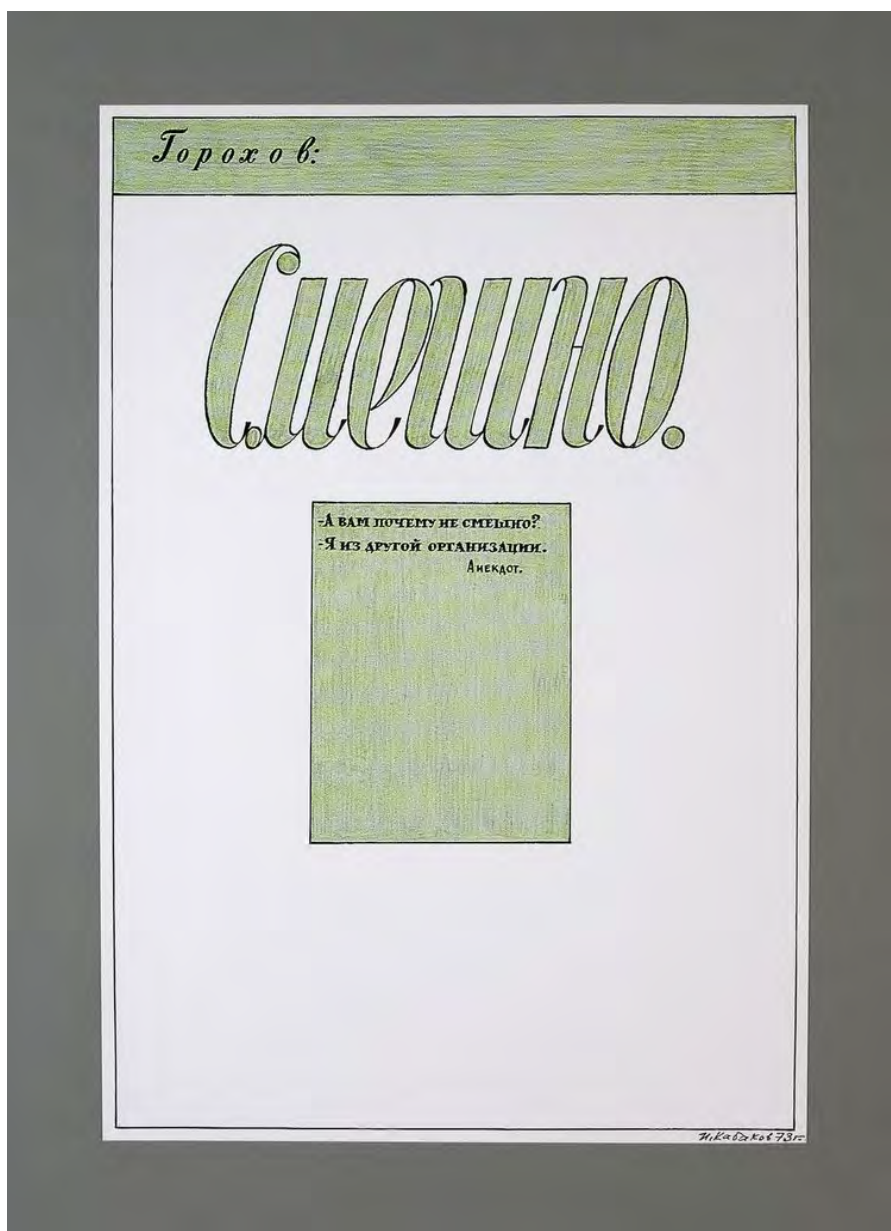


Fig. 3. Il'ja Kabakov, *Smešno*, 1973, from the album *Šutnik Goročov*.

Another joke, introducing Gorochov's first album borrows an incident from Mark Twain's satirical novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), in which a time-traveling hero convinces his medieval-era captors of his supernatural powers by "producing" a solar eclipse:

– “Солнце, закройся!” – произнес я громовым голосом.  
 Все подняли головы.  
 Яркое сияющий диск стал медленно уменьшаться.  
 (М. Твен, *Янки при дворе Короля Артура*)

“Sun, cover yourself!” I pronounced in a thunderous voice.  
 All lifted their heads.  
 The bright shining disk slowly began to diminish.  
 (M. Twain. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*)<sup>22</sup>

Although Soviet authorities never challenged Twain's satire on political grounds, his hero's bold claim on the sun's power may have plausibly piqued Soviet ears when isolated in this way. Not only does Kabakov condense the entire “Eclipse” chapter into a dramatic kernel emphasizing one individual's claim to total power over natural phenomena and the allegiance of the masses, but there is a clear echo here with the radical Russian Futurist opera *Pobeda nad solncem* (*Victory Over the Sun*, 1913), not staged since 1920. Kabakov's imaginary commentator Lunina's curt declaration, “Мне Горохов не нравится” (“I do not like Gorochov”), might be the most politically correct response to such “dangerous” jokes and suspect associations for those seeking to avoid complications.<sup>23</sup>

For Kabakov's Moscow audience in the 1970s, however, such allusions to the cult of personality or the radical experiments of the Russian avant-garde would likely have come off as more dated than dangerous.<sup>24</sup> Hardly an up-to-the-minute political satire, the entire album is narrated in a retrospective mode, surveying all of Soviet – and indeed human – history. Thematically, *Desjat' personažej* evokes “a bygone era”, its subject-matter and forms descending, as Jackson has noted, from the private life of nineteenth-century Russia.<sup>25</sup> *Šutnik Gorochov's* eponymous hero barely appears beyond the introductory page, where he relates his family's history of celebrated jokers and clowns. Their strange anecdotes and routines, which Gorochov carefully collects, comprise the album's three main sections. Aside from this brief introduction, Gorochov speaks only through the collected stories of his clowning relatives.

Many of Gorochov's family jokes hinge on a trick wherein a thing that seems one way, seen in a different light or from another angle, turns out to be another. In the first album, “*Šutki*” *L'va Gleboviča* (*Lev Glebovič's* “*Jokes*”), a series of fantastical scenes depicted on sheets of tracing paper are transformed into yet stranger scenes as the translucent pages are lifted back.

In the second album, “*Sovpadenija*” L’va L’voviča (Lev L’vovič’s “Coincidences”), odd and foreboding situations turn out to be a series of visual “coincidences” caused, we discover, by shifts in the observer’s point of view. In the third album, “*Igra*” Arkadija L’voviča (Arkadij L’vovič’s “Game”), each turn of the page reveals a different vista, plunging the viewer back in history, and finally concluding on the blank white page of *Drevnie neizvestnye vremena* (Ancient Unknown Times; see Figure 4). In the interspersed commentaries of Kašper, a fictional magazine editor, we hear of Gorochov’s contributions of comedic material for the magazine’s back pages. But strangely, even Kašper has never actually met Gorochov in the flesh, and he remains, like many of Kabakov’s album characters, dissolved in the cacophony of voices, disappearing entirely by the end, as if by magic.<sup>26</sup>

What to make of this anachronistic collection of jokes, coincidences, and games, where the past comes hurtling back in all its quaint and antiquated forms? Who is Gorochov and why does he cling to fragments of the past at the expense of his own appearance in the present? Is this a reminder of trials endured (the memory of Stalinist terror made tame) or a re-investment of old forms with new purpose (a productive mining of the pre-Revolutionary past)? In Jackson’s reading, Gorochov’s album is a contest between two inadequate epistemologies, “self-satisfied knowing and disruptive ignorance”.<sup>27</sup> In this world, any philosophical proposition is sooner or later swept away by an unruly joke, giving birth to more propositions swept away by more jokes in an infinite regress that “models the Futurist conception of art”.<sup>28</sup> In this reading, Gorochov, “playing anti-Hegel, suggests that art will no longer furnish the raw material for philosophy”.<sup>29</sup> Instead, philosophy and art are grist for the mill in the production of laughter.

Describing his album production, Kabakov enumerates the cultural *мифемы* (mythememes) that each of the albums in *Desjat’ personažej* comes to embody.<sup>30</sup> *Šutnik*, according to the list, expresses the idea of “Глупость, неподвижение в глубину в шутке; ирония, которая только по виду многозначительна со всеми своими намеками. Особая пошлая эфемерность всякого остроумия” (“Stupidity, lack of movement into the depth of a joke, irony that only seems to be full of meaning with all of its innuendo. The special, low impermanence of any witticism”).<sup>31</sup> As with Vladimir Nabokov’s description of *pošlost’* as the “unobvious sham, [...] not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive”, Kabakov’s joker is falsely meaningful, falsely allusive, falsely significant of something beyond himself.<sup>32</sup> *Kommentarii Kogana* (Kogan’s Comment) from the concluding section, *Obščij kommentarij* (General Commentary), associates a similarly fallacious quality to jokes, an illusion of depth that runs up against the reality of shallowness. The fictional Kogan opines:

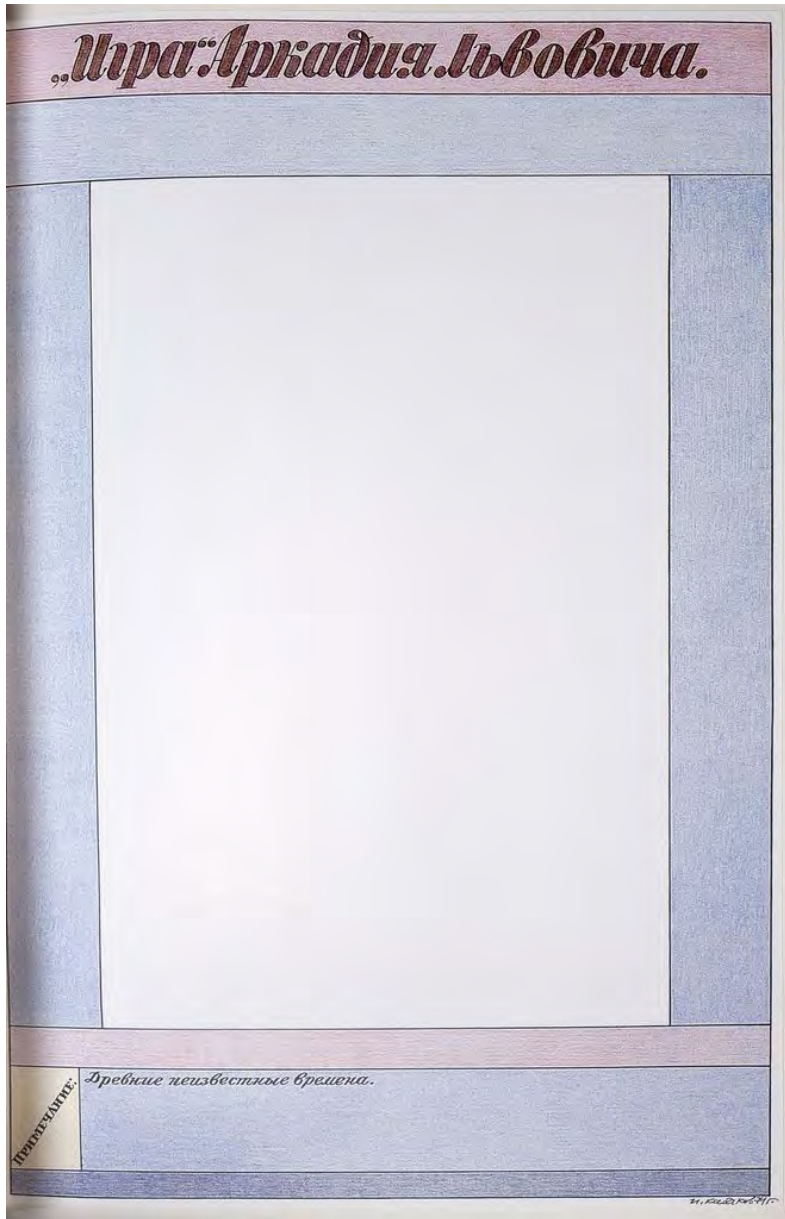


Fig. 4. Il'ja Kabakov, *Drevnie neizvestnye vremena*, 1974, from the album *Šutnik Gorochov*.



Шутейство, если о нем говорить как о какой-то “философской установке”, просто состоит в том, что под самым верхним, доступным всем слоем смысла устанавливается другой, нижний, который прорывает, дискредитирует первый. Но к дальнейшему продвижению в глубину это не приводит, и все остается на поверхности, в этих двух слоях, которые бесконечно играют друг с другом.

Joking, if we talk about it as some kind of “philosophical proposition”, simply means that another, lower layer of meaning breaks through and discredits the first, uppermost surface layer of meaning that is accessible to everyone. But this does not lead to any further profundity, but rather, everything remains on the surface in these two layers which play endlessly with one another.<sup>33</sup>

If Gorochov’s jokes are futuristic, it is an aimless sort of futurism, one in which laughter may well sweep away all it encounters, but remains powerless to make sense of the past or progress toward the future. It is instead an endless recapitulation, punctuating a present that teeters on the edge of triviality and outright bad taste.

Svetlana Boym has elaborated the idea of *pošlost’* – what Kabakov here links to shallowness, triviality, and laughter – as one side in the battle between “*byt* (everyday routine and stagnation), and *bytie* (spiritual being)”.<sup>34</sup> The stakes in this battle between *pošlost’* and its vehement critique are no less than “the definition of Russian identity, both national and cultural. The usage encompasses attitudes toward material culture and historical change, and it determines ethical values [...]”.<sup>35</sup> Gorochov’s obsession with the past, the fragments of family lore, jokes, games, trifles, balloon rides, teacakes, incidents at a summer camp, flying rose-bushes, menacing flies, and fantastic fables would all seem to be permanent residents in the realm of *pošlost’*, embedded in the world of nineteenth-century novels, Soviet children’s books, jokes over tea, and the everyday domain of *byt*. If Kogan’s theorizing is any indication, *Šutnik Gorochov* is a sly send-up of Soviet *byt* inflected in the key of popular literature and laughter. But rather than a futurist or revolutionary critique of bourgeois forms of life, Kabakov’s laughter telescopes from present to past and back again, picking through the ruins of pre-Revolutionary and Soviet *byt* with the fascination of a garbage-picker or Walter Benjamin’s book collector.<sup>36</sup>

### *Metaphysical Comedy*

Amid this endless procession of jokes, there are moments in Gorochov’s albums that go beyond the amusing coincidence or fantastical fable, that are not so easily displaced by the next gambit or put out of mind. These moments

suggest the metaphysical, the mysteries underlying perceived and experienced reality, and in this way, they exceed the categories of *byt* or *pošlost'* and gesture toward *bytie*. They include: *Šestikrylyj serafim* (*The Six-Winged Seraphim*, see Figure 5), a translucent sheet that, when lifted, reveals *Slučaj v Ėrmitaže* (*The Incident at the Hermitage*, see Figure 6), in which, according to the caption, “в четверг, 8 апреля, перед самым закрытием музея, восемь человек внезапно поднялись в воздух и образовали восьмиконечную звезду” (“on Thursday, April 8, right before the museum’s closing, eight people suddenly lifted into the air and formed an eight-sided star”); the empty whiteness of *Drevnie neizvestnye vremena* (see Figure 4) concluding “*Igra*” *Arkadija L’voviča*; and Gorochov’s mysterious disappearance at the end of *Šutnik Gorochov*, which piques, but does not quite confirm, our suspicion and Kašper’s that Gorochov never really existed, and by extension, neither do we.<sup>37</sup> These moments of mystery gesturing toward the sacred, the extra-historical, or simply inexplicable all signal the presence of another world beyond *byt*, the real possibility of depth, profundity, a world beyond joking or the play of surfaces.

Kabakov’s album production dates entirely to the 1970s, with *Desjat’ personažej* occupying his attention almost singularly in the first half of the decade. Kabakov writes of this time as being marked by a strange, widespread tendency toward spiritualism: “какое-то склонное к космизму сознание, особый интерес к высоким, неземным, сверхчувственным флюидам” (“a consciousness prone to cosmism, harboring a special interest in higher, unearthly, supersensible fluids”).<sup>38</sup> The disillusionment following the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968, the inability of the planned economy to meet the demands of an increasingly urban, educated population, and the abandonment of the grand historical teleology and utopian promises of previous decades all led to a growing malaise.<sup>39</sup> For many, this spelled an inward turn in search of higher meaning outside party, history, or the prevailing atmosphere of consumerism, palpable, as Kabakov writes, in:

[...] необычайно метафизическом, странном, особом воздухе, даже можно сказать, климате, который царил как бы над Москвой с конца 60-х до середины 70-х годов и который как бы захватил умы или, точнее сказать, сознание определенной части художественной, и не только художественной, “общественности”.

[...] an extraordinarily metaphysical, strange, particular air, or we can even say climate, which reigned over Moscow from the end of the 1960s and until the middle of the 1970s, and which seemed to have seized the minds, or more precisely, the consciousness of a particular part of the artistic, and not just artistic, “public sphere”.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 5. Il'ja Kabakov, *Šestikrylyj serafim*, 1973, from the album *Šutnik Goročov*.



Fig. 6. Il'ja Kabakov, *Slučaj v Ėrmitaže*, 1973, from the album *Šutnik Goročov*.

For Kabakov and his circle, this spiritualism and metaphysical mood expressed itself both in the never-ending conversations that suffused their frequent gatherings and in works of a wide variety of aesthetic positions, from abstract painting to conceptual albums of the type I have been describing. What might be read as the pure irony of Kabakov's meticulous reproduction of Soviet communal *byt*, in the unofficial artistic culture of the early 1970s, cannot be read without considering a metaphysical dimension that transcends the frame of the artwork.

This dynamic of *byt/bytie* underpins the performances of Collective Actions (*Kollektivnye dejstvija*), a group of Moscow Conceptualists of a slightly younger generation than Kabakov, who began staging minimal, anti-theatrical actions in the fields and forests on the edge of Moscow in the spring of 1976. Collective Actions events always began with invitations requesting the viewers' presence at a determined time and place. With no knowledge of what was to come, the invitees experienced a sense of anticipation as they journeyed by commuter train and made their way through the landscape to arrive at the place of action. The action itself – or rather, the demonstrational part of the action – was rarely very long or especially eventful. In most actions, such simple phenomena as the appearance of a figure in the distance, movement across a field, or the pulling of a rope out of the forest became the focus of intensified attention that gave the performances at times the sense of something extraordinary taking place.

Two early actions, *Komedija* (*Comedy*; October 2, 1977) and *Tretij variant* (*The Third Variant*; May 28, 1978) could be considered close relatives of *Šutnik Goročov* for the ways that they restaged tropes of popular amusement to oscillate between ordinary, even *pošlyj* laughter and the metaphysical experience of intensified sensorial perception. In *Komedija*, two figures – one tall and draped in an ochre-colored cloth, the other shorter, dressed in street clothes, and following behind holding the draped figure's train – appeared on an empty field and began to move in the direction of the audience. When approximately 80 meters away, they stopped to face the viewers, the second figure climbed under the drapery, and they continued to move as one across the field. When the draped figure stopped again and lifted the drapery, the second figure was no longer there (once hidden under the drapery, the second participant had lain down in a ditch out of the audience's sight). Having removed his costume, the standing figure turned and left the field. The other figure remained in the ditch until the audience departed (see Figure 7).<sup>41</sup> A similar scene of conjury played out in *Tretij variant*. A figure draped in violet appeared from the forest, crossed the field, and lay down in a ditch. After a few minutes, a second figure, also draped in violet but with a red balloon for a head, appeared from a ditch in a different part of the field. He then proceeded to pierce the balloon, producing a cloud of white dust, and lay back down. At that moment, the first figure stood up from the original



ditch, now wearing ordinary street clothes, filled the ditch in with dirt, and disappeared into the forest from which he had come (see Figure 8).<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 7. Kollektivnye dejstvija, *Komedija*, October 2, 1977.



Fig. 8. Kollektivnye dejstvija, *Tretij variant*, May 28, 1978.

In the first volume of Collective Actions' documentary materials, *Poezdki za gorod* (*Trips out of the City*), the group describes these early performances as anti-demonstrational settings for meditation on the viewer's own consciousness. "[У] нас нет задачи что-либо 'показать' участникам-зрителям," they write in the preface. "Задача состоит в том, чтобы сохранить впечатление от ожидания как от важного, значимого события" ("Our goal is not to 'show' something to the viewer-participants. The goal consists in preserving the sense of anticipation as of an important, meaningful event").<sup>43</sup> More than any of the group's other actions, *Komedija* and *Tretij variant* underscore the disjunction between theatricality and spiritual experience, between "showing something" to an audience and inviting the audience to experience an "important and meaningful event". Like Gorochov's family clowns, *Komedija* and *Tretij variant*'s draped figures, stage-like situations, and sleight-of-hand illusions evoke popular entertainments or *Commedia dell'arte* spectacles. The spectacle, however, like Gorochov's joking, serves as a decoy. "[Т]о, что нам демонстрировалось," the preface continues, "на самом деле было демонстрацией нашего восприятия – и ничего больше" ("The thing that was being demonstrated was in reality a demonstration of our perception and nothing else").<sup>44</sup> In this way, the spectacle shapes the outward form of the artwork and mediates reception in a familiar, even clichéd way, while at the same time pointing to the possibility of some deeper meaning beyond these habitual and culturally codified forms of reception.

Acknowledging the limits of artistic experience to access the spiritual – Gorochov's disappearance, the empty album page – Collective Actions write:

Следует оговориться, что в этом предисловии мы рассматриваем только одну, поверхностную часть всей ситуации, то есть "для зрителя" и более менее связанную с *эстетическими проблемами*. Внутренний смысл ее, связанный с главной целью акций, а именно, *получением определенного духовного опыта*, по существу своему не знакового, и который имеет реальное значение исключительно для действующих на поле устроителей, здесь не рассматривается.

We should clarify that in this preface, we are considering only one, superficial part of the entire situation, the part "for the viewers" that is more or less related to *aesthetic problems*. Its inner meaning, which is related to the main goal of the action, namely, *the attainment of a particular spiritual experience* – in its essence not signifiable – and which has real significance exclusively for those organizers acting in the field, is not considered here.<sup>45</sup>

Here, the limits of the aesthetic are revealed. They mask a more profound level of experience (*bytie*) that does not yield to documentation or analysis and is only gestured at by the mundane act of watching figures move through a field or laughing at the popping of a red balloon.

The Conceptualist turn in Moscow in the 1970s was more complicated than either its name or the notion of ironic subversion would imply. As Jackson has argued, it was, in one sense, a reaction to the prevailing artistic situation in Moscow, a working-out of positions “in a no-man’s-land between an unattainable modernist subjectivity and the awfulness of Soviet reality”.<sup>46</sup> The struggle with metaphysical questions pervaded many corners of unofficial life, from underground religious fellowships to the spiritually-infused abstract paintings of Michail Švarcman or Ėduard Štejnberg.<sup>47</sup> For Kabakov, Collective Actions, and their circle, however, the metaphysical represented a separate realm, invoked in, but essentially beyond the reach of the aesthetic. If the utopian impulse of Malevič’s *Black Square* was once again decoupled from the practical imperatives of political and cultural revolution in its post-war reception, this utopianism did not find a direct counterpart in Moscow Conceptualism.<sup>48</sup> While alluding to the clichés of everyday Soviet life in what can be called “muted irony”, Kabakov’s albums, Collective Actions’ performances, and many other examples of Moscow Conceptualist activity, carved out spaces for non-instrumental aesthetic experience and spiritual feeling within the Soviet everyday.<sup>49</sup> Through such “useless actions” as turning the page of an album or watching figures in a field, this strain of Moscow Conceptualism suggested a re-investment of everyday perception with a fullness and meaningfulness that seemed to be lacking in the “cold, grey, indistinct absurdity” of Moscow in the 1970s.<sup>50</sup>

### *Senseless Laughter*

While laughter may have attended the performance of Kabakov’s albums or Collective Actions’ events and enlivened the circle’s social atmosphere, it would be misleading to say that laughter comprised their primary aesthetic strategy, as the previous examples demonstrate. However, the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s saw a turning point in unofficial art in Moscow away from the seriousness of “black-and-white conceptualism” of the concluding decade and toward a mood of giddy, multicolored festivity. Nikita Alekseev (another member of Collective Actions) recalls these years as a time of “плясание и тусовка” (“dancing and socializing”).<sup>51</sup> As Pankov suggests, the change was hastened by the appearance of a new generation, often referred to as the “Нью-вэв” (New-wave), for whom Kabakov, Collective Actions, and their circle were a formidable, but outmoded tradition. The most radical of this youth wave were *Muchomor*, a group of five young men refusing to be called artists and resembling “тикающую



толпу новобранцев” (“a hooting crowd of new conscripts”) who wrote poems, painted each other’s portraits, staged performances, sang songs, and produced suitcases full of drawings, lyrics, and hand-made books.<sup>52</sup> Deriving their name from the *Amanita muscaria*, commonly known as the fly agaric mushroom ( “мухомор” in Russian), the Muchomors pursued a carnivalesque strategy that drew on the countercultural undertones of the well-knownentheogen and subject of popular culture and children’s books.

With laughter as an all-pervasive tactic, the *Muchomors* mounted a two-pronged attack on both Soviet mass culture in its verbal and visual forms and on the unofficial artistic tradition from which they had sprung and within which they located themselves. In this way, they combined images ironically mimicking official propaganda with mocking treatments of their artistic predecessors, who were still very much present. One of the Moscow art world’s earliest encounters with this outrageous, undifferentiating laughter took place in the spring of 1979 at a gathering of the “seminar”, which was held regularly at the apartment of Alik Čačko and attracted many of Moscow’s unofficial luminaries, including Kabakov, Bulatov, Čujkov, poets Dmitrij Prigov, Lev Rubinštejn, and Vsevolod Nekrasov, critic Boris Grojs, among others.<sup>53</sup> The five young members of the group, brought by the Gerlovins and Monastyrskij to host a “literary-artistic evening”, proceeded to stage a merry jubilee for the fictional lieutenant Rževskij, hero of drama and sexually explicit jokes, complete with crude pictures, readings in honor of Rževskij, and tape recordings propagandizing the group.<sup>54</sup> Over the next five years, the group continued its assaults, staging performances closely resembling those of Collective Actions, but with a playfully sardonic edge.

In one performance, *Raskopki (Excavation; May 27, 1979)*, the meditative mysticism and obsession with documentation of Collective Actions’ *Komedija* or *Tretij variant* took on a shocking tone when a large group of viewers, invited to a field to dig for buried treasure, unearthed a coffin containing the nearly suffocating *Muchomor* member, Sven Gundlach, feverishly taking down his immediate impressions (see Figures 9-10).<sup>55</sup> Another action, *Rasstrel (nakazanie) (Firing Squad [Punishment]; September 15, 1979)*, turned its aggression on the audience, when members of the group wearing army uniforms complete with rifles and gas masks marched all 67 invitees for an hour, choosing one nineteen-year-old audience member to be “punished” by firing squad.<sup>56</sup> The “guilty party” was then taken into the forest and an actual rifle shot was heard, leaving the audience extremely disturbed. For many in the circle, these scandalous actions were beyond the pale of what could be considered art. For Gundlach, however, proper artistic boundaries were beside the point. He experienced the 1970s as a crisis, “начиная с тенденции превратить искусство в псевдорелигиозную практику и кончая с повальной эмиграцией” (“beginning with the tendency to transform art into a pseudo-religious practice and ending with the epidemic of emigration”). Not

only that, but Gundlach had experienced the horror of being pursued by the authorities from the time he was an adolescent, when he had been targeted to become an informant by the KGB.<sup>57</sup> To work in the style of the “героический период’ невещественного, неосязаемого, неуловимого” (“heroic period’ of the immaterial, the intangible, the elusive”), so emblematic of 1970s Conceptualism, was no longer possible.<sup>58</sup>



Fig. 9. Muchomor, *Raskopki*, May 27, 1979.

The change of mood around the turn of the 1980s was palpable not just in art, but in society more broadly. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the preparations for the Moscow Olympics in 1980, and the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland in the same year all contributed to renewed restrictions on public life in Moscow and a disciplinary attitude to underground culture not seen since the early 1970s.<sup>59</sup> Artists who had been published in *A-Ya* were subject to close surveillance and warned to have nothing to do with the journal.<sup>60</sup> The *Aptart* gallery, opened in Alekseev’s apartment in October 1982 and housing the pageant-like installations of the young New-wavers, suddenly came under official scrutiny and closed after only five months (see Figure 11).<sup>61</sup> Alekseev and Michail Fedorov-Rořal’, an *Aptart* collaborator, sustained home searches and interrogations. By 1984,

three *Muchomors* had been conscripted into the army and forced to leave Moscow.<sup>62</sup>



Fig. 10. Muchomor, *Raskopki*, May 27, 1979.

It is no surprise, then, that political themes began to appear in New-wave artwork in a way not generally seen in the 1970s. *Muchomor* actions alluding to Soviet militarism and the threat of nuclear war directly addressed the disparity between Soviet rhetoric and political reality.<sup>63</sup> The Soviet attack on a South Korean passenger plane in September 1983 inspired an *Aptart* exhibition *Pobeda nad solncem* (*Victory over the Sun*).<sup>64</sup> Even some of the most seemingly juvenile works, like Vadim Zacharov's *Sloniki* (*Little Elephants*; 1981-1982), allude to the politics at the core of Soviet experience (see Figures 12-13). In this performance, represented by a set of four black-and-white photographs set in a plain domestic interior, Zacharov, crouching in a corner and dressed in the shirt and tie of a fashionable young man, employs various methods of "neutralizing" a set of porcelain elephant figurines ubiquitous in Soviet domestic interiors. He tries incorporating them into his body (stuffing them in his ears, nose, and mouth); integrating his body into their order (serving as their display shelf); and pushing them away (throwing them up in the air, only to have them fall back down on his chest).

But in the end, the elephants prove too strong a symbol, and sullen-faced, he declares, “любое сопротивление слонам бесполезно. Слоны мешают жить” (“any resistance to elephants is futile. Elephants get in the way of life”).<sup>65</sup> The war against domestic trash, including faience figurines, “fat-bellied” petit-bourgeois furniture, and porcelain elephants, was, as Boym has argued, a crucial front in the early Soviet construction of *New Byt*, the new Communist everyday life.<sup>66</sup> Parodying this battle against bourgeois kitsch, Zacharov’s *Sloniki* are paradigmatic of the younger generation’s attitude to Revolutionary politics. Unlike Sots-art, which sought to deconstruct the codes of Soviet ideology, the carnivalesque quality of *Muchomor* and *Aptart* spectacles went further by destroying sense as such, plunging viewers into a visual and verbal confusion that elicited intense emotional reactions spanning both laughter and outrage. While ridiculing the earnestness of Revolutionary fervor, their works rejected escape to higher realms through the aesthetic. Pinning the viewer with a look of deadpan derision, Zacharov knows with the clarity of hindsight that escape is futile. Elephants are a problem for which the aesthetic has little recourse.



Fig. 11. Aptart, installation view.





Fig. 12. Vadim Zacharov, *Sloniki*, 1981-1982.



Fig. 13. Vadim Zacharov, *Sloniki*, 1981-1982.

### Conclusion

In his study of Rabelais, Michail Bachtin associates carnival laughter with the material body and with the breaking down of old, petrified forms. “Laughter degrades and materializes,” he writes.<sup>67</sup> It opposes the seriousness of official culture with sensuous and playful elements whose parody of the world reveals its relativity and foments its rebirth.<sup>68</sup> Extending Bachtin’s observations into the sphere of cultural politics, Peter Sloterdijk suggests a return to the kynical tradition of aggressive and shameless bodily gestures (“the kynic farts, shits, pisses, masturbates on the street, before the eyes of the Athenian market”) as the materialist deployment of laughter and parody in the service of social criticism and resistance to hegemonic power.<sup>69</sup> Both theorists see laughter as a potentially active force of political resistance emerging from the unofficial realm in the face of established, repressive institutional structures.

The discursive field on which the New-wave generation of Moscow Conceptualists operated was two-fold. On one level, it responded to the local artistic discourse of the Moscow Conceptualist circle, articulated in artworks, actions, constant discussions in apartments and studios, and texts passed around in samizdat manuscripts and sometimes published in the West.<sup>70</sup> On another, like the older generation, it addressed the broader ideological field of Soviet everyday life and institutions, including official language and representations as well as the ordinary conditions of *byt*. That the younger generation turned to laughter as a strategy on both fronts marked a significant change in the relationship between art and politics in Moscow Conceptualist art. If Kabakov and Collective Actions could be said to have worked in the gap between art and life – by straddling works of art and ordinary objects, or significant, meaningful actions in the field and everyday being in the world – to gesture toward and preserve space for the metaphysical, then *Muchomor* and the *Aptart* movement seemed to insist on obliterating the distinction altogether through the kynic strategy of sense-destroying laughter.

Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak identifies a particular sort of absurd, ironic laughter as both prevalent in and specific to late-Soviet culture.<sup>71</sup> Although these humorous genres could operate in aesthetic fields (Yurchak mentions *Mit’ki* and the Necrorealists, though *Muchomor* would also qualify), he argues for a more expansive reading of ironic laughter as a “symptom of the broader cultural shifts that occurred in late-Soviet society”.<sup>72</sup> Arising from the encounter with the paradoxes of everyday Soviet life, this form of humor “refus[ed] to accept any boundary between seriousness and humor, support and opposition, sense and nonsense” and instead “engaged with the same paradoxes and discontinuities of the system, exposing them, reproducing them, changing their meanings, and pushing them further”.<sup>73</sup> This characterization of a radical subjection of everyday life and art to ironic procedures describes well the activities of *Muchomor* and *Aptart*. What unnerved

Panitkov about these activities – *Muchomor*'s indifference to artistic boundaries or standards, their “unstoppable energy” that refused to discriminate between aesthetic practice, political propaganda, and kitsch – was precisely what, according to Yurchak and consistent with Bakhtin and Sloterdijk, endowed this kind of humor with its critical edge.

Here, finally, lies the crux of Panitkov's objection to *Muchomor*, the stakes of his passionate polemic. If senseless laughter levels all categories, disregards boundaries, and refuses to play by the rules, then Moscow Conceptualism itself is yet another category to be flaunted, another “armored, self-preserving, and rationalizing ego” that the kynic body subjects to its attack.<sup>74</sup> In this sense, Panitkov is correct in his assessment that the *Muchomors*' senseless laughter spelled the downfall of Moscow Conceptualism, even while the two generations socialized in the same circles, distributed their texts in the same editions, and showed their work in the same exhibition spaces. That the *Muchomors* no longer respected the aesthetic as an autonomous sphere with important spiritual/metaphysical potential, however, means that such a downfall was of little concern in any case. If we look at the bigger picture, however, there were many factors that contributed to a shift away from Conceptualist strategies as they were practiced in the 1970s, the most significant of which were the ability to travel to the West and the opening up of the unofficial art world to the Western art market in the mid- and late-1980s. Moreover, both *Muchomor* and *Aptart* were fairly short-lived phenomena cut short by KGB pressure. I would argue that it was not internal conflicts or artistic debates – useless action versus senseless laughter – that destroyed Moscow Conceptualism, but outside forces, like emigration, government pressure in the early 1980s, and the Western art market, that ultimately spelled the end of unofficial art as a whole.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See for example, Groys, Hollein, Fontán del Junco (2008).
- <sup>2</sup> I should say outright that my interest here lies in Moscow Conceptualism in visual and performance art, not poetry or literary fiction. This is a somewhat artificial distinction, since artists and poets moved in overlapping circles and maintained a close dialogue. For various reasons, however, it is a distinction that has prevailed in the literature and produced two different bodies of criticism with rather different emphases. (Scholarship on literary conceptualism, for example, tends to link it more closely with Sots-Art and focuses on issues such as literary genres, discourse analysis, and poetics.) On literary con-



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ceptualism, see Epstein, Genis, Vladiv-Glover (1999); Lipovetsky (1999); Balina, Condee, Dobrenko (2000).

3 “Moscow Conceptualism” is a widely accepted variation of the term first  
coined by Boris Groys in his article ‘Moscow Romantic Conceptualism’  
4 (1979: 3-11). See also Groys (2006: 408-409).

5 The Sretenskij Bul’var circle loosely included Èrik Bulatov, Il’ja Kabakov,  
Viktor Pivovarov, Oleg Vasil’ev, Ulo Sooster, Ivan Čujkov, Èduard Štejn-  
berg, and Vladimir Jankilevskij. See Alpatova, Taločkin, Tamruči (2005:  
6 138).

7 For more on this incident, whose dramatic circumstances and coverage in the  
Western press earned it the name Bulldozer Exhibition, see Hoptman,  
Pospiszyl (2002: 65-77); Glezer (1977).

8 On Komar and Melamid’s Sots-Art Conceptualism, see Ratcliff (1988). On  
The Nest, see Alpatova (2008).

9 For more on individual artists and groups, see Alpatova et al. (2005);  
Margarita Tupitsyn (1989); Degot’ (2000); Viktor Tupitsyn (2009). On Mos-  
cow Conceptualism specifically, see Bobrinskaja (1994); Tamruchi (1995);  
Degot’, Zacharov (2005); Groys et al. (2008); Jackson (2010); Groys (2010).

10 The desire to document this tradition gave birth to *MANI, Moskovskij archiv  
novogo iskusstva* (Moscow Archive of New Art), whose first volume came  
out in February 1981.

11 This new wave included the *Muchomor* (Toadstool) group (Sven Gundlach,  
Aleksej Kamenskij, Sergej and Vladimir Mironenko, and Konstantin  
Zvezdočetov); *SZ* (Viktor Skersis and Vadim Zacharov); Jurij Al’bert; as well  
as other artists associated with the Aptart gallery. See M. Tupitsyn (1989: 98-  
12 115); Obuchova (2004); and Silaeva (2007).

13 Compare, for example, the list of contributors to *MANI* or *A-Ya* with the  
slightly different artists considered by Bobrinskaja (1994), Degot’, Zacharov  
(2005), and Groys et al. (2008).

14 The various waves of Moscow Conceptualism’s reception are a subject that  
deserves separate consideration. This exhibition history includes, among  
others, *Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late  
Communism* (Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA and The Institute of  
Contemporary Art, Boston, 1990); *Moskauer Konzeptualismus: Sammlung  
Haralampi G. Oroschakoff & Sammlung, Verlag und Archiv Vadim Zakharov*  
(Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, 2003); *Angels of History: Moscow Conceptua-  
lism and Its Influence* (Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerpen, 2005);  
*Total Enlightenment: Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960-1990* (Schirn Kunst-  
halle, Frankfurt am Main; Fundación Juan March, Madrid, 2009); *Field of  
Action: The Moscow Conceptual School in Context, 1970s-1980s* (Ekaterina  
Cultural Foundation, Moscow; Calvert 22, London, 2010-2011).

15 See Monastyrskij, Panitkov (2010). Unless otherwise indicated, all trans-  
lations of Russian texts are my own.

- 13 See *smejus'* and *chóchot* in *Vasmer's Etymological Dictionary* (1998). Compare also to the English "ha ha", meaning "to laugh aloud", in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2012).
- 14 The Russian Futurist echo here is of course to Velimir Chlebnikov's 'Zaklinanie smechem' (1909), which belies the *smech/chóchot* distinction somewhat. Nonetheless, as Anca Parvulescu reads it, Chlebnikov's use of *smech* acquires its incantatory, public quality in part by the onomatopoeia produced through the repetition of *ch* sounds, a condition that is already present in *chóchot*. See Parvulescu (2010: 1-4).  
Jackson (2010: 64-66, 74-75).
- 15 See Il'ja Kabakov (2008: 121-151, 356-357).
- 16 *Ibid.*, 136-137.
- 17 On the collective in Soviet unofficial art and Moscow Conceptualism, see V. Tupitsyn (2009).
- 18 The dating of the albums varies slightly by source. In *60-70-e...*, Kabakov gives, variously, 1970-1975 and 1972-1975 as the dates for the *Desjat' personažej* cycle (2008: 131-132, 356); however he also writes that the "theme-images" that formed the cycle's basis emerged and were recorded in 1970, making the earlier date the more likely (137). *Šutnik Goročov* is reproduced in full in Kabakov (1994: 50-105).
- 19 On the political implications of illicit jokes, or *anekdoty*, see Graham (2009).  
Kabakov (1994: 52).
- 20 *Ibid.*, 53. In fact, this is only a paraphrase of the incident. There is no such pronouncement addressed directly to the sun in Twain's text or in its Russian translation by Kornej Čukovskij. See Twain (1950).
- 21 Kabakov (1994: 105).
- 22 Graham (2009: 8).
- 23 Jackson (2010: 145-150).
- 24 Kabakov (1994: 101).
- 25 Jackson (2010: 146).
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Kabakov (2008: 136-138).
- 29 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 30 Nabokov (1961: 70); quoted in Boym (1994: 41).
- 31 Kabakov (1994: 103).
- 32 Boym (1994: 29).
- 33 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 34 Benjamin (1999: 486-493). Benjamin's book collector, in his nostalgia and romantic relationship to ownership, of course, could be said to exhibit a high degree of *pošlost'*.
- 35 Kabakov (1994: 68-69; 99; 101).
- 36 Kabakov (2008: 132).
- 37 For historical and social perspectives on the period, see Kotkin (2001); Raleigh (2012).

- 40 Kabakov (2008: 132).
- 41 *Kollektivnye dejstvija* (1998: 27). For additional documentary photographs as well as descriptive texts and other related material, see <<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions.html>>. Last accessed April 11, 2012.
- 42 *Kollektivnye dejstvija* (1998: 28). For additional photographs see <<http://conceptualism.letov.ru/KD-actions-9.html>>. Last accessed April 11, 2012.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 23-24. Emphasis added.
- 46 Jackson (2010: 109).
- 47 On Švarcman, Štejnberg, and other unofficial modernists of the 1960s and 1970s, see Alpatova et al. (2005); Degot' (2005: 159-164).
- 48 On the utopianisms of the artistic and political avant-gardes, see Buck-Morss (2002: 42-67). For a slightly different reading of the reception of utopianism in the 1970s and 1980s, see Groys (1992: 75-112).
- 49 Collective Actions' slogan actions from 1977 and 1978 might be characterized as displaying a muted irony. In 1977, the group hung up a red sheet with the following words emblazoned on it in white lettering: "Я ни на что не жалуюсь и мне все нравится, несмотря на то, что я здесь никогда не был и не знаю ничего об этих местах" ("I do not complain about anything and I like everything, despite the fact that I have never been here before and know nothing about these parts"). In 1978, they hung another sheet, this time blue, with the words: "Странно, зачем я лгал самому себе, что я здесь никогда не был и не знаю ничего об этих местах, – ведь на самом деле здесь так же как везде, только еще острее это чувствуешь и глубже не понимаешь" ("Strange, why did I lie to myself that I have never been here before and know nothing about these parts, when here is just like everywhere else, you just feel it more sharply and more deeply don't understand"). These poetic riffs on the contingency of place, executed first in the form of an official proclamation, but then diverging from this form in the "off" color of blue, are quite different in their relationship to Soviet ideological language from such truly ironic works as Komar and Melamid's white on red slogan pieces *Our Goal Is Communism!* or *Ideal Slogan* (both 1972).
- 50 Alekseev (2008: 148). For a number of retrospective accounts of the decade from members of the Moscow underground, see Kizeval'ter (2010).
- 51 Alekseev (2008: 165). One of the best descriptions of this period can be found in Alekseev's memoir, *Rjady pamjati*. As a member of both Collective Actions and the New-wave (his apartment housed its short-lived but groundbreaking exhibition space, the *Apart* gallery), Alekseev is uniquely able to convey the atmosphere of these years. See also Andrew Solomon's first-hand account of the period, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost* (1991).
- 52 This characterization comes from Rimma and Valery Gerlovin, who introduced the *Muchomors* to the Moscow Conceptualist circle. See their statement in Alpatova et al. (2005: 266). For information on the *Muchomors*

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- and the New-wave, see individual entries in Alpatova et al. (2005); Alekseev (2008); Solomon (1991); Gundlach (1983: 3-5); V. Tupitsyn (1989: 98-115). See also the recently published volume of primary texts: *Muchomor* (2010).
- 53 See Groys's description of the seminar in Groys, Vidokle (2006: 403-404); see also Alekseev (2008: 106-107).
- 54 According to accounts, the audience reaction was stunned silence until Kabakov suddenly pronounced the spectacle "genius". See Alekseev (2008: 106-107); Alpatova et al. (2005: 268). For an alternative account of the evening's reception, see Vladimir Mironenko and Konstantin Zvezdočotov's dialogue in *Muchomor* (2010: 113-115).
- 55 Alpatova et al. (2005: 270); and *Muchomor* (2010: 149-153).
- 56 Alpatova et al. (2005: 271); and *Muchomor* (2010: 154-155).
- 57 Solomon (1991: 101-103).
- 58 Gundlach (1983: 3). The English translation has been slightly modified for accuracy.
- 59 Alekseev (2008: 160). See also Krečmar (1997: 127-182).
- 60 Solomon (1991: 109).
- 61 Alekseev (2008: 168-187). See also *Apt Art: Moscow Vanguard in the 80s* (1985).
- 62 Alpatova et al. (2005: 337).
- 63 See, for example, the *Muchomor* action "Ėksperiment! Proekt zaščity ot nejtronnogo oružija!" ("Experiment! Project of Defense against Neutron Weapons"; April 1983), documented in *MANI* (Moskovskij archiv novogo iskusstva) (1982, 4, envelope 18). See also Alpatova et al. (2005: 321); and many of the poems, drawings, and actions reproduced in the *Muchomor* volume.
- 64 Alekseev (2010: 174); Alpatova et al. (2005: 326-327).
- 65 See *Vadim Zacharov: 25 let na odnoj stranice* (2006: 40-41). See also documentation in *MANI* (1981, 2, June, folder 17).
- 66 Boym (1994: 32-40).
- 67 Bakhtin (1984: 20).
- 68 Bakhtin (1984: 4-23).
- 69 Sloterdijk (1987: 103).
- 70 One major outlet was the journal *A-Ya: Unofficial Russian Art Revue*, published in Paris by Igor' Šelkovskij between 1979 and 1987. Reprinted as Šelkovskij (2004).
- 71 Yurchak (2006).
- 72 *Ibid.*, 244.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 243.
- 74 Huysen (1987: xviii).

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## LAUGHTER AT THE OPERA HOUSE: THE CASE OF PROKOF'EV'S *THE LOVE FOR THREE ORANGES*

ANNA NISNEVICH

### Abstract

This essay traces the diverse sources and fates of the pursuit of laughter in Sergei Prokof'ev's first full-length opera *The Love for Three Oranges* (1921) – arguably the composer's only pronounced take on modernism. Conceived and composed during the turbulent times of war and exile, the opera at once harked back to the pre-revolutionary Petersburg theater suffused with historical homage, and leaped forward to the amnesiac ebullience of the interwar modernist stage. In a series of examples, I demonstrate Prokof'ev's distinctive ways of generating comedy, the multi-media techniques that allowed, even if for a brief while, for a happy marriage between modernism and the up-and-coming Soviet “culture industry”.

Keywords: *Laughter; Prokof'ev; Comedy; Opera; The Love for Three Oranges; Meierkhol'd*

When Sergej Prokof'ev was running away from the Russian revolution in 1918, he took with him the script of Vsevolod Mejerchol'd's adaptation of Carlo Gozzi's *commedia dell'arte* *The Love for Three Oranges*. Three years later Prokof'ev's own *The Love for Three Oranges*, his first full-length opera, premiered, and pitifully flopped, in Chicago. In 1926 the same work was staged in Leningrad (with the author in absentia) to a great popular and critical acclaim. An effervescent rendition of an old tale of some hypochondriac Prince who, once he laughs, is allowed to embark on his

requisite quest for a Princess – an ostensibly aristocratic venture – this *The Love for Three Oranges* came to fit the bill of the new Soviet musical theater surprisingly well. The pursuit of laughter – the theme of Gozzi’s *commedia*, the mission of Mejerchol’d’s so-called “reflexive reading” of Gozzi, and the outcome of Prokof’ev’s play at modernist opera – has since become a major point of contention for the work’s changing producers, consumers and interpreters.

The current article sketches this pursuit from Mejerchol’d’s early attempts at regeneration of the Imperial stage to Prokof’ev’s own tackling of illusion and disillusionment to the reception of the opera in the young Soviet state. Demonstrating Prokof’ev’s distinctive ways of generating comedy, I zoom on the opera’s central comic act, the scene of the Prince’s laughter unfolding more as a pure kinaesthetic fact than as a calculated joke, and show how the composer’s new bodily approach to musical-theatrical representation triggered the spectators’ sensations in a most straightforwardly gripping way. Uniquely positioned at the junction of reflective and manipulative theatrical practices, Prokof’ev’s method enabled the sort of production which simultaneously looked back to the antiquated aristocratic theatrical practices and forward to the hygienic Soviet classicism, and in which a modernist quest for art’s autonomy came to be briefly yet happily married with the technocratic impulse of the emerging Soviet “culture industry”.

### *Reflexive Readings*

The plot of Prokof’ev’s *The Love for Three Oranges* is famously, and deliberately, incoherent. In some fantastical card kingdom a hypochondriac Prince needs to be cured in order to succeed his aging father the King of Clubs and rule the kingdom. The desolate King learns that (apparently) laughter is the best medicine for this sort of disease, and summons the buffoon Truffaldino to make the Prince laugh. However, the Prince’s hypochondria is not a natural occurrence, but a result of a conspiracy by the kingdom’s first minister Leandr who aspires to overtake the throne. Leandr in turn is a protégé of the evil sorceress Fata Morgana; he is literally her winning card in a card game with the magician Čelij who supports the King. When the Prince finally laughs, and thus regains his healthy royal presence, Fata Morgana casts a spell on him – as ludicrous as it is cryptic – condemning him to fall in love with three oranges. In the course of his bizarre quest for the three oranges the Prince passes through a horrid kitchen and a dreadful desert, finds, loses, and regains his Princess, and is left by his bride’s side at the opera’s end, watching silently as the rest of the characters chase each other on stage in the final imbroglio.

This plot’s incoherence stretches back to the Count Carlo Gozzi’s *fiaba L’amore delle tre melarance* (1761), the first attempt to revive the dying art

form of improvisatory *commedia dell'arte* during the era of the Enlightenment, that apotheosis of premeditation.<sup>1</sup> Instead of entering the war of arguments and thus moving on to the territory of his enemy, Gozzi took the high road of theatrical action. Displeased with the new brand of theater based on the audience's identification with the characters and their life stories – and most of all with the graceless realism of Carlo Goldoni that catered to the emergent bourgeois spectatorship – he insisted that “art in the construction of a piece, well-managed conduct of its action, propriety of rhetoric and harmony of diction were sufficient to invest [even] a puerile fantastic motive [...] with the illusion of reality, and to arrest the attention of the whole human race”.<sup>2</sup> Rather than merely privileging a collection of skillful antics over an enactment of a plausible story, Gozzi bet on the emotive force of the craft that was, in his words, “polished by centuries of practice”.<sup>3</sup> Resistant both to teleology and coherence, such favorite fairy-tale motifs as the doomed kingdom, conspiracy, the magic curse and the quest for love alone had been proven to stir the passions in the most palpable way. At a time when social and aesthetic distinction was being challenged from all possible sides, Gozzi aspired to preserve the world of the fabulous by means of his *fiabe*.

Around 1910 another era of aristocratic decline – one posthumously dubbed the Russian Silver Age – ushered another revival of the theater of yore in St. Petersburg. Nearly everyone associated with theater there sought to become a Gozzi. “We, the aristocrats of theater (perhaps the last aristocrats of theater!) [...] detect some perturbing symptoms in the life of this theater,” proclaimed Nikolaj Evreinov, a critic, dramatist, theater director, theorist, and a composer who once studied with Rimskij-Korsakov at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. “It is futile to seek a distinguished flourishing of theater arts in a democratic state,” he added. “The chorus of historical facts loudly sings to us that theater owes its emergence and development mainly to aristocracy, and the sad closing chords of same chorus demonstrate that when an aristocratic state is dying, so is its theater dying, gradually shrinking.”<sup>4</sup> Evreinov's musical metaphor of “closing chords” referred to the most recent bit of imperial history, a moment which Evreinov sought if not to overturn then at least to decelerate through the revival of old theatrical conventions. Proclaiming “the will to theatricality” one of humankind's basic instincts, he formed in 1907 the so-called “Starinnyj teatr” (“The Theater of Yore”), an enterprise sponsored by another theater aficionado (and, at the time, the editor of the *Yearbook of the Imperial Theaters*) baron Nikolaj Drizen. In the few productions this theater ever realized between 1907 and 1912, historians, literary scholars, theater directors, costume designers and composers satisfied their wills to theatricality through reconstructions of Medieval and Renaissance theaters.<sup>5</sup>

Evreinov's derisive view of democracy bespoke his fear of the inherent utilitarianism of everything that relied on rationalized quasi-egalitarian exist-

ence. In a grand meta-historical gesture he pitted the professed disinterestedness of the aristocratic theater against petty-bourgeois profit seeking:

I said: “only the hereditary aristocrat can largely become the true aristocrat of theater”. Why?

I think that the explanation of this fact lies in the very nature of hereditary aristocracy. Where the plebeian has to think carefully, to calculate, to grab a textbook, an encyclopedia or a counting device, the aristocrat already acts, boldly relying on his highly cultivated will-power, on the whole “select” experience of his ancestors, well skilled in the notions of higher order.<sup>6</sup>

A not-so-subtle ideologue of theatrical distinction, one who “recovered” Shakespeare’s aristocratic roots and “exposed” the merchant background of the co-originator of the Moscow Art Theater Konstantin Alekseev (better known as Konstantin Stanislavskij), Evreinov left little mark on theatrical practice. It fell to the theater director Vsevolod Mejerchol’d, then on the staff of the St. Petersburg Imperial Theaters, to look for practical ways of bringing exaltation back to the stage. Retaking the path once trod by Gozzi, the director initiated a new crusade against the excesses of subjectivity. “It is not an individual that theater needs but a virtuoso,”<sup>7</sup> Mejerchol’d declared, and went on to assert this position in theory, initiating in 1914 a scholarly discussion of conventional theater in the new journal, *The Love for Three Oranges*, and in practice, opening an experimental studio where he aspired to forge new acting virtuosos out of the spirit of the fabulous and the subject matter of the *commedia dell’arte*. Whether in a study room or on paper, Mejerchol’d’s students tried out various embodiments of conventional theatrical situations. Acting out curses, quarrels, or love scenes from classical plays by Gozzi, Lope de Vega, and Molière, they honed their skills of so-called “reflexive reading”. Endless practice of short interactive scenes constituted their schooling.<sup>8</sup> By privileging reflex over reflection, Mejerchol’d sought, among other things, to reinvigorate theater as an art of living rather than brooding. Even though he perceived his foes through a purely theatrical lens, he enabled the very distinction that Evreinov so bluntly conveyed. Confronting the motivational method of acting introduced by his teacher Stanislavskij, he also challenged the very grounds of this method: a belief in the primacy of thoughts over deeds.

The inaugural issue of the journal *The Love for Three Oranges* featured Mejerchol’d’s own adaptation of Gozzi’s first *fiaba* (conceived in collaboration with two theater historians, Vladimir Solov’ev and Konstantin Vogak) as a peculiar manifesto of the new theatrical aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> His was the version of Gozzi in which every intrigue, every slightly premeditated turn of action was doomed to failure. Driven to try to poison the Prince with overwrought poetry, the first minister Leandr is confronted by Truffaldino’s comic light-

ness. Summoned to make the Prince laugh, Truffaldino is ultimately incapable of doing so. Showing up at the courtly masquerade to prevent the Prince from laughing, Fata Morgana is in fact the one who ultimately tickles his funny bone: it is her splattering fall – heels over head, as the instruction in the script goes – that provokes the Prince's improbable giggling. No matter how much authority a protagonist wields within the play's hierarchy, a servant and a prince, a prime minister and a sorceress all fail to accomplish what they intend. The comic plot unfolds despite, not because of what its heroes plot. Robbed of their agency, theatrical characters are no longer allowed to muse, dream, or cogitate, or at least do so convincingly. Exaggerated trying becomes their last resort.

This must have been the aspect of the re-invented *commedia dell'arte* that particularly appealed to Prokof'ev when he started jotting down the first pages of the libretto and the first measures of the score of his opera *The Love for Three Oranges*. By that time the composer's diary had been peppered with the remark that his perfect opera would be comprised primarily of "stirring situations".<sup>10</sup> He may still have been under the sway of his earlier ballet *The Buffoon* (*Šut*) whose eponymous character was a paragon of gestural exuberance. Just as well he could have remembered his favorite childhood pastime, home theatricals, the sort of leisure activity familiar to every Russian upper class child.<sup>11</sup> (Was it this childhood conditioning that led Prokof'ev so eagerly to participate in the meetings of baron Drizen's private salon in which theatrical debates reigned, and for which he composed his first "melodrama" *The Ugly Duckling* after Hans Christian Andersen?)<sup>12</sup> But perhaps he took the ultimate cue from Mejerchol'd, who personally handed him the first issue of the journal *The Love for Three Oranges* as the composer was preparing to leave Russia. In a striking similarity to the Mejerchol'd studio program, Prokof'ev populated his opera with protagonists who live lives of affective overstatement. They whine or cry, they exhibit anger or fury, fear or boldness in such a towering way that one is made to wonder whether these characters are in possession of their emotions or are possessed by them.

The hypochondriac Prince exemplifies such an existence. All but a perfect automaton, he spends the opera's first half in the thrall of one deep melancholy, immobile but ceaselessly lamenting; in the second half he is overcome by his new lust for the three oranges, and starts moving incessantly on and around the stage, as if literally driven by this desire. Fata Morgana is no less automatic, even though she is a tier above the Prince in the opera's hierarchy: fate incarnate, she is embedded within her own world of imperative. To emphasize his heroes' entrenchment within their purely theatrical functions, Prokof'ev drew on Mejerchol'd's experiments with the conventional characters and situations of the *commedia dell'arte*, and mobilized what had by his time become operatic archetypes. When Fata Morgana

grandly commands the Prince to fall in love with three oranges – “Fall in love with three oranges! Fall in love with three oranges! Fall in love with three oranges!” – chances are that her spell will impel (even though it perhaps won’t endure) because it harks back to a specific musico-dramatic model, another example of coercion. A triple iteration rounded off with an emphatic closing gesture, it apes the famous prohibition from Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin* (“Nie sollst du mich befragen”; “You shall never ask my name nor where I come from”).

a)

Lohengrin. *Very slowly.*

El - nes du ge - lo - ben mir. Nie sollst du mich be - fra - gen,  
 one thing you must prom - ise me: You nev - er once shall ask me,

noch Wis - sehs Sor - ge tra - gen, wo - her ich kam der Fahrt, noch wie mein  
 Nor e - ven care to won - der From whence I jour - neyed here, Nor what my

45011

b)

Фата Моргана, пролетно, Призку. Заклинанье.  
*Fata Morgana, flew over the Prince. Spellbinding.*

Чародейката, востъг.  
*Les sorciers diabolés, hurlent.*

И! Или

И! Или

Фата Моргана.  
*faut* въ три гми а - блед - си -

Чародейката.  
*И! Или*

(Musical example 1, a and b)

Manipulations of Wagnerian formulae had become *de rigueur* in Petersburg cabarets by the mid-teens. Wagner had reached Russia belatedly, his music already surrounded with an aura created by *Wagnerism*; relished, imitated, parodied and burlesqued, he came to loom large in numerous skits that poked fun at operatic stereotypes. A habitu  of several Petersburg cabarets, Prokof'ev was immersed in that culture, and the score of *The Love for Three Oranges* contains some of his bluntest Wagnerian spoofs. (Perhaps the juiciest is the moment when the thirsty Truffaldino exalts the succulence of the oranges that he sadly has to guard in an extended passage based on the Tristan chord, that epitome of Wagnerian desire.) Yet in the scene of Fata Morgana's curse Prokof'ev offers a version of Wagner in which orchestral magic and harmonic sorcery seem to compete with those of the original. Where Wagner used mostly strings, Prokof'ev not only utilizes the whole of his orchestra, but also adds a chorus of infernal creatures to the mix. Whereas Wagner was satisfied with a plain diatonic harmonic progression of I-VI-III-IV-V, Prokof'ev infuses the space of his imperative with sinuous chromatic lines and harmonies.

Ultimately, Prokof'ev's (representation of the) supernatural outdoes Wagner's. By means of stylistic hyperbole the composer goes beyond biting commentary on the hackneyed source of exaggeration: instead, he bids his listener to experience the original situation anew. Even as an object of parody, the spell first of all elicits an anticipated kinetic response – both from the Prince who suddenly finds himself deeply in love with three oranges and the well-conditioned (by Wagner) listener who must sense an imperative. This shift from the intellectual to the kinetic connection between the stage and its beholder epitomizes the opera's dramatic conception. The action unfolds neither through the development of dramatic conflict nor through the internal transformation of the characters, but by means of perceptible collisions between and within familiar operatic situations. Not unlike wheels and cogs of some sort of meta-theatrical contraption, these collisions propel the plot.

### *Art as Device*

In 1919, the year Prokof'ev worked on *The Love for Three Oranges*, his good Petersburg-Petrograd acquaintance – and another avid attendee and participant in the city's cabarets – Viktor  klovskij published his emblematic essay 'Art as Device', one of the first manifestos of what later came to be known as Russian Formalism. Reconsidering the (then-mainstream) idea of art as communication, the author insisted that rather than convey, connote, imply or intimate, art's function was to impress and impel. For  klovskij, aesthetic experience was an essential part of the mechanism of human survival, for it helped withstand acquiescence. It was art that awakened those

embedded within their environments to life's basic matter, to things whose freshness inevitably wore off as they entered the realm of the habitual and automatic. It was art, then, that ultimately sparked curiosity and inventiveness, the propellants of scientific and social regeneration often known as progress. "Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war," Šklovskij mused:

[...] and so, to return sensation to our limbs, to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, humans have been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of things by means of perception instead of recognition. By estranging objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and laborious. The perceptual process in art has purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity.<sup>13</sup>

The words "estrangement" ("остран[н]ение") and "defamiliarization" have become absorbed into the language of contemporary literary and cultural criticism so thoroughly that their original meaning seems (just as Šklovskij might have predicted) to have worn off. They are often taken for granted as representing emotional disengagement and perceptual distance at once, Russian Formalism freely lumped with the Brechtian theater of *Verfremdungseffekt* or, even less reservedly, with the post-modernist straw-man Modernism of dehumanization. It has become customary in music scholarship to group the early Prokof'ev together with other musical defamiliarizers of the time, and in particular with his former compatriot Igor' Stravinskij, an avowed doyen of musical alienation. Celebrating Prokof'ev's opera for its salubrious deflating of Romantic grandeur, the musicologist Richard Taruskin, for instance, sees *The Love for Three Oranges* as "a prescient little exercise in the irony we take for granted in Modernist theater" and suggests that "behind the comic mask lay an icy countenance, a foretaste of the ban on all pathos that would dominate European art between the wars".<sup>14</sup> While undoubtedly participating in the modernist project, Prokof'ev's opera, however, hardly fit within the framework of aesthetic anesthesia that took the central musical-theatrical stage in the inter-war Europe. For nowhere did it display the "icy countenance" of Stravinskij's interwar oeuvre or exude the psychoanalysis-driven irony of the French surrealist music theater. Rather, the purposely naïve playfulness of its *mise-en-scènes* invited to repossess convention as a once-active social experience, as something that could and would once again stimulate the sensorium. As such, *The Love for Three Oranges* can be seen as a perhaps sole operatic substantiation of certain modes of Russian experimental theater and certain principles of early Formalism, shared convictions stemming from their progenitors' common Pe-



tersburgian pedigree. If these modes and principles effectively exposed such deep matters as internal motivations, psychic energies or ambiguous feelings as literary constructs, conglomerations of various devices that no longer worked, they endorsed perception as something ingrained in human nature, scientifically proven, and potentially manageable – not unlike the conditioned reflex that had by then come to hold tight the attention of many a scientist. Along with contemporaneous behaviorists, anthropologists and ethnographers, these literary and theater scholars were partaking of the post-World-War-I project of reinventing humanity as a universal category.

Perception, something that (they said) unified all peoples and cultures, became one of this project's chief research sites. And if anything is thematized in *The Love for Three Oranges*, it is perception. This opera's perhaps most conspicuous – and certainly most often noted – feature is a group of fictional spectators who constantly interrupt and even break into the operatic action. They are the Tragicists (*трагики*), who loudly endorse the moments of pathos; the Comics (*комики*), who cheer every dash of drollery; the Lyrics (*лирики*), who empathize with a mere whiff of sentiment; the Empty Heads (*пустоголовые*), who demand sheer slapstick; and the Eccentrics (*чудаки*), who serve as a sort of theatrical conscience ensuring that generic decorum is followed on stage. When the King's anguish at his son's incurability spills over the limits of acceptable kingly bearing, the Eccentrics whisper in indignation. When the Princess is about to die of thirst right there on stage, the Eccentrics promptly bring her a bucket of water, thereby securing the requisite happy ending.

Prokof'ev scholars have habitually identified this opera's odd set of mediating characters as a "Greek chorus".<sup>15</sup> Yet how far the Tragicists, Comics, Lyrics, Empty Heads and Eccentrics are from the moralizing mediators of a Greek tragedy, or, for that matter, from any sort of high or low drama crowd. Just as distant are they, as well as the opera's other characters, from the self-reflective theatrical "types" of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and other deliberate doubles of contemporaneous modernist drama. Rather, personifying the expectations of some "ideal" well-conditioned audience, the opera's fictional spectators are perceivers *par excellence*. Taking his cue from Mejerchol'd's adaptation of Gozzi, which had already introduced the warring groups of *бытовые комики* and *сугубые трагики* – their respective allegiances to realism and melodrama laid bare as trite by a trio of omniscient *чудаки* (the authors' apparent ideological stand-ins), – Prokof'ev, however, reallocated these characters' import from aesthetic to kinesthetic. Simultaneously watching and (re)acting, with next to no thinking in between, his implicated spectators call attention to the dual nature of collective consciousness without lingering much on its ambiguities. And as such, they are also devices that, to use Šklovskij's terminology, complicate

the opera's primary matter, make it more palpable, and thus generate an ever greater response from the opera's ultimate perceivers, its actual spectators.

Even without so convenient a tool as intermediary audiences, Prokof'ev generates a new experiencing of conventional situations by way of perplexing alignments between different levels of theatrical production, configurations that simultaneously produce and challenge suspense. A case in point is the opera's perhaps most familiar bit: its famous March, or rather the *mise-en-scène* that leads directly to it. Prokof'ev prepares the March musically as an object of desire by means of laborious preparation, a sort of Beethovenian *Aufschwung* whose familiar accumulation of sound volume and harmonic tension elicits a sense of extra urgency. But this preparation accompanies the scene in which the doleful Prince refuses to step out of his bedroom, utterly unwilling to see the masquerade prepared for him by Truffaldino. As both listeners and watchers, we are confronted with a perceptual dilemma: what is it that the music wants so much, but the Prince is so resistant to take in? As if this would not be enough to make the spectators drool in anticipation, Prokof'ev specifies in the score that the March is to be heralded by a dramatic transformation of the stage setting as the Prince's gloomy bedroom opens into a brightly-lit courtyard. Arriving at the top of the music-plot-setting nexus, the March impresses all the more.

#### *On the Nature and Culture of Laughter*

The only spectator who remains unimpressed by the March is the hypochondriac Prince himself. Burdened by all sorts of imaginary aches – the primary symptoms of hypochondria – he is incapable of responding to external stimuli. Too long has he been fed poetry by the conspiring Leandr; his innards are literally filled with bulky antediluvian verses! (Poetry as the source of the Prince's ailment was one of the few elements of *The Love for Three Oranges* that persisted in all of its versions. Gozzi, Mejerchol'd and Prokof'ev seemed to share the assumption that an overdose of imagination was generally unhealthy.) In order to be subjected to manipulation, theatrical or otherwise, the Prince needs to be reintroduced to the corporeal world. The pursuit of the Prince's laughter, which occupies the opera's first half, is, then, a quest for the Prince's body.

That body is elusive: like every other intention in the opera, the pursuit of laughter fails miserably time and again. The calculated sequence of masquerade merriments put on by the buffoon Truffaldino in the opera's second act – the last weapon in his comic arsenal – succeeds only to redouble their key spectator's blues. An accident is in order to jolt the Prince out of his cozy gloominess. It is Fata Morgana's unintentional and awkward fall in the midst of the masquerade that ultimately triggers the Prince's sensation: caught unawares, he laughs. And he laughs and he laughs and he laughs. And as his

initial, hardly audible chuckles are succeeded by longer and louder tittering, as he is fully seized by unstoppable oral trembling, and as his giggling eventually subsides, we witness a materialization, in musical rhythm and in melody, of what can be called a "laughter-gram", one veritable, almost scientific approximation of real-life laughter. Like a spring suddenly released from a depressed position – yet promptly caught in a slow motion, – the Prince's voice gradually swells in range and dynamics. The orchestral accompaniment expands accordingly, suggesting a reconstitution of a previously absent physicality – as if the Prince was indeed finally gaining his healthy body.

203 Più mosso. Molto animato.

Труф.  
Truf.

ка-а - га - га!  
di - tel!

V. I, Cl.

Принцъ, поднимается изъ кресла.  
Le Prince, se levant du fauteuil.

Ха - ха... ха - ха - ха...  
Ha - ha... ha - ha - ha...

V. I

pp 6 1 2 3 4 1

204

Пр.  
Pr.

ха - ха - ха - ха... ха - ха - ха...  
ha - ha - ha - ha... ha - ha - ha...

2 3 4 pp 1 2 3

V. II

Пр.  
Pr.

ха - ха - ха - ха... ха - ха... ха - ха - ха...  
ha - ha - ha - ha... ha - ha... ha - ha - ha...

2 1 2

4 pp 1 2 3 4

V. 10

205 Сильнѣ становитом все громче и радостнѣе.  
*Le rire devient de plus en plus fort et joyeux.*

Пр. *Pr.*

Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха  
 ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха

*etc.*

*p* 1 2 3 4 1 2

Пр. *Pr.*

Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха  
 ха, ха! ха! Ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха

*etc.*

3 4 *p* 1 2 3 4

Пр. *Pr.*

Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха! Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха  
 ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха! ха! Ха - ха, ха - ха

*etc.*

1 2 3 4 *p* 1

Quart.

Пр. *Pr.*

*ac - ce - le*

Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха - Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха  
 ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха, ха - ха

*etc.*

2 3 4 *mp* 1 2

ran - do 207 *Piu mosso.*

Пр. ха - ха - ха - ха! Ха - ха - ха, Ха - ха - ха, Ха - ха - ха, Ха - ха - ха, Ха - ха - ха,  
 ha - ha - ha - ha! Ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha,

208 *piu accelerando*

Пр. ха - ха - ха, ха - ха - ха, ха - ха - ха - ха! Ха - ха - ха - ха, ха - ха - ха - ха,  
 ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha - ha! Ha - ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha - ha,

Ol, Fag.

209 *Suffoquant de rire. poco a poco*

Пр. ха - ха - ха - ха, ха - ха - ха - ха! Ка - ка - я... я...  
 ha - ha - ha - ha, ha - ha - ha - ha! Cette vieil - le...

ri - tar - dan -

Пр. смьин - на - я... ста - ру - шон -  
 cette vieil - le... est - si dro -

(Musical example 2)

In this scene, one of its kind in operatic repertory, Prokof'ev appears to insist that as newly born, the Prince's reconstituted body is a *tabula rasa*, blank matter liberated from the unnecessary cargo of images and ideas. His laughter is nothing more than a kinesthetic fact, a pure action devoid of reflection or pain. Transported into the sphere of hard sciences, the Prince is cured from his infirmity; intellectual chimeras fly away. Yet this act of laughing has a double edge. If spontaneity is its necessary ingredient, so is the enjoyment of its very unfolding, a stretched-out awareness of its actuality. Being simultaneously *in* and *of* his laughing body, the Prince is now ready to control not only himself but also his royal dominion. What is more, poised between aesthetic and scientific realities, he is about to impel the opera's spectators, both fictional and real, to partake of his genuine pleasure.

Prokofiev's first opera written in emigration, *The Love for Three Oranges* flopped miserably when it premiered in Chicago in 1921. Only a few voices praised the production for what was seen as its inevitably "revolutionary blow at all forms of standard opera".<sup>16</sup> Most American critics, however, had trouble ingesting what seemed to be a contradiction in terms: the lavishly produced opera – in fact, the most expensive one that season – that showcased the absurdity of emotional depth. "Mr. Prokofiev might well have loaded up a shotgun with several thousand notes of varying lengths and discharge them against the side of a blank wall," a critic from *The Chicago Tribune* remarked with indignation.<sup>17</sup> A whole gallery of blank walls stood in the way of the opera's cordial reception. *The Love for Three Oranges* may have been made opaque by the hasty, almost undirected staging; by the general unpreparedness of the audience for an aria-less operatic flow; by the apparent irrelevance of Petersburgian theatrical debates to those on the other side of the Atlantic. But most impenetrable of all was the opera's glaring rejection of meaning. "Is it a satire? Is it a burlesque? Whose withers are wrung?" – a *New York Times* critic queried impatiently.<sup>18</sup> Laughter for the sake of laughter seemed incompatible with the very idea of art current at the time and place. The absence of a cause-and-effect dramatic progression and some sort of a moral – or at least a wedding! – at the opera's end made it a perfect critical target. The opera's combusive quality seemed to leave nothing else for the critics but to go ballistic in turn.

The laughter also set the terms of the opera's reception when *The Love for Three Oranges* was staged in the composer's former hometown Leningrad in 1926. Unlike the Chicago premiere, however, the Leningrad production was received with so much enthusiasm that a discussion of its various facets kept recurring in press all through the opera's uncommonly long run – 26 performances in one season – at the "Akopera" ("Akademičeskaja opera", formerly the "Imperial Mariinskij teatr").<sup>19</sup> The tone was set by a special collection of essays released to coincide with the opening performance.<sup>20</sup> Chief among the collection's contributors was the future Soviet musicologist number one Boris Asaf'ev (then writing under the pen name of Igor' Glebov), who dubbed the opera "a true *Götterdämmerung*, however, not amid the cosmic fire and Rhine's turbulent waters, but in a Bengal fire amid infectious laughter".<sup>21</sup> For Asaf'ev, by virtue of its comic contagiousness alone *The Love for Three Oranges* toppled that operatic warhorse, Wagner's gloomy tetralogy, – if not in word, then in deed. Assigning agency to the laughter itself, Asaf'ev insisted that laughter was the opera's "key dramatis persona, for the action could not move until the Prince laughed, and after he had laughed, he found himself involved in a laughter-engendering venture". The opera as a whole exemplified then "a striving for [...] laughter as an impulse of action, as a theatricality freed from the chains of rumination and didacticism," and the opera's openly gestural and "muscle-motoric" music brought

about the new “will to life” gained through “the naive laughter that freed from the inertness of daily pressures”. “Hail to the will-forming rhythm,” Asaf'ev grandly concluded, “and to the life itself in all its simplicity and naturalness, in the struggle and joy of its successes, with no ‘philosophical’ glances back and with no ‘accursed questions’ about its meaning.”<sup>22</sup>

The earnest merging of art and the everyday, of “theatricality” and a “will to life” in Asaf'ev's essay nevertheless itself was partly a glance back. It evoked Evreinov's earlier musings on the relation between a “will to theater” and the aristocratic lifestyle, the link, which, if revived (so the theater theorist thought), would ward off the base utilitarianism of the encroaching world of *petits bourgeois* (“мещане”). Yet what for Evreinov was largely a retrospectivist fantasy, a gesture of mourning for the then-vanishing scene of social privilege, now held a decisive social potential for Asaf'ev. Appointing his notion of “will” to qualify life rather than theater, the musicologist welcomed the opera's “willful” (“волевая”) musico-dramatic action as a rousing model for the community that stretched far beyond the theatrical walls.

Asaf'ev's urge to conscript the operatic stage to social betterment, while nothing new at a time of vast social experiment, may seem to have found an unlikely source in a modernist musical setting of an aristocratic fable. Yet his voice was just one among many in the choir of the opera's general civic approval. The public discussion of *The Love for Three Oranges* in the periodicals *Rabočij i teatr* and *Žizn' iskusstva* (by now predictably) revolved around the opera's sprinkly mirth, a quality seen as setting a “demarcation line” between the old and the new theater, and thereby proving the latest Akopera production a true “new achievement”.<sup>23</sup> New was the opera's sound-montage (“звуконтаж”), or tight reciprocation between sound and action uniquely projecting ebullience.<sup>24</sup> Yet even newer seemed its music's uncanny ability to compel without persuading. This was something that made it well worth the new audiences' while.

The director of the Leningrad production Sergej Radlov, whose Mejerchol'd apprenticeship could be traced to the earliest issues of the journal *The Love for Three Oranges*, projected his faith in his staging's societal weight perhaps the farthest. Starting with a complaint, he concluded with nothing short of a social prophecy: “Unfortunately, NOT is too young and undeveloped for us to assess the full measure of the enormous influence such great lubricants as laughter and rhythm wield on the human machine.” But “soon the time will come when the consumption of a specific minimum amount of laughter will be an absolute requirement of personal hygiene.”<sup>25</sup> The abbreviation NOT stood for *Naučnaja organizacija truda*, a new system of labor management that had reached its height by the mid-1920. Morphing freely the dream of a perfect theatrical machine into the utopia of a perfect human

machine, Radlov promulgated the new technocratic vision of the rapidly forming Soviet state.

In an ironic twist of history, by the mid-1920s Mejerchol'd's early attempts to regenerate the Imperial stage had been transformed into a special system of theatrical training for the actors of the new social order. The adherents of that system, which received the name of Biomechanics, sought to combine art and science in order to generate a maximal response from their audiences, and thus forge the new spectator of the new theater. Their thrill with theatrical effectiveness was soon to acquire a less delectable edge: before long socialist propaganda mobilized all available modes of stimulation in order to forge the new matter of the new society, *homo sovieticus*. But that would be another story altogether, and a whole other opera by Prokof'ev, one entitled *A Story of a Real Man*.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of this plot's complicated route from Giambattista Basile to Carlo Gozzi to Vsevolod Mejerchol'd to Sergej Prokof'ev in Richard Taruskin, 'From Fairy Tale to Opera in Four Moves (Not So Simple)', in: *Opera and the Enlightenment*, ed. by Thomas Bauman and Marita Pezoldt McClymonds, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 299-307.

<sup>2</sup> *Useless memoirs of Carlo Gozzi*, trans. by John Addington Symonds, London, New York, 1962, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>

Мы, аристократы театра (быть может – последние аристократы театра!) [...] наблюдаем в жизни театра тревожные симптомы. [...] В демократическом искусстве тщетно искать благородного расцвета театрального искусства. [...] Хор исторических фактов мощно поет нам, что театр обязан своим возникновением и развитием главным образом аристократии, и этот же хор в своем кадансе учит, что когда гибнет аристократический строй государственной жизни, гибнет, мельчая, и ее театр.  
(Nikolaj Evreinov, *Demon teatral'nosti* [*The Demon of Theatricality*], Moskva, 2002, pp. 260, 255)

<sup>5</sup> There is no comprehensive history of "Starinnyj teatr". But the multiple references to this theater in Evreinov's own oeuvre and in the essays and memoirs of his contemporaries (Mejerchol'd and Benua among the most concerned) suggest that the enterprise was largely a private venture that



became public mainly through publication of numerous debates about it rather than by actually being attended by a variety of audiences.

6

Я сказал: “лишь кровный аристократ по преимуществу может стать подлинным аристократом театра.” Почему? Сдается мне, объяснение этого факта лежит в самой природе кровного аристократа. Там, где плебей должен всесторонне соображать, рассчитывать, хвататься за учебник, справочник, счеты, – аристократ уже действует, смело полагаясь на свою воспитанную, в высшем плане, волю, на весь “отборный” опыт своих искушенных в явлениях высшего порядка предков. (p. 256)

7

*Ljubov' k trem apel'sinam (The Love for Three Oranges)*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1912, p. 4.

8

The detailed descriptions of these classes, often led by Mejerchol'd's associate Vladimir Solov'ev, regularly appeared in the journal *The Love for Three Oranges*. For a brief summary of Mejerchol'd's techniques see Alma Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, Jefferson, N.C., 1996.

9

In his adaptation of Gozzi's *fiaba*, Mejerchol'd was assisted by his comrades in theatrical arts Vladimir Solov'ev and Konstantin Vogak.

10

Such pronouncements reappear in Prokof'ev's early diary somewhat regularly. See, for instance, the entries from March of 1914 or October 1916 in Sergej Prokof'ev, *Dnevnik: 1907-1933 (Diary: 1907-1933)*, in three volumes, Paris, 2002.

11

For animated recollections of Prokof'ev's childhood theatricals see his *Avtobiografija (Autobiography)*, Moskva, 1982, esp. pp. 42-48.

12

The extant album from baron Drizen's salon, which includes snippets of *The Ugly Duckling* among its entries, is housed in the archive of the St. Petersburg Russian National Library (delo # 3441). The rest of the entries is comprised of hand-written meditations on theater by such personalities as prince Sergej Volkonskij (the former Director of the Imperial Theaters) and the music critic Vladimir Karatygin, among others.

13

Автоматизация съедает вещи, платье, мебель, жену и страх войны. [...] И вот для того, чтобы вернуть ощущение жизни, для того, чтобы делать камень каменным, существует то, что называется искусством. Целью искусства является дать ощущение вещи, как видение, а не как узнавание; приемом искусства является прием “остранения” вещей и прием затрудненной формы, увеличивающий трудность и долготу восприятия, так как воспринимательный процесс в искусстве самоцелен и должен быть продлен; искусство есть способ пережить деланье вещи, а сделанное в искусстве не важно.

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(Viktor Šklovskij, 'Iskusstvo kak priem' ['Art as Device'], in: *Poëtika. Sborniki po teorii poëtičeskogo jazyka* [Poetics. Collections of Essays on Theory of Poetic Language], Petrograd, 1919, p. 105)

14 Richard Taruskin, 'From Fairy Tale to Opera in Four Moves (Not So Simple)', in: *Opera and the Enlightenment*, pp. 304.

15 Taruskin uses this designation in his above-cited essay. Michael Pisani (cited below) does not hesitate to continue the tradition. Harlow Robinson calls the fictional audiences "commentators" in his article 'Love for Three Operas: The Collaboration of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Prokofiev', in: *Russian Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3, July, 1986, pp. 287-304, failing to notice the glaring lack of reflection in these audiences' part.

16 Paul R. Martin, *Musical Digest*, January 9, 1922, 2, p. 3. This and the following American music critics are quoted in Michael Pisani's exploration of the American reception of *The Love for Three Oranges*, "A Kapustnik" in the American Opera House: Modernism and Prokofiev's Love for Three Oranges', *Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 4, Winter, 1997, pp. 487-515.

17 Richard Aldrich, *Concert Life in New York, 1902-1923*, New York, 1941, pp. 703-705.

18 Edward Moore, Review in Chicago Tribune quoted in *Musical Digest*, January 9, 1922, 2, p. 2.

19 26 performances was more than twice the number of the customary 12 for a premiere.

20 *K postanovke opery Sergeja Prokof'eva "Ljubov' k trem apel'sinam" (On the Production of the Opera by Sergej Prokof'ev "The Love for Three Oranges")*, ed. by Igor' Glebov [Boris Asaf'ev], Leningrad, 1926.

21

Опера Прокофьева – это действительно "Гибель богов", но не в космическом пожаре и волнах бушующего Рейна, а среди бенгальского театрального огня и зажигательного смеха. (*Ibid.*, p. 22)

22

Смех – главное действующее лицо, ибо пока принц не засмеялся, действие не могло сдвинуться, и после того, как он засмеялся, оказался вовлеченным сам опять-таки в смехотворное предприятие, в котором нет места ничему неосмеянному... [...] Таков, именно, несчастный, а потом ставший счастливым принц в сказке Прокофьева. То обстоятельство, что воля к жизни вызвана в нем пустяковым стечением обстоятельств [...] ничуть не принижает истинности и подлинности возрождения: ведь оно происходит через освобождающий от житейского гнета простодушный смех [...] Да здравствует организующий волю ритм и сама жизнь во всей ее простоте и естественности, в борьбе и радости удачи, без "философической" оглядки и без "проклятых вопросов". (*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18, 22)

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23 “[...] демаркационная линия, отделяющая будущее русской оперы от ее прошлого, проведена. И проведена именно с постановкой оперы Прокофьева” (*Žizn' iskusstva*, 1926, No 9, p. 13; signed N. Malkov). *Rabočij i teatr* ran several articles discussing the new production of *The Love for Three Oranges* under the general title ‘Novoe dostiženie Akademičeskoj opery! [sic]’, *Rabočij i teatr*, 1926, No. 8, pp. 6-7. The next issue of the same periodical contained another debate, now titled ‘Ljubov’ k trem apel’sinam. Za i protiv!’.

24 The word “звукомонтаж” recurs in several reviews suggesting a common framework.

25

К сожалению НОТ [научная организация труда] – слишком молодая и неразработанная наука, чтобы мы могли сейчас уже в полную меру оценить колоссальное влияние на человеческую машину таких смазывающих веществ, как смех и ритм. [...] Недалеко то время, когда вводить в человека определенный минимум смеха будет требованием общественной гигиены. (*Ibid.*, p. 34)



*РАДИОНЯНЯ*, ИЛИ ЧТО СМЕШНОГО В КЕНГУРЕ  
(*RADIONIANIA OR WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT A KANGAROO*)

МАРИЯ ЛИТОВСКАЯ  
(*MARIJA LITOVSKAIA*)

**Abstract**

In this article the legendary radio programme of the 1970s, *Radioniania* (*Radio Nanny*), is described as a symptomatic example of late Soviet radio broadcasting. Officially, the programme, which was both educational and entertaining, was directed at young children, but it reached a much wider audience. The reason why it became so popular had to do with changes in the system of education and also with changes in the relation between the individual and the state: at that time it became less obligatory to resign oneself to the “omnipotent” authorities.

Keywords: *Laughter*; *'Radioniania'*; *Soviet Radio*; *Education*

В современном российском обществе, где спорадически вспыхивают очаги ностальгии, один из кодовых позывных, который объединяет в радостном умилении множество разных людей в возрасте от пятидесяти до сорока лет, – *Радионяня*.<sup>1</sup> Это название ежемесячной радиопередачи, которая выходила в СССР по первой программе радиовещания в воскресенье. На ностальгических сайтах<sup>2</sup> школьники 1970-х годов постоянно вспоминают, как они с нетерпением ждали и радостно слушали эту веселую передачу.

Записи *Радионяни* сегодня доступны,<sup>3</sup> родители предлагают их своим детям, преподаватели средней школы используют материалы ра-

диопередачи в учебном процессе, но современные школьники восторгов старшего поколения не разделяют, относясь к предлагаемым их вниманию “веселым урокам” как еще к одному методическому приему для усвоения очередных исключений русской грамматики или арифметических правил – не более того. Неоднократные попытки возрождения радиопередачи в прежней форме успехом тоже не увенчались.

Из сегодняшнего дня *Радионяня* вследствие своей легендарности (и невозстановимости) кажется симптоматическим образцом позднесоветской радиопродукции, позволяя ставить вопрос о том, что воспринималось как веселое в советских 1970-х годах, а также обрисовать, на каком социокультурном фоне подобный тип веселого возникал, и высказать некоторые предположения о причинах тогдашнего успеха *Радионяни* как в детской, так и в части взрослой аудитории. Поскольку история советского радиовещания 1970-х годов еще ждет своих исследователей, позволим себе начать свои размышления с характеристики его общих тенденций в период, когда появилась и завоевала успех *Радионяня*.

Выход *Радионяни* совпал с очередной сменой в 1970 году руководства Гостелерадио, связанной в том числе и с развитием концепции вещания. Установки нового директора С. Г. Лапина историки журналистики характеризуют следующим образом: он, “прежде всего, ценил верность партийным директивам, умелое и старательное выполнение указаний руководства и четкую творческую предсказуемость, которая обезопасила бы эфир от неожиданностей, а тем более ошибок”.<sup>4</sup> Какие же “указания” могли привести к появлению *Радионяни*?

Сенсации “оттепели” к этому времени завершились, в 1967 году руководство СССР провозгласило, что в стране построен развитой социализм. Но идеологические обоснования советского общества все более расходились с реалиями советского жизнеустройства. Общественную неудовлетворенность запечатлевали писатели и режиссеры, с середины 1960-х активно заговорившие об испытании повседневностью, о проблемах быта, об обыденной нравственности.

Именно в это время появляются и получают громкий читательский успех “московские” повести Ю. Трифонова (1969-1975), пишутся пьесы А. Вампилова *Утиная охота* (1970) и *Прошлым летом в Чулимске* (1972). В 1970 году выходят на экран *Жил певчий дрозд* О. Иоселиани, *Начало* Г. Панфилова, *Белорусский вокзал* А. Смирнова, *Городской романс* П. Тодоровского, *Мой добрый папа* И. Усова, *Денискины рассказы* В. Храмова, *Был месяц май* М. Хуциева. Косвенным указанием на меняющиеся отношения в советском обществе могут служить массовые экранизации А. П. Чехова.<sup>5</sup> В журналистике расширяется число статей на темы нравственности, “нравственная проблематика” становится по-

стоянным предметом рассмотрения в литературной и кинокритике, переключивает в темы школьных сочинений по литературе.

Нельзя сказать, что государство никак не реагировало на эти тревожные симптомы. Тревожные, потому что расширение сферы частной жизни, было ли оно направлено на достижение материального благополучия или духовное раскрепощение, позволяло человеку выскользнуть из-под всеобъемлющего государственного контроля. Необходимость отдыха от нормирующих идеологических рамок, ощущение этих рамок как способа сдерживания мысли, неосознаваемое, скорее всего, большинством населения, но постоянно проявляющееся стихийно – в пересказывании политических анекдотов, зубоскальстве над советским руководством и советскими же святынями, побуждало государство к расширению официальных каналов отвлечения от “дефицитов” повседневного существования. Чем более однообразный ассортимент официальной интерпретации событий предлагался, чем более предсказуемым оказывалось его риторическое оформление, чем сильнее толкование в СМИ происходящего вокруг расходилось с обыденным его восприятием “простыми” людьми, тем большее внимание идеологические ведомства уделяли разного рода “добавкам”, смягчающим впечатление от общего государственного идеологического оскудевания. Одной из таких “добавок” стала развлекательность.<sup>6</sup>

В 1970-е годы на советском радио, помимо передач информационных, задающих необходимую для повседневного существования понятийную и когнитивную основу восприятия и оценки происходящего (*Новости, В странах мира и социализма* и т. п.), и “развивающих”, предлагающих знакомство с достижениями науки и “высокой” культуры (*Театр у микрофона, В мире науки*), культивировались программы развлекательные (воскресная *С добрым утром!*, *Утренняя почта Маяка, Вечерняя передача Маяка, Опять двадцать пять, Музыкальный глобус*, концерты по заявкам *Полевая почта Юности, В рабочий полдень, Встреча с песней* и др.),<sup>7</sup> создававшие атмосферу оптимистического общественного согласия, задушевности и взаимопонимания. Однако парадоксом советской организации радио- и телевидения была невозможность “чистого” развлечения, каковое считалось прерогативой “западного” капиталистического образа жизни и допускалось в жизнь советского человека гомеопатическими дозами. “Чистое” развлечение в период “застоя” использовали как сильнодействующее средство для отвлечения массовой аудитории от нежелательных действий (например, трансляции концертов популярных в СССР западных поп-звезд в ночь Пасхального богослужения) или в качестве своеобразного подарка, скажем, в Новогоднюю ночь, когда после обязательного *Голубого огонька* уже под утро показывали сборный концерт “звезд зарубежной эстрады” с неизменным балетом Берлинского телевидения. Обычно развлечение

предполагало включение “серьезного” контента в игровую оболочку разных типов “концертов по заявкам” или собраний шуток и реприз.

*Радионяня* входила в группу “образовательных” и одновременно развлекательных радиопрограмм для детей. Официально передача должна была отвечать личностным интересам своей целевой аудитории – младших подростков, главным делом жизни которых считались учеба и связанная с ней организованная социализация. Предполагалось, что информация, полученная в результате прослушивания передачи, должна помочь усваивать школьный материал, и даже сегодня *Радионяню* в учебниках по истории советской радиожурналистики описывают как “цикл веселых уроков, которые не только разъясняли сложные правила правописания в русском языке, но и были своеобразной ‘школой этикета’: рассказывали, как надо вести себя в гостях, в театре, в музее и других общественных местах. [...] даже самые трудные правила грамматики и синтаксиса превращали в веселые, легко запоминающиеся, часто шуточные песенки и частушки”.<sup>8</sup> “Трудные правила” с помощью веселых интермедий и песен, по идее, должны были лучше усваиваться.

Значимость образовательной составляющей *Радионяни* поддерживают и некоторые рассказы создателей передачи:

Постоянным и главным был *Веселый урок*. Иногда это был урок математики, биологии, астрономии или истории. Эти уроки, звучавшие в каждом выпуске, были самыми долгожданными для детей, потому что на таком уроке двоек не ставили, а трудные правила из учебника звучали, как песенка, которую, однажды услышав, уже не мог отогнать от себя. Так как на радио приходили мешки искренних детских писем, среди которых, к сожалению, очень редко встречались грамотные, то уроки веселой грамматики стали фирменным блюдом программы.<sup>9</sup>

В то же время в отличие от других радиопрограмм для школьников того времени, вспоминаемых их слушателями добрым словом, – *КООПП!* (“Клуб по охране авторских прав природы”), *Клуб знаменитых капитанов*, *Почтовый дилижанс* – насыщенных новой для большинства слушателей информацией по биологии, физике, географии, литературе, истории, *Радионяня* ничего неожиданного даже младшим подросткам не сообщала. Более того, структура передачи мало чем отличалась от абсолютно серьезной политически сориентированной *Пионерской зорьки* или региональных пионерских радиожурналов 1970-х годов: озаглавленные блоки более или менее предсказуемой информации с назидательным пафосом, заранее записанные интервью, письма поддержки от слушателей, песни.

Но слушателей такая предсказуемость не отталкивала. Вспоминая обсуждение проекта *Радионяни*, Елена Лебедева говорит:

Возник вопрос: для детей какого возраста наша передача? Об этом спрашивала Анна Александровна Меньшикова, главный редактор, а вместе с ней и все сотрудники редакции. На радио уже шли передачи для дошкольников и для школьников среднего возраста, и для старшеклассников. А мы как-то и не подумали о возрасте своих будущих слушателей. И тут Николай Владимирович Литвинов, шутя, произнес: от 8-ми до 80-ти. Так и случилось.<sup>10</sup> Подтвердили это и первые письма радиослушателей.

К замечанию редактора передачи стоит прислушаться: подобно многим формально предназначенным для детей текстам, *Радионяня* имела двух адресатов, но вряд ли взрослые слушатели собирались вспомнить правила грамматики или освоить нормы приветствия; видимо, они получали от передачи что-то другое.

Судя по названиям рубрик (и воспоминаниям), у *Радионяни* было одно – заранее заданное – принципиальное отличие от детских радиопередач того времени – шуточный разговорный тон, который подчеркивался “подкладным” смехом, отделявшим друг от друга фрагменты “Смешных случаев на уроках”. Трое ведущих полчаса говорили друг с другом о знакомых по школьным урокам правилах грамматики, математики, физики или хороших манер, читали письма в редакцию, пели, принимали приглашенных гостей. Кульминационным центром передачи была рубрика “Веселый урок”, где разговор шел о сложных фрагментах школьной программы и проблемных этикетных ситуациях. В обязательной рубрике “Смешные случаи на уроках” зачитывались письма радиослушателей, приводящих забавные истории о неудачных письменных или устных школьных ответах, вызвавших смех соучеников. Значительная часть *Радионянь* включала интервью с известными детскими писателями, которые также, отвечая на вопросы ведущих, остряли и рассказывали веселые истории. У неискушенных слушателей создавалось впечатление спонтанности диалогов и полилогов ведущих, их импровизации, игры.

Каждая передача начиналась и заканчивалась “фирменной” песней, “Веселый урок” также обязательно завершался общей песней ведущих. Вступительная песня-заставка звучала следующим образом:

Мы рады вас приветствовать, товарищи ребята,  
Конечно, если дома вы, а не ушли куда-то.  
И просим вас немедленно оставить все дела,  
*Радионяня* сегодня к вам пришла –  
*Радионяня, Радионяня* – есть такая передача  
*Радионяня, Радионяня* – у нее одна задача:  
Чтоб все девчонки и все мальчишки подружились с ней,  
Чтоб всем ребятам, всем трулялятам, было веселей!



Совмещение в песне обращения “товарищи ребята” и “трулялят” было, по сути, попыткой столкновения двух дискурсов: официального советского языка, которому подчинялась, в частности, школа, и того раскованного игрового языка досуга, что вошел в русскую детскую литературу со времен Корнея Чуковского. Собственно, слово “трулялята” пришло из перевода стихотворения Юлиана Тувима ‘Про пана Трулялинского’, рассказывающего о том, как “в Припевайске весь народ припеваючи живет”.

Если для “товарищей” важны “дела” вне дома, то для “трулялят” – “веселье”. “Товарищи” живут в мире иерархий, где “немедленно оставляют все дела” по приказу старшего, а “трулялят” “просят” сделать это, к тому же оставляя за ними свободу выбора: уйти из дома или остаться. *Радионяня* показывает единство двух ипостасей как детей, так и взрослых, возможность свободного перехода от одного языка к другому, она готова “подружить” между собой эти два типа высказываний.<sup>11</sup>

Сделано это было достаточно просто и, как показал успех передачи, удачно. *Радионяня* формировалась как сообщение, основанное на постоянном последовательном смешении официального и дружеского дискурсов, что позволяло, с одной стороны, подчеркнуть их разность, а с другой – подчеркивало абсурдность самого факта их противопоставления. “Дело” и “потеха”, как выяснилось, могли прекрасно совмещаться, превращая обязательное в интересное и радостное.

Веселость может показаться недостаточным основанием для популярности, но тот тип комического, который разрабатывала *Радионяня*, судя по всему, был в то время уникальным и возможным только на радио. Не случайно, видимо, другие радиопередачи по мере их создания или позже получали журнальные или книжные аналоги,<sup>12</sup> тогда как материалы *Радионяни* выходят только в аудиозаписи. Переведенные на бумагу тексты А. Хайта<sup>13</sup> и Э. Успенского<sup>14</sup> теряют обаяние, поскольку в передаче главными были не “утилитарная” познавательная информация или изящные скетчи; неожиданное для слушателей остроумие создателей проявлялось в интонации, темпоритме, подборе прозаических и музыкальных фрагментов и даже в присущем радио отсутствию отчетливого визуального образа происходящего.

Первый редактор *Радионяни* определяла ее жанр как “радиожурнал, неповторимый стиль которого соединял в себе театральный капустник, детский утренник и музыкально-поэтическое кабаре”.<sup>15</sup> Всем этим жанрам из разных житейских и художественных сфер свойственны установка на внятную для зрителя/слушателя структуру с ярким конферансом и чередой коротких скетчей, соединение строгого общего сценария с возможной импровизацией внутри его частей и открытая игра с масками.

Маски ведущих, которые использовались в радиопередаче, были связаны с сердцевинной советского представления о детстве – периоде учения, то есть с образами учителя и учеников. *Радионяню* вели известные в 1970-х годах исполнители эстрадных миниатюр Александр Левенбук<sup>16</sup> и Александр Лившиц,<sup>17</sup> а также знаменитый у нескольких поколений советских детей “радиоголос” Николай Владимирович Литвинов.<sup>18</sup>

Большинство радиослушателей-подростков, скорее всего, никого из ведущих никогда в глаза не видели, про эстрадную пару Лившиц-Левенбук не слышали, а вот характерные вкрадчиво-ласковые интонации Литвинова им не могли не быть знакомы по радиопередачам “для самых маленьких” – актер был главным советским “сказочником”. Популярность Николая Литвинова была настолько велика среди слушателей разных поколений, что он среди других знаменитостей оказался героем популярных в СССР в 1970-е годы пародий Виктора Чистякова *Красная Пашечка* и т. п., которые транслировались по радио, телевидению и даже были выпущены на отдельной грампластинке.

Хотя голоса всех троих ведущих были недетскими и на обложках пластинок *Радионяни* изображались трое взрослых с незапоминающимися лицами в обычной одежде, в передаче с самого начала подчеркивалась их возрастная и статусная иерархия: Литвинова именовали полным именем – Николай Владимирович, а Лившица и Левенбука уменьшительными – соответственно, Сашей и Аликом. Таким способом условно обозначалось, что “сказочник” Литвинов *играет* роль учителя, а “дяденьки” Лившиц и Левенбук – учеников, которые, впрочем, в передаче именовались “помощниками”. В “пионерских” передачах того времени, где часть информации сообщалась от лица пионеров, было принято чередовать ведущих-взрослых и ведущих-детей или приглашать в качестве ведущих актрис-травести, говоривших напряженно-звонкими голосами.

Образы учителя и его помощников-учеников закреплялись сериально повторяющейся фабулой “Веселых уроков”: ведущие обсуждают какой-то учебный повод. Ученики выказывают свое непонимание предмета обсуждения, преподаватель терпеливо объясняет им суть вопроса, ученики прерывают его замечаниями, пока для них не наступает момент прозрения. Достигнутое в ходе обсуждения проблемы решение символически закрепляется совместным исполнением песни, где фиксируется переход от ошибочного понимания к правильному знанию, которое и облекается в итоговое правило, часто совпадающее с формулировкой из учебника.

Большая часть итоговых песен “Веселых уроков” представляет собой обычные мнемотексты, утилитарный эффект которых предопределен ритмикой и рифмовкой. Например:

От перемены мест слагаемых  
 Сумма не меняется!  
 К двадцати прибавить тридцать –  
 Будет ровно пятьдесят.  
 К тридцати прибавить двадцать –  
 Будет тот же результат.  
 А-ах! – Что? – Что же получается?  
 А-ах! – Что? – Что же получается?  
 От перемены мест слагаемых  
 Сумма не меняется!  
 От перемены мест слагаемых  
 Сумма не меняется!

Авторами запоминающихся мелодий, на которые распевались зарифмованные правила, были Владимир Шаинский, Геннадий Гладков, Борис Савельев, Николай Песков.

Процесс превращения самоуверенных незнаек во что-то, наконец, понявших учеников происходил заново в каждой последующей передаче. *Радионяня* выходила раз в месяц, цикличность имитировала педагогический процесс, с которым слушатели сталкивались ежедневно: усвоенное школьное знание в очередной раз сменялось незнанием, и школьник был обречен снова и снова проходить всю процедуру его обретения от начала до конца.

Приведем для примера текст одного из “Веселых уроков”:

*Лившиц и Левенбук:* Начинаем веселый урок!

*Литвинов:* Вот сегодня, дорогие мои помощники, у меня для вас совершенно особое задание. Я дам вам слова, а вы из этих слов должны будете составить рассказ, причем рассказ интересный и обязательно веселый.

*Левенбук:* Пожалуйста, хоть целый роман сочиним!

*Лившиц:* А какие слова, Николай Владимирович?

*Литвинов:* Слова такие, запоминайте: метро, пальто, кино, кашне, кенгуру, шоссе, шимпанзе, домино, фортепиано, пенсне, кафе.

*Левенбук:* Тут и запоминать нечего!

*Лившиц:* Мы записали и сейчас из этих слов не только рассказ, но и поэму в стихах напишем!

*Левенбук:* И не только стихи сочиним, но и песню на эти стихи споем!

*Лившиц:* Правильно!.. Музыка!.. (Поет) Как-то рано поутру / С другом сели мы в метро, / И поехали в метро / Фильм смотреть о кенгуре. /

*Левенбук:* (Поет) Вот сидим мы с ним в кинe / Без пальта и без кашне... / А вернее – я и ты / Без кашна и без пальты.

*Литвинов:* Вы знаете, друзья мои, мне кажется, что так сочинять и я могу. (Поет) Любит кины детвора, / Если в кинах кенгура / Ходит-бродит по шоссе, / Носит в сумке шимпанзу.

*Лившиц:* У вас тоже получается.

*Левенбук:* Вы тоже молодец.

*Лившиц:* (Поет) Кенгуру в кафу зашел, / Занял там свободный стол.

*Левенбук:* (Поет) И сидит за доминой / С шимпанзой и какадой.

*Лившиц:* (Поет) Вдруг огромный обезьян / Стал играть на фортепьян...

*Литвинов:* (Поет) Тут и взрослый, сняв пенсню, / Хохотал на всю киню.

*Лившиц:* (Поет) Интересное кино! / Жаль, что кончилось оно!

*Левенбук:* (Поет) В гардероб пора бежать – / Будут польта выдавать!

*Литвинов:* У нас с вами получилась песенка как раз про то, как не надо говорить.

*Лившиц, Левенбук:* Почему?

*Литвинов:* Да потому, что все эти слова не изменяются по падежам. Например, пальто – в именительном – пальто и в родительном – пальто. Без чего? Без пальто. Слово не меняется. И по числам такие слова тоже не меняются. Мы говорим: этот фильм идет в нескольких кинотеатрах. А не в нескольких кинах.

*Лившиц:* Теперь все ясно.

*Литвинов:* Подождите, еще не все. Вот представьте себе: в зоопарке сидят шимпанзе – брат и сестра. Нельзя сказать, что брат – шимпанзе, а сестра – шимпанза. Нельзя, потому что по родам такие слова тоже не меняются.

*Левенбук:* Значит, эти слова вообще никогда не изменяются?

*Литвинов:* Никогда! И это надо знать всем ребятам, об этом надо помнить, а нам с вами об этом надо петь... (Поет, к нему присоединяются Лившиц и Левенбук.) Чтобы грамотными стать / И писать отлично, / Никогда нельзя менять / В падежах различных / Ни кино, ни домино, / Ни бюро и ни метро, / Ни кашне и ни пенсне, / Ни шоссе, ни шимпанзе. / Можно песню распевать / При честном народе, / Если только не менять / Ни в числе, ни в роде / Ни какао, ни депо, / Ни кафе и ни пальто, / Ни колибри, какаду, / Ни жюри, ни кенгуру.

Распределение текста на проговариваемый (серьезный) и пропеваемый соло (абсурдно-игровой) в финале завершается своего рода симбиозом: коллективно исполняемой песней-правилом с элементами шутливости. К нестройному жизнерадостному хору ведущих вполне мог присоединить свой голос слушатель.

В передаче шла именно игра в школу, так как в ходе уроков последовательно нарушалось несколько важнейших принципов принятой

в СССР образовательной системы. Советская школа, пережив короткий период демократизации, в 1920-е годы, вернулась к модели дисциплинарного учебного заведения, основанной на строгом соблюдении иерархии старших и младших, неукоснительной дисциплине как залого успешной социализации, жестком контроле над успеваемостью, прилежанием и поведением.<sup>19</sup> Педагог в этом контексте воспринимался как строгий и неподкупный транслятор обязательного для всех знания, человек, стоящий на страже интересов общества: не выпускать во взрослую жизнь ни одного человека, не знающего правил русского языка, исторических дат или алгоритма решения разных типов математических, физических или химических задач. Эти функции, с одной стороны, обеспечивали достаточно высокий общественный статус педагога, с другой – во многом предопределяли его поведение. Идеальный учитель определялся выражением “строгий, но справедливый”.

Для советских школьников в общении учителя и ученика правила поведения каждого были очевидны: взрослый (учитель и вожатый) заведомо воспринимался как авторитетный носитель знания и поведенческих норм. В *Радионяне* наставник соответствовал образу идеального педагога: был невозмутимо спокоен, добродушен, но непреклонен в стремлении научить действовать по определенному образцу. Алик и Саша в конечном итоге тоже укладывались в традиционную схему: непонимающие самоуверенные ученики под ловко заданными вопросами педагога сдавались и усваивали необходимые правила. Но с учителем невозможно фамильярничать, его недопустимо, например, поощрять или укорять, то есть делать то, что позволяют себе Шурик и Алик. Учитель, в свою очередь, не должен передразнивать учеников в надежде, что они поймут свои ошибки, ему полагается держать дистанцию, а не распевать с учениками песенки.

Уроки *Радионяни* учили не бояться доводить рассуждение до логического конца, чтобы тогда, когда ошибка становилась очевидной даже для самого строптивого ученика, исправить ее. Так, традиция внеурочного освоения многочисленных исключений в русском языке (в приведенном выше случае несклоняемых существительных) предполагала превращение их в некий единый текст, часто ритмизованный или зарифмованный для того, чтобы запоминание шло проще. При этом в рекомендованной учебной практике никогда не использовался прием от противного: показать смехотворность исковерканного языка для того, чтобы в итоге сформулировать удобное для применения правило. Родной язык не мог быть объектом осмеяния. В *Радионяне* с ее установкой на спонтанный диалог этот принцип используется систематически. Учебный результат от смены приема запоминания в итоге меняется мало: слова все равно надо заучивать, но в передаче преследуется иная цель – развеселить откровенной нелепицей и тем самым добиться единения

между участниками учебного процесса. Прием доведения до абсурда ошибки, чтобы рассмешить, а уже потом сформулировать правило, смещал представления о дозволенном, в частности, обращении с языком, открывал возможности для языковой игры.

Языковая игра, характерная для “уроков” *Радионяни*, непосредственно связана с расшатыванием нормы. Борис Норман замечает:

Что же касается внутренних законов развития языка, то здесь можно выделить одну особенность. С момента демократизации нашего общества, бесконечного процесса, где степень демократичности может быть разной, в языке появилось стремление к освобождению от некоторых пут и сухих норм. В языке начинает проявляться очень сильная тенденция к языковой игре, и люди начинают больше шутить, дурачиться, кривляться. И хотя человек поступает нехорошо по отношению к языку, он поступает очень правильно по отношению к собеседнику. Если вы в разговоре с кем-то можете себе позволить пошутить, то это означает, что вы цените своего собеседника, не боитесь его и хотите, чтобы отношения с этим человеком стали ближе.<sup>20</sup>

В учебно-развлекательной *Радионяне* осуществлялась характерная для позднесоветского времени незаметная абберация идеологически закрепленной традиции. В передаче при сохранении внешней структуры позиций учителя-ученика сбивалась ценностная жесткость школьной иерархии, ставилась под сомнение сама модель получения знания, принятая в тогдашней советской школе и в целом в системе воспитания. Один из ведущих передачи вспоминал, что для авторов была важна задача упрощения учебника, то есть методического совершенствования официального образования:

Мы – люди консервативные, не революционеры, методов, когда передача рождается прямо у микрофона, не исповедовали. Хайт сидел и писал сценарий, а мы ему помогали, как могли. Мы делали вид, что мы помогаем учебнику и учителю, а не заменяем их. На самом деле это была наша цель. Заменить учебник. Потому что у нас веселее и короче и можно запомнить, а в учебнике все изложено значительно труднее. Многие зарубежные страны преподавали язык по *Радионяне*. Но в нашей стране в Мин-образовании к нам относились достаточно ревностно. А зря, потому что эксперимент, поставленный когда-то в школах, показал, что человек, прослушавший веселый урок *Радионяни*, делает в несколько раз меньше ошибок.<sup>21</sup>

Именно в 1970-е годы в СССР предпринимается очередная попытка разбалансировки традиционной педагогической системы. Гуманный

учитель, готовый жертвовать своим “авторитетом” в глазах коллег, чтобы помочь детям, – герой искусства этого времени. Приведем только два примера. В 1969 году Ролан Быков снимает лирическую комедию *Внимание, черепаха!* по сценарию Семена Лунгина и Ильи Нусинова. История о том, как первоклассники спасают черепаху, заблудившуюся в районе танковых учений, от юмористического изображения детей постепенно переходит к патетическому описанию дружбы и подвига. Учительница начальных классов неумело, как может, помогает ученикам. В 1973 году выходит абсолютно серьезный рассказ Валентина Распутина ‘Уроки французского’ о молодой преподавательнице, нарушающей неписаный кодекс поведения учителя, чтобы спасти от голода ученика, и теряющей из-за этого место работы. Подобные учителя воспринимаются воспитанниками, а вслед за ними зрителями и читателями, как лучшие представители профессии.

Интеллигентское сообщество в СССР приобщается к заложенному Бенджамином Споком<sup>22</sup> воспитательному стандарту, вариант которого у популярного в позднесоветскую эпоху журналиста Симона Соловейчика получит название “учение с увлечением”<sup>23</sup> или “воспитание без воспитания”. Сын Соловейчика так описывает этот подход в педагогике:

Переход от незнания к знанию или от непонимания к пониманию иногда превращается в мучительное блуждание в мире неизвестного. Просьба выполнить обычное, с точки зрения взрослого, задание оборачивается для ребенка сказочным “иди туда, не знаю куда, найди то, не знаю что”. Но по-другому и невозможно, потому что новое знание в большинстве случаев не раскладывается на простые множители предыдущего знания. Столкнувшись с неизвестным, без подсказки, как себя вести, ребенок теряется и не переходит заветной границы познания. Эта подсказка и есть педагогический мостик. [...] В большинстве случаев, когда отец [...] брал в руки мои учебники, у него появлялось страдальческое выражение лица. Он не просто не мог читать школьные учебники, он страдал от того, как они были сделаны. Эти методически выверенные тексты не оставляли возможности для фантазий. В учебниках по необходимости все учтено, все предупреждено, все разбито на равномерные шажки. Возникало ощущение ловушки. [...] Обожествление ребенка не за его успехи в школе, не за его поведение, не за его любовь к родителям, а просто за то, что он ребенок, – это мы узнали в нашем доме. Всепрощение и всепонимание как единственно возможные меры воздействия на ребенка – это тоже мы узнали в нашем доме. Щепетильность в выборе фраз, в тоне разговора с детьми или рядом с ними – и это мы узнали в нашем доме.<sup>24</sup>

Важнейшей ценностью жизни ребенка провозглашалась радость, в таком случае уравнивающий взрослых и детей смех становился одним из главных воспитателей. В *Радионяне* неумелость порождает смех, а не гнев. Саша и Шурик своими утрированными ошибками и неумением себя вести смешат. Безымянные нерадивые ученики из “Смешных случаев на уроках” сменяют друг друга, поставляя все новый и новый материал для рубрики; помощники в каждую новую передачу приходят неучами и недотепами, но от этого раздражение у знающего старшего не возникает. Ребенок – автор нелепых оговорок, описок, стилистических ошибок, составляющих рубрику “Смешные случаи на уроках”,<sup>25</sup> но сегодняшний неумеха завтра начинает замечать ошибки и сам сообщает о них *Радионяне*.

*Радионяня* призвана была узаконивать детское непонимание, наивность, озорство как норму, перенося их из уже освоивших эту территорию кино и литературы<sup>26</sup> в мир более приближенных к реальности радиопередач.

Само название *Радионяня* подчеркивает это новое отношение к школьнику. Коннотации слова “няня” в русском языке основаны на образе дома, раннего детства, заботы, любви, всепрощения и семейной фамильярности. Достаточно сравнить в русской литературе классические, то есть всеми признанные как образцовые типы нянь и “дядек”, главным предназначением которых является любовь к воспитаннику, и строгих (занудных, нелепых, глупых и т. д.) гувернеров и гувернанток, не говоря уже об образах преподавателей – учителей, классных наставников, классных дам, которые заняты обучением ребенка.<sup>27</sup> Терпение, шутка и понимание – вот воспитательный арсенал няни. Няня в русской культуре<sup>28</sup> любит ребенка таким, какой он есть, – учитель муштрует его, чтобы тот стал похож на образец. Не случайно в репертуар популярных дисциплинарных реплик советского учителя входили “Я вам не нянька” и “В школе няnek нет”.

Благожелательная снисходительность взрослого в *Радионяне* то и дело сменяется общим весельем, когда формальные рамки их социальных ролей еле сдерживают внутреннее равенство участников. Своеобразным апогеем “новых” отношений ученика и учителя стала хоровая песня ‘Хлопай-топай’:<sup>29</sup>

Лучше танца “Хлопай-топай”  
Ничего на свете нет!  
Только хлопай! Только топай!  
Лишь бы выдержал паркет!

*Привет:* Эх, раз! Еще раз!  
Целый класс пустился в пляс!



Хлопай-топай! Топай-хлопай!  
Нет ребят счастливей нас!

Мы танцуем “Хлопай-топай”  
Утром, днем и вечером.  
Лучший танец – “Хлопай-топай”  
Если делать нечего!  
*Припев.*

Завуч, няня и директор  
Стали с нами танцевать!  
За такое поведение –  
Можно им поставить “пять”!  
*Припев.*

Кем бы ни был ты – отличник  
Иль совсем наоборот –  
Разучи-ка этот танец,  
И танцуй хоть целый год!  
*Припев.*<sup>30</sup>

Возможное только в песне и недостижимое в реальности советской школы равенство и братство старших и младших, успешных и неуспешных, руководителей и подчиненных, которые все вместе увлеченно хлопают и топают, можно прочитывать и как воплощение детской мечты, и как сатиру на характерное для эпохи “застоя” ритуально организованное бессмысленное “кипучее безделье”, сопровождаемое заклинаниями вроде “нет ребят счастливей нас!”.

*Радионяня* предлагала детям и взрослым непривычный тип отношений в системе образования – сотрудничество. Маскарад *Радионяни* делает возможным это отклонение от общепринятого стандарта, так как действуют в нем взрослые, всего лишь играющие в учеников/учителей. Игра воспринималась как откровенное дуракаваляние,<sup>31</sup> клоунадный в своей открытости прием. Однако в отличие от телевизионных передач типа *АБВГДейки*, где учениками были *видимые* клоуны, относящиеся к миру эксцентрики, буффонады, дистанцированные от повседневной жизни ребенка, ролевой статус которых предполагал комически утрированно изображенные глупость или простодушие,<sup>32</sup> ведущие *Радионяни* однозначного статусного подкрепления в сознании слушателя не вызывали.

Николай Литвинов был известен слушателям, так как работал по совместительству радиоволшебником. “Помните? ‘Здравствуй, дружок!..’ У нас был порядок. Каждое утро – сказка. После сказки мы отправлялись в садик, где нам говорили про Брежнева, потом возвраща-

лись домой, смотрели ‘Спокойной ночи, малыши!’ с тетей Валей – и спать. И за этим порядком следил Николай Владимирович, добрый советский дух.”<sup>33</sup> Литвинов – пусть и государственный сказочник – в *Радионяне* говорит голосом не учителя, но человека домашнего. Сказочник своей своей узнаваемой интонацией задает столкновение образов терпеливой доброй няни и строгого школьного учителя. Выбор актера был точным, не случайно именно с его смертью передача окончательно прекратила свое существование: любимый детьми и взрослыми клоун Юрий Никулин, которым пытались заменить ведущего, не мог претендовать на статус “няни”.

Представить, кто такие и как выглядят Алик и Шурик, было сложно. Откуда они такие взялись – этот вопрос оставался за рамками передачи. Дети, приученные слушать радио, были знакомы с этой условностью, воссоздавая в воображении образы воображаемых персонажей. Так, например, характерные голоса Кашалота, Мартышки или Стрекозы из *КОАПП* не нуждались в анималистическом достраивании.

То, что недоучками были взрослые “дяденьки”, задавало непривычный для российской традиции образ взрослого, весело играющего в ребенка-шалопаю. Взрослый, сохранивший детские черты, был популярным героем искусства того времени. Рассказ Василия Шукшина ‘Чудик’, актуализировавший человеческий тип нелепого доброго инфантильного взрослого, вышел в свет в 1968 году. Шурик из *Операции Ы* и *Кавказской пленницы*, Семен Семенович Горбунков из *Бриллиантовой руки* Леонида Гайдая, дядя из *Рассказов о Чике Фазиле* Искандера – подобного типа герой был широко представлен в искусстве того времени, но все эти тексты предназначались взрослым.

Взрослые недотепы были знакомы советским детям, вспомним хотя бы ‘Человека рассеянного’ Самуила Маршака или героя стихотворения Даниила Хармса ‘Что это было?’. Кроме того, благодаря Астрид Линдгрен в детскую российскую культуру вошел “в меру упитанный”, инфантильный, жадный, хвастливый, эгоцентричный, хотя и не лишенный обаяния Карлсон,<sup>34</sup> и “странный” взрослый уже не должен был вызывать удивление у аудитории *Радионяни*. Но летающий Карлсон, живущий на крыше, был сказочным персонажем.

Взрослые детей, конечно, играли, но советская культура знала до этого лишь амплуу трагедии, распространенное в Театрах юного зрителя и на эстраде (Янина Жеймо, Мария Бабанова, Рина Зеленая). Амплуа предполагает подражание физическому облику ребенка (рост, конституция, голос). Эта условность в общем контексте театрального или эстрадного представления была знакома зрителю/слушателю. Подобных персонажей не было в известных советским детям литературных и фольклорных текстах. Фольклорные дураки были глупцами в своем возрасте. Многочисленные двоичники советской детской литературы изобража-

лись как заблуждающиеся дети, в итоге самостоятельно выходящие на верную дорогу к знаниям.<sup>35</sup> Учителем для них была сама жизнь, пусть и полная сказочных приключений.

Персонажи *Радионяни* – жизнерадостные самоуверенные безграмотные, но по-своему обаятельные взрослые. Недетский возраст персонажей подчеркивается в скетче, где помощники вспоминали, какие клички были у каждого из них в детстве. Одного из них звали Саша-малаша-манная каша, другого – Левенбук-съел бамбук, и это уравнивало героев с ведущими, так как в конце каждого выпуска звучало, что “в передаче принимали участие Николай Владимирович Литвинов, Александр Лившиц и Александр Левенбук”. Саша и Алик, которых наставляет Николай Владимирович, явно восходили к другой традиции. Подсказку дает один из ведущих *Радионяни* Александр Левенбук, размышляя о причинах популярности передачи:

Мне кажется, что *Радионяня* полюбились слушателям тем, что в ней был элемент необычайного озорства. Кроме того, сам прием оказался довольно симпатичным – два взрослых человека оказались рядом с Николаем Владимировичем Литвиновым – блистательным артистом радио, любимцем детворы. Мы с Сашей Лившицем оказались двумя “шлемазлами” – недотепами, смешными и симпатичными персонажами, и передача очень быстро стала популярной.

Шлимазл – в идиш фольклоре странный, воспринимающийся как неполноценный человек; в зависимости от контекста: неудачник, чудак, дурак.<sup>36</sup> Этот образ был популярен в советской эстраде: использовался в некоторых интермедиях Аркадия Райкина, во второй половине 1960-х гг. Геннадий Хазанов создает маску “учащегося кулинарного техникума”, глуповатого застенчивого обаятельно невезучего парня. Шлимазл добродушен, склонен к фатализму, плохо учится он не от лени, а от неспособности, глупости совершает не со зла. Он хочет нравиться, услужлив, по-своему заботлив, но у него это не получается: он плохо понимает правила коммуникации и все время попадает впросак, само наименование его означает в переводе “отказ от удачи”.<sup>37</sup> Человек, не способный к успешной социализации, оттого получающий возможность жить по своим правилам, а не по требованиям социума, воспринимается тогдашним обществом сочувственно: он свободен и независим; погруженный в свои мелкие несчастья, он не участвует в больших подлостях.

Адаптированные к советской детской аудитории герои идиш фольклора в *Радионяне* существуют на стыке тогдашней официальной и неофициальной культуры. Текст передачи, собственно, погружал в культуру границы: “Сердцевину проекта составляли песни, исполняемые самой

‘няней’ с премилыми обертончиками, даже не то что шансонными – кафешантанскими. Постоянным контекстом этих песен был фирменный, безошибочно узнаваемый конферанс. В песни вставлялись *телеги*, между песнями *гналась пурга*”, – замечает Псой Короленко, по мнению которого в “‘Няне’ счастливо соединились три величайших духа – Советский, Русский и Хасидский эгрегоры”,<sup>38</sup> в результате чего советский инструментальный ансамбль, сопровождавший передачу, превращался в “местечковый клезмер-бэнд”, а школьное знание добывалось через коверканье языка и самонадеянные заявления. Серьезный материал школьных учебников перепевался в смешных песнях, строгий учитель вдруг срывался в безудержное веселье, взрослые не отличались от детей – очевидно, сталкивались несколько подходов к воспитанию.<sup>39</sup>

На жаргоне более позднего времени интонацию *Радионяни* назвали бы *отвязной*, то есть нарушающей предписанные правила. Передача была рассчитана на тех, кто уже приобрел знание, и значит, может наслаждаться отклонениями от нормы, реагировать на языковой или ситуационный комизм. Авторы и исполнители не просто демонстрируют относительность принятых форм отношений учителя и ученика, но смеются над тем, что в советском публичном пространстве высмеиваться не могло по определению. Объектом осмеяния оказывались не только лень, невнимание, самоуверенность, неумение слушать и т. п. качества, присущие младшим подросткам, но и установка на “звериную серьезность” в постижении правил взрослой жизни, и т. п. Традиционная методика преподавания ставится под сомнение самим фактом фамильярного, с точки зрения правил советской школы, обращения с предметом.

Добрый, но настойчивый учитель и шлимазлы веселыми уроками с пением и стишками учили свою аудиторию фамильярно говорить о “священном”, чувствовать относительность существующих дискурсивных правил, делать выводы из самых безнадежно расплывающихся посылок. Можно допустить, что, с точки зрения авторов передачи, это способствовало развитию свободного мышления, раскрепощению фантазии, радостному мироощущению. По сути дела, речь шла о власти над умами детей, о переформатировании их представлений о дозволенном. Популярность передачи, добрая память о ней косвенно утверждают, что в советском обществе в 1970-е годы возникла потребность изменить не только формы общения взрослых и детей, но и способы взаимодействия государства в лице учителя как носителя обязательного знания и частного человека, в принципе не противящегося этому знанию, но предпочитающего получать его в нестрогом развлекательном виде.

Узаконенное двоемыслие эпохи “застоя” становится внутренним стержнем передачи для младших подростков. Развлечение незаметно вышло из-под контроля. Государственный радиоголос утратил дистан-

цию значительности, его стало возможно постоянно перебивать, дробить вопросами, уточнениями, демонстрировать невнимание и даже открытое нежелание его слушать. Строгая иерархия отношений отца-учителя и ребенка-ученика сменяется приятельской фамильярностью. Необязательность подчинения оказалась уроком, для советского общества потенциально куда более разрушительным, чем суровый авторитарный антисоветизм “Свободы”, безапелляционная репортажность “Русской службы” ВВС или открывающий безбрежный мир информационного консьюмеризма “Голос Америки”.

*Радионяня* в своем первоначальном виде завершила свое существование в 1979 году после эмиграции Александра Лившица. Его заменили то Львом Шимеловым, то Владимиром Винокуром, выход передачи утратил регулярность, несколько раз ее пытались реанимировать, но “золотой век” был уже позади. Авторы *Радионяни* разработали и закрепили новый стиль в публичном разговоре с детьми. Его подхватили: с 1975 года Борис Грачевский запускает детский юмористический журнал *Ералаш*, одну за другой выпускает юмористические повести Э. Успенский, с конца 1970-х становится все более фамильярной тональность официальных “пионерских” изданий. Когда новаторский “отвязный” стиль стал едва ли не всеобщим в детской периодике, он перестал производить прежнее впечатление. Изменилась и социокультурная ситуация в СССР. В эпоху крушения государства передача, осторожно расшатывающая социальные рамки, уже не казалась столь привлекательной. *Радионяня*, оставшись в благодарной памяти младших подростков 1970-х годов, ушла в историю.

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#### ПРИМЕЧАНИЯ

- 1 Продавцы в магазинах бытовой техники утверждают, что многие посетители среднего возраста, видя название электронного прибора по слежению за маленьким ребенком – “радионяня”, начинают напевать “Радионяня, радионяня, есть такая передача...”.
- 2 Приведем только несколько примеров: [www.bosonogoe.ru](http://www.bosonogoe.ru); [www.1972-1984.ru](http://www.1972-1984.ru); и др.
- 3 “Радионяня: Правила хорошего тона, или как получить пятерку по поведению” (*Россия: Гостелерадиофонд*, 2008; *‘Радионяня’: Веселые уроки. Грамматика*, вып. 1-5, Ардис, 2009; и т. п.).
- 4 *Радиожурналистика: Учебник*, под ред. А. А. Шереля, Москва, 2000, сс. 70-71.

- 5 Так, в 1969 году на экраны вышел *Сюжет для небольшого рассказа* С. Юткевича, а в 1970 году – *Дядя Ваня* А. Кончаловского, *Чайка* Ю. Карасика, *Карусель. Из записных книжек А. П. Чехова* М. Швейцера.
- 6 Наряду с развлекательностью активно использовались “избирательное” и “критическое” информирование, представлявшее собой обзоры материалов на интересующие общество темы, соответствующим образом отобранные и прокомментированные. Они могли принимать различный облик: от журнала для молодежи *Ровесник* (издавался с 1962 года; к 1970-м годам превратился в основной источник информации по молодежной западной культуре) до сборников издательства Наука *Теории. Школы. Концепции*, выходивших с 1975 года в серии “Идеологическая борьба в современном мире”, посвященных структурализму, рецептивной эстетике, герменевтике и т. п., где подробно реферировались не изданные в СССР научные исследования. Избирательно публикуемые тексты писателей-модернистов или грампластинки с записями самых популярных музыкальных групп также были призваны локализовать и смягчить информационный дефицит в советском обществе.
- 7 Подробнее о самых знаменитых радиопередачах того времени см. рассказы их создателей в: <http://www.tvmuseum.ru/catalog>.
- 8 *Радиожурналистика*, с. 76.
- 9 Е. Лебедева, ‘Радионяня – была такая передача...’, [http://www.tvmuseum.ru/catalog.asp?ob\\_no=7095](http://www.tvmuseum.ru/catalog.asp?ob_no=7095).
- 10 Лебедева, *ibid*.
- 11 Не случайно сборник, посвященный “культурным героям советского детства” именуется *Веселые человечки* (редакторы-составители И. Кукулин, М. Липовецкий, М. Майофис, Москва, 2008), а раскрывает “нестабильность существующих дисциплинарных ‘клеток’ и расшатанность смысловых ‘решеток’, когда лиминальность ‘веселых человечков’ олицетворяла состояние промежуточности позднего социализма” (С. Ушакин, ‘Мы в город Изумрудный...’, *Веселые человечки*, с. 52).
- 12 Например, В. Крепс, К. Минц, *На волне знаменитых капитанов*, Москва, 1974; М. Константиновский, *КОАПП! Сборник радиосценариев*, вып. 1-8, Москва, 1970-1979; Ст. Рассадин, Б. Сарнов, *В стране литературных героев*, Москва, 1979; и др.
- 13 Аркадий Иосифович Хайт (1938-2000). К началу 1970-х гг. автор эстрадных миниатюр Аркадия Райкина, Геннадия Хазанова и других эстрадных исполнителей; выступал на эстраде с концертными номерами. Соавтор сценариев популярнейшей серии мультфильмов *Ну, погоди!* (1969-1986).
- 14 Эдуард Николаевич Успенский (род. в 1937). К 1970 гг. автор ‘Клуба 12 стульев’ в *Литературной газете*, книги *Крокодил Гена и его друзья*, по которой в 1969 году был поставлен мультфильм *Крокодил Гена*. Кроме Успенского и Хайта в авторскую группу “Радионяни” входили Лион Измайлов, Ефим Смолин, Михаил Танич, Михаил Либин, Юрий Энтин.
- 15 Лебедева, *ibid*.

- 16 Александр Семенович Левенбук (род. 1933). С 1957 – артист Мосэстрады, где выступал дуэтом с А. Лившицем. Режиссер, актер. С 1988 – художественный руководитель театра “Шалом” (Москва).
- 17 Александр Борисович Лившиц (1933-2003). С 1957 – артист Мосэстрады. Уехал в Израиль в 1987. Умер в Израиле.
- 18 Николай Владимирович Литвинов (1907-1987), актер. С 1932 работал на радио как актер и режиссер передач для детей.
- 19 См. об этом, например, Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia 1890-1991*, New Haven, 2007; *Антропология советской школы: Культурные универсалии и провинциальные практики. Сборник статей*, сост. и общая ред. С. Г. Леонтьева, К. А. Маслинский, М. А. Ромашова и др., Пермь, 2010.
- 20 Б. Норман, ‘Способность к языковой игре – важный фактор в жизни общества’, <http://news.tut.by/200065.html>. Подробнее об этом см.: Б. Норман, *Игра на гранях языка*, Москва, 2006. Аналогичные явления отмечали в своих статьях Е. А. Земская и М. В. Панов.
- 21 Цит. по: <http://www.mirnov.ru/arhiv/mn788/mn/13-1.php>.
- 22 Первое русское издание книги Б. Спока *Ребенок и уход за ним* вышло в 1970 году. Аналогичные поиски эффективного воспитания в духе сотрудничества происходили в это время в разных странах. Так, в 1969 г. появляется передача *Улица Сезам (Sesame Street)*; в 1974 г. – *Muppet-show (The Muppets Valentine Show)*; в 1975 г. в СССР – уже упоминавшаяся *АБВГДейка*.
- 23 Первое издание книги *Учение с увлечением* пришлось на 1978 год, но в течение 1970-х годов С. Соловейчик публиковал свои тексты на эту тему в подростковых и взрослых периодических изданиях.
- 24 Артем Соловейчик, ‘Воспитание без воспитания’, *Звезда*, 2000, № 12; цит. по: <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2000/12/artem.html>.
- 25 Предполагалось, что эти тексты присылали читатели. Никакой гарантии, что некоторые из них не сочинялись непосредственно авторами передачи, нет. В то же время сбор подобных ошибок культивировался в преподавательских коллективах (их зачитывали на совместных “посиделках”, печатали в стенгазетах и т. п.), являясь формой демонстрации превосходства знания над незнанием, одним из инструментов сплочения преподавательского сообщества.
- 26 В русской детской литературе с 1900-х годов грязнуля, неумеха, фантазер, двоечник становятся любимыми персонажами. Добродетельные герои – это образцы, наделенные качествами, ценными в конкретные исторические периоды; они живут в обстоятельствах, меняющихся вместе со сменой образа жизни, ценностей и т. п., а значит, довольно быстро их поведение начинает нуждаться в комментариях. Разного рода не-знайки близки детям, так как эту ступень социализации все дети обязательно проходят.
- 27 См. об этом: Н. М. Свирина, ‘Школьный мир в произведениях русской литературы конца XIX-начала XX века’, *Нестор. Журнал истории и*

культуры России и Восточной Европы, № 13, 2009, *Мир детства: семья, среда, школа*, сс. 58-74. О роли няни в русской культуре см.: Э. Р. Мур, А. Эткинд, ‘Утомленные солнцем, унесенные ветром: Суррогатное материнство в двух культурах’, *Семейные узы: модели для сборки*, кн. 2, Москва, 2004; В. В. Пономарева, Л. Б. Хорошилова, *Мир русской женщины: Воспитание, образование, судьба. XVIII-начало XX века*, Москва, 2006.

28 В 1968 году в СССР была переведена Памелы Треверс *Мэри Поппинс* (перевод Б. Заходера), где создавался иной тип няни: строгой и эксцентричной волшебницы.

29 Слова М. Лазовского.

30 Цит. по: <http://festival.1september.ru:8080/articles/556214/pril2.doc>.

31 Слушатели передачи рассказывают: “Передача с двумя взрослыми идиомами, как про них говорила моя мама, и этим сказочником” (АВ, 42 года); “Меня всегда звали: Иди слушай своих придурков” (ДХ, 44 года).

32 Автором *АБВГДейки*, которая выходила с 1975 года, также был Э. Успенский. О роли и функции клоуна как социокультурной персоны см.: Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Berlin, 1997.

33 П. Короленко, ‘У нее одна задача’, <http://old.russ.ru/culture/song/20000921-pr.html>.

34 Первая повесть была переведена Лилианой Лунгиной на русский язык в 1957 г., а в 1968 и 1970 гг. появились мультфильмы Бориса Степанцова.

35 См., например, анализ повести В. Медведева ‘Баранкин, будь человеком!’ (1961): М. В. Воловинская, ‘Образ двоечника в советской литературе для детей середины XX века’, *В измерении детства: Сборник статей по материалам Международного научного семинара “Русская детская литература: национальное и региональное” 27-29 февраля 2008 г.*, отв. ред. М. П. Абашева, Пермь, 2008, сс. 138-144.

36 Подробнее об этом персонаже идиш фольклора см., например, Angelo Solomon Rappoport, *The folklore of the Jews*, London, New York, 2007; Дан бен Амос, *Еврейская народная литература*, Москва, 2004.

37 Из идиш שלִימַזְלִי (shlimazl, “misfortune”), и иврита שֶׁל מַזְלִי (shellōmazzāl), שֶׁל (shel, “из, от”) + לֹא (lō, “не”) + מַזְלִי (mazzāl, “удача”) – а также немецко-голландское – “shlecht mazl” = “плохая удача”. Искренне благодарю Дениса Иоффе за сообщенные факты.

38 П. Короленко, ‘У нее одна задача’, цит. по: <http://old.russ.ru/culture/song/20000921-pr.html>. О роли еврейской культуры в формировании советской массовой культуры см., например, Д. Минченков, *Дунаевский. Красный Моцарт*, Москва, 2006. Тема влияния идиш фольклора на советскую детскую культуру, в том числе и смеховую, в силу своей объемности заслуживает отдельного исследования, мы же только намечаем возможность подобного подхода к теме.

39 О сомнительности принципов воспитания, которые отстаивала *Радионяня*, конечно, говорили, в том числе и с детьми. В 1971 году была



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написана сказка С. Михалкова 'Праздник непослушания', где речь как раз идет об опасности отсутствия иерархии в неготовом к этому детском обществе. Оставшиеся без родителей дети в итоге понимают необходимость старших не только как источника безопасности и материального благополучия, но и в качестве тех, кто определяет границы дозволенного.



## LAUGHING AT CARNIVAL MIRRORS: THE COMIC SONGS OF VLADIMIR VYSOCKIJ AND SOVIET POWER

ANTHONY QUALIN

### Abstract

Much of Vladimir Vysotskii's enormous popularity throughout the Soviet Union arose from his audience's appreciation of his humorous songs. The current study's primary focus is on the relationship between these songs and the Soviet State. It explores his use of satire and examines the connection between Vysotskii's comic songs and Russian jokelore culture, examining how they construct Russian masculinity. It also contains an analysis of certain themes in Vysotskii's works in order to discern the ways in which his satires are a response to Soviet totalitarianism and to what degree they consist of universal carnival themes.

Keywords: *Laughter; Vladimir Vysotskii; Songs; Soviet Power*

Much of Vladimir Vysockij's enormous popularity throughout the Soviet Union arose from his audience's appreciation of his humorous songs. In his analysis of a 1997 survey, Leonid Sedov observes the public's "preference for the funny and merry Vysockij over the dramatic and tragic Vysockij" (1999: 58). It would be a gross exaggeration to portray all or even most of Vysockij's comic songs as pointed political satire aimed at the totalitarian Soviet government. However, the poet's comic vision of Soviet reality along with the Soviet establishment's reaction to that vision reveal much about the role of non-official humor in the cultural life of the USSR in the sixties and

seventies. I shall begin with a brief and far from exhaustive exploration of Vysockij's attitudes toward Soviet power, followed by a general overview of Vysockij's humor. I shall explore the connection between Vysockij's comic songs and Russian jokelore culture, examining the manner in which both types of humor construct Russian masculinity. I shall analyze certain themes in Vysockij's works in an attempt to discern the ways in which his satires are a response to Soviet totalitarianism and to what degree they consist of more universal carnival themes.

### I. *Vysockij and the Soviet State*

To a certain extent the very existence of the Vysockij phenomenon belies the concept of a totalitarian Soviet Union in the post-Stalin years. If, as Robert Conquest contends, a totalitarian regime recognizes "no limits to its authority in any sphere" (2000: 74), Vysockij's frequent performances and mass-popularity outside of that authority's control would appear to be evidence that the Soviet Union of the sixties and seventies was not totalitarian. On the other hand, the USSR clearly attempted to control things that are normally outside of the purview of the state. An example of exactly how sensitive the state could be can be found in Vysockij's response to the confiscation of some of his recordings upon the arrest of Andrej Sinjavskij. In a letter to his friend Igor' Kochanovskij he writes, "During the search they took all of the tapes with my songs, and a few things that were somewhat more biting, with my stories and so on. So far there hasn't been any repression, and I haven't noticed anyone spying on me, although I keep on hoping. That's how it is, but it's no big deal, these are new times with new methods. We aren't afraid of anyone and, you know, as Chruščev said, 'We have no political prisoners' [...]"<sup>1</sup> The jokes of which Vysockij speaks are hardly pointed attacks on Soviet ideology. The humor is more silly than political, as Vysockij's narrator vomits on a Soviet Colonel, tells about his experience as a drunken cosmonaut trainee, and describes the bears in Šiškin's famous painting as Lenin, Alexander II, and Nadežda Krupskaja. It is difficult to believe that a state would be so concerned with controlling both public and private discourse as to punish someone for such essentially harmless jokes. That Vysockij was purportedly questioned by the KGB about the recordings and that he felt the recordings' existence could cause him problems reveals the extent to which the Soviet system aspired to a totalitarian control of private and public life. Of course Leninism is neither the first nor the last ideology to mete out punishment for blasphemy aimed at its sacred figures. According to Marija Rozanova, however, the KGB returned the tapes to her, after it attempted to erase the jokes in question. This incident underscores the Soviet state's desire for totalitarian control of even private discourse as well as its hostility toward

unsanctioned humor. It also demonstrates the extent to which it was unable to exert the desired control, as the KGB failed in its attempt to erase materials that it viewed as dangerous.

The episode discussed above occurred in 1963, before Vysockij had become a household name. As Vysockij achieved greater fame and matured as an artist and poet, his relationship with the Soviet system grew quite complex. While he is often portrayed as a rare honest voice in a sea of falsity,<sup>2</sup> there are some who point to his relative material wealth and ability to travel freely as a sign that he had been co-opted by the system (Podorožnyj 2009). Of course, such critics are overlooking the shameful paucity of officially released albums and the almost complete absence of publication of Vysockij's written works. They completely ignore the legal troubles over the financial aspects of his concerts<sup>3</sup> and the prohibition of his employment in numerous films.<sup>4</sup> The anti-Vysockij campaign that began in 1968 and lasted into 1970 also appears to have escaped their notice. Apparently, in the minds of some, Vysockij's French wife and Mercedes more than compensated for his lack of official recognition and the state's rejection of his primary creative activities despite the fact that he was the most popular cultural figure in the nation. On the other hand, Vysockij was far from being a radical anti-Soviet dissident. As he told Dan Rather in a 1976 interview: "I love my country and I don't want to cause it any harm. And I never will!" He also told the Sixty Minutes host, "I have never considered my songs to be protest songs or revolutionary songs" (Vysockij, Rather 2009). Much has been made of Vysockij's inclusion of Lenin (with Garibaldi) as one of his two "most remarkable historical personalities" in a questionnaire that he filled out for the Taganka Theater in 1970. This would seem to evidence either admiration for the Soviet Union's founder, even if Vysockij was not entirely pleased with his nation's current state, or the willingness to compromise principles in order to stem the tide of anti-Vysockij feelings in the press and among the bureaucrats in charge of cultural affairs. Neither conclusion is particularly compatible with the image of Vysockij as an uncompromising opponent of all things Soviet. Less attention, however, is given to two other answers from the same questionnaire. He answers the question "What would be the first thing you would change if you became head of the government?" saying "End censorship", and to "What was the most recent thing to upset you?" he answered simply "Everything" (*Anketa Vladimira Semenoviča Vysockogo* 2010). These answers reveal that even if he admired Lenin, he was unhappy with the state of things around him. The issue of his feelings towards Lenin is further complicated by Vadim Tumanov's claim that he and Vysockij once composed separate lists of one hundred historical figures whom each found unsympathetic, which, according to Tumanov, both contained Lenin (Korman 2006: 337-345). Perhaps rather than devote excessive attention to the question, we can take Vysockij's response to a question about his feelings toward

Russia at face value: “That’s not a question; it’s the subject that I have been working on through my songs for twenty years. So if you really want to know my feelings, try to collect as many of my songs as possible. I love everything that concerns my country’s virtues and I reject everything, I hate a lot of things, that concern its flaws” (Galij 2000: 197).

Among the recurring themes that run through a great many of Vysockij’s works, freedom plays a prominent role. This begs the question as to whether or not singing the praises of freedom is anti-Soviet. At one point in Petr Soldatenkov’s film *I Don’t Like (Ja ne ljublju)* an interviewer tries to get Vysockij to expand on his thoughts on freedom by asking him about the line “I agree to run in a herd, but not under a saddle and without reins” from the song ‘The Ambler’s Run’ (“Я скачу, но я скачу иначе...”). Vysockij’s initial response is that it is not he, but his horse, who utters those words. When the interviewer reminds him that the horse is Vysockij’s horse, Vysockij changes his tack and asks if the interviewer would prefer things the other way around. Thus at first Vysockij distances himself from the point of view of the lyric hero before realizing that the desire to run free should not be seen as such a radical idea. Yet the song *is* subversive, not because it praises freedom, but because it implies that something or someone is saddling and bridling the citizens or at least the creative *intelligentsia* of the Soviet Union.

## II. *Some Elements of Vysockij’s Humor*

The range of Vysockij’s humorous songs encompasses nearly every aspect of Soviet life. He laughs at love relationships, at professions, at sports, at leisure activities, at public obsessions, and at politics. The humor in Vysockij’s songs can be as simple as to be based on word play and on poking fun at common human foibles, but it can also consist of pointed satire. As this paper grew out of a talk on humor and totalitarianism, I will focus on the extent to which various elements of Vysockij’s humor engage the Soviet State. Thus this article’s lack of focus on Vysockij’s masterful word play and my neglect of his ability to create humor with unexpected and inventive rhyme does not mean that I have overlooked them or do not appreciate his talents in these areas. Thus, we shall limit the current study to the following elements in Vysockij’s verse: political satire, reflections of Soviet *anekdot* culture, menippean satire, carnivalization, and possible displays of chauvinism.

## III. *Vysockij as Satirist*

Though much of Vysockij’s comic verse is essentially apolitical a number of his songs consist of pointed satire. Politics can be treated openly as in the

Chinese cycle, in which Vysockij ridicules political movements in Maoist China, or in “I am going to lose my true belief...” (“Потеряю истинную веру...”), in which Vysockij’s narrator criticizes his own government for awarding the title “Hero of the Soviet Union” to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.<sup>5</sup> Despite Vysockij’s contention that he is no Aesop,<sup>6</sup> some of his songs are obvious allegories.<sup>7</sup> In the song ‘Scapegoat’ (“В заповеднике, вот в каком забыл...”) the scapegoat begins as the victim of oppression at the hands of wolves and bears, only to become the oppressor when he attains power. While it may be going too far to read this song as an allegory for the revolution, the theme of the corrupting force of power is obvious. Moreover, as Jakov Korman observes in his *Vladimir Vysockij: Ključ k podtekstu* the song’s parallels to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* are clear (2005: 276). The song “Once upon a time lived a kind fool-simpleton...” (“Жил был добрый дурачина-простофиля...”) is often interpreted as Vysockij’s evaluation of Chruščev’s time in power.<sup>8</sup> Even seemingly apolitical songs like ‘Morning Calisthenics’ (“Вдох глубокий, руки шире...”) can contain what may be viewed as political messages that stick with the listener:

Bad news is nothing to fear –  
 In response we run in place –  
 Even beginners wind up as winners.  
 It’s a thing of beauty – among the runners  
 No one’s first and no one falls behind, –  
 Running in place is a universal concili-  
 ator!  
 (1991, 2: 214)<sup>9</sup>

When asked about the role of life experience in creative work Vysockij responded that imagination is equally important. In this regard, he mentioned his affinity for Swift, Gogol’, and Bulgakov (Perevozčikov 2009). It is no coincidence that all of these authors are known for their satire. Vysockij, too, could be a master satirist. The range of Vysockij’s humorous songs is quite broad, however, and to look for political satire in all of them is to risk over-projecting a singular interpretation. Korman falls into this trap in *Vladimir Vysockij: Ključ k podtekstu*, seeing nearly everything that comes into conflict with the poetic persona as symbols of Soviet power. This approach borders on the absurd when he claims that representations of the Holy Spirit (2006: 242) and Canadian professional hockey players (20) are allegories for the government of the USSR. Likewise, Viktor Bachmač overstates the pointed elements of Vysockij’s humor, contending: “[T]he poet ridiculed the internal bankruptcy of the upper leadership, great power chauvinism, imperialistic complexes, all of which were cultivated by political scientists and ideologues. He also ridiculed the ubiquitous passivity of the masses, who found them-

selves unable to change anything; neither in matters of state nor in their personal lives” (1998: 50). Certainly Vysockij does a have number of pointed satirical songs such as the political verses that I mentioned above and few works which attack personal vices. Of the latter, his songs about envy such as ‘The Envier’s Song’ (“Мой сосед объездил весь союз...”) and “An inexplicable cataclysm has occurred...” (“Произошел необъяснимый катаклизм...”) in particular, are characterized by what Michail Bachtin calls the negative functions of laughter. The social satire in these songs has little in common with what Bachtin refers to as Menippean satire, resembling rather what the theorist dismisses as Heinrich Schneegans’s “narrow modern interpretation of satire as a negation of separate individual phenomena” (Bachtin 1984: 306-307). While I shall discuss carnival and Menippean elements in Vysockij’s verse later in this study, some of the poet’s humor is quite alien to the Bakhtinian concept of the carnival. For instance, the song ‘The Viewing of the Bride’ (“А у соседа пир горой...”) is a particularly biting piece in which nobody, least of all the narrative persona, has a single redeeming quality.<sup>10</sup> Despite the abundance of food and alcohol at the neighbor’s feast it has little else in common with the joyous feasts of Bachtin’s carnival. Even the brawling at the feast is false and perfunctory “and then they fought not out of animosity”<sup>11</sup> and instead of regeneration we are left with degeneration: “And all that was good in them / They finished exterminating” (1991, I: 440).<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. Vysockij’s Verse as “Anekdot” or Antidote to the Soviet Construction of Masculinity

The majority of Vysockij’s humorous songs are only anti-Soviet in the sense that they deal with characters and subject matter that are outside of the official Soviet discourse. In this regard they have much in common with the humor discussed in Seth Graham’s *Resonant dissonance: The Russian joke in cultural context*, in which he explores the social and cultural significance of the *anekdot* or joke in the late Soviet period. Graham employs the term ethnic reflexivity to describe a category of jokes which underscore Russianness and privilege “a cluster of behaviors and character traits that were anathema to state discourse” serving as “an antidote to the constant self-aggrandizement of official discourse” (2009: 95-96). Among the canonical traits of the jokeloric Russian, Graham lists “drunkenness, belligerence, thievery, laziness, sexual boorishness, a compulsion to use profanity, and a knack for incompetent workmanship and destruction of property” (97). Similar traits are very common among the anti-heroes of Vysockij’s humorous songs, which, it seems, appealed to the same desire for a vision of the Russian

character other than “state-produced or state-sanctioned representations of the Russo-Soviet ‘ethnos’” (95).

Much of what Graham has to say about the *anekdot* is also true of Vysockij’s humor. As Georgij Tokarev notes: “In Vysockij’s early songs one clearly senses a poetic, more precisely lyrical [песенный] orientation toward joke telling elements” (2000: 311). Analyzing the “performativity” of the *anekdot*, Graham discusses the “‘Mask’ worn by the *anekdot* performer” (75). Vysockij, who was also an actor, is famous for assuming the roles of a wide range of narrative personae. Moreover, Graham contrasts the simple “naturalistic” performance of *anekdoty* to the “markedly theatrical professional nature of official entertainment during the Stagnation period” (75). Vysockij himself frequently called attention to the contrast between his shows and *estrada* concerts, referring to his performances as “a conversation with his audience, the chance to tell them in one form or another, humorously or seriously, about the things that concern and disturb you” (Vysockij 2000: 137) and dismissing most *estrada* concerts as empty spectacles (145-147). Vysockij insisted that he wanted his performances to resemble the friendly atmosphere of a gathering with friends at a table, which of course was a common place for the telling of *anekdoty*. Graham mentions Vysockij as an inhabitant of “a place on the boundary between official and unofficial culture” (2000: 79) and compares him to the comic Michail Žvaneckij, a performer who “bridged the distance” between the realms of “vetted popular entertainment and everyday public discourse” (76). Vysockij and Žvaneckij also bridged the gap between literature and the *anekdot*, as each of their works began with a written text but reached the audience through performance. Unlike official performers, however, Vysockij strove to create an atmosphere that was more similar to an informal gathering of friends than a professionally produced spectacle. Returning to Graham’s discussion of the jokeloric Russian as a counter-discourse to the artificial and sterile image of the Soviet man, we find that Vysockij’s humor makes him a participant in this nationwide project to construct a more genuine, if not always appealing, image of Russian masculinity.

Vysockij wrote and performed his songs, the vast majority of which are sung in the first person, from the point of view of a broad and varied cast of characters. Although frequently his narrative personae are held up to ridicule, the laughter is seldom vicious and most listeners probably sympathize with the narrators while they are laughing at them. As Iraida Kirillova observes: “[H]e mocks the ‘simple’ man harshly, though neither humiliating nor insulting him, but rather treating him with sympathy” (1999: 328). This is the case, for instance, in ‘A Trip to the City’ (“Я самый непьющий из всех мужиков...”), in which the hero is a comically naïve bumpkin, and ‘Instruction’ (“Я вчера закончил ковку...”), which is narrated by a woefully ignorant worker. The ignorance of the characters in these songs comes into



conflict with absurdities that they are encountering for the first time. Similar to the innocents, such as many of Michail Zoščenko's heroes and Vladimir Vojnovič's Ivan Čonkin, described in Lesley Milne's 'Jokers, Rogues and Innocents', they are "[r]ound eyed and literal in their understanding, they take things at face value, and the comic frustration, failure or chaos caused by their efforts exposes the gap between appearance and reality" (2004: 95). The rural innocent in 'A Trip to the City' is unable to grasp the concept of a Soviet store that sells goods unavailable anywhere else in Moscow but only for foreign currency. The more sophisticated listener may laugh at the narrator's expense, but the joke is really on those who have grown to accept such a system. The worker planning his trip abroad in 'Instruction' has to deal with conflicting images of the world beyond the iron curtain. We laugh at his confusion and his fear that he might embarrass himself and his country while abroad. We realize, however, that one reason for his predicament is that he is being forced to pretend because the truth about the Soviet Union is the real source of his and his nation's feelings of inadequacy. If we return to Graham's analysis of the self-reflective Russian anecdote, we will see that this is a classic case of the typical jokeloric image of Russianness coming into contrast with its official Soviet counterpart. That the instructor has to exhort the narrator to avoid vodka and extramarital affairs abroad indicates that the official Soviet obligation "to be disciplined and impeccable in one's personal behavior and to strictly observe the principles of the moral code of a builder of communism" may not have come naturally to many Soviet citizens. His wife's insistence that he bring fabric home from his trip indicates that she is not concerned with the Soviet policy that dictates that she "not concern herself with the acquisition of various items and valuables" (*Osnovnye pravila povedenija sovetских graždan, vyezžajuščich v kapitalističeskie i razvivajuščiesja strany* 2010).

At times Vysockij's handling of the manner in which Soviet institutions treated many of the nation's people as second class citizens is even more direct and pointed. If 'A Trip to the City' is essentially a jokeloric song with elements of satire, the song "And the people kept on grumbling and grumbling..." ("А люди все роптали и роптали...") is closer to pure satire. It portrays citizens being passed over for a table in a restaurant in favor of foreigners and delegates. While this particular song may seem more plaintive than humorous, Vysockij sings the song to uproarious laughter at a 1970 performance at the home of the actress Ija Savvina. In this private setting, Vysockij underscores the political element of the song by inserting the words "After all it's the fiftieth anniversary of Soviet power! This just cannot be possible!"<sup>13</sup> into the people's lament at the end of the piece. One can argue, however, that Vysockij is actually defending the fundamentals of the Soviet system in "And the people kept on grumbling and grumbling..." and 'A Trip to the City'. Indeed, both songs are written from the perspective of true

believers who cannot accept the incongruity between Soviet ideology and the reality in which they find themselves. The complexity of these seemingly simple songs lies in the listener's attempt to discern the target of the satire. Do these songs attack the anti-Soviet practices that have crept into Russian society in the sixties or are we laughing at the naiveté of those who expect the USSR to live up to its Marxist ideals?

When considering the role of songs that point out the contradictions between Soviet ideology and life in the USSR, we must consider two possibilities. On the one hand, they must surely have undermined the government's authority and helped to foment the widespread lack of identification with the Soviet system that facilitated the later collapse of the system. On the other hand, the opportunity to laugh at the system's absurdities may have served as a safety valve of the sort Michail Bachtin describes in his discussion of the carnival and the rigid church culture of the Middle Ages. These interpretations are not, of course, mutually exclusive. It is most likely that these songs made life easier to bear and allowed some to lead a double life while at the same time they eroded many people's faith in Soviet institutions. This having been said, it would most certainly be an overstatement to hold Vysockij responsible either for the fall of the Soviet Union or for prolonging its existence.

#### *IV. Menippean Satire and Vysockij's Works*

While it is clearly impossible to determine the extent to which Vysockij's humor may have accelerated or delayed the fall of the USSR, the issue of the nation's social, economic, and political situation's effects on his work is considerably less complex. In the article "Človečeskaja komedija" v poëtike Vysockogo, the authors list the stylistic and thematic elements that Vysockij's works share with menippean satires, relying heavily, of course, on Bachtin's description of the genre. No less striking than the similarities between Vysockij and the menippean satirists are the similarities – again according to Bachtin – of certain phenomena in their societies. Of the menippea, Bachtin writes: "It was formed in an era when the national legend was already in decay..." (1984: 119). He later adds: "The other side of this epoch was the devaluation of all external positions that a person might hold in life, their transformation into *roles* played out on the stageboards of the theater of the world in accordance with the wishes of blind fate" (119). Bachtin could easily be describing Vysockij's Soviet Union with these words. Seth Graham implies that Bachtin's description of medieval society reads like an allegory for Soviet society when he notes that Bachtin's "description of medieval carnival culture [...] reads as a virtual allegory for Soviet unofficial culture" (2009: 16). Under these conditions, Vysockij showed a menippean satirist's

interest in “current and topical issues” and his works are frequently described as an encyclopedia of Soviet or Russian life.<sup>14</sup> This echoes the language Bachtin uses to characterize Lucian’s satires: “an entire encyclopedia of the times” (1984: 118).

In the spirit of the menippean satirists, Vysockij peoples his songs with characters from history, myth, and folklore. He is not afraid to profane the sacred, be it traditional religion, as is the case of ‘A Song about the Carpenter Joseph, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, and the Immaculate Conception’ (“Возвращаюся с работы...”) in which he portrays Joseph’s anger at being cuckolded by the Holy Spirit, or be it a combination of religious and Soviet sacred concepts, as in “Revolution in people’s brains from place to place...” (“Переворот в мозгах из края в край...”), in which God is portrayed first as a cruel dictator and then as a drunken beggar. This inverted carnival role reversal (a carnivalization of the carnival, if you will) leaves the listener much more sympathetic to the pauper God on the church doorstep than to the all powerful God in judgment. Perhaps more blasphemous in Soviet terms is the song’s parody of the revolution through an attempt to build paradise in Hell and its portrayal of both God and Satan as quasi-Soviet leaders. The former decrees executions and the latter orders a military parade and sings the praises of productive labor. Perhaps because of the subject matter, Vysockij never performed this song at large public concerts. The only existing recordings are from small gatherings of friends (Kobačev 2009).

Many of the historical, mythological, and folkloric figures in Vysockij’s songs behave as if they were Vysockij’s contemporary compatriots. Though she warns the Trojans of their imminent doom, Cassandra is ignored by those in power, because that is what those in power are expected to do (“Долго Троя в положении осадном...”). A similar fate meets the seers who predict Grand Prince Oleg’s death (“Как ныне собирается Вещий Олег...”). Mona Lisa tricks Leonardo da Vinci into marrying her so that she can have a member of the intelligentsia as a husband (“Может быть выпив поллитру...”). Russian folk characters and the inhabitants of Puškin’s *lukomor’e* are all shown to live petty lives with few concerns other than drinking and obtaining material goods in “Puškin’s seaside is no more...” (“Лукоморья больше нет...”). While it could be argued that Vysockij is portraying the demoralizing effects of life in the Soviet Union, it is equally plausible to contend that these songs express the universality of human frailties, demonstrating that they are not unique to Vysockij’s Soviet Union. Some would contend that the latter argument is not applicable to “Puškin’s seaside is no more...”; arguing that the characters have clearly degraded since the time of Puškin.<sup>15</sup> It can be argued equally convincingly, however, that the song is “simply an *anekdot* on the subject of Puškin’s seaside [лукоморье] in our days” (Tokarev 2000: 311). Whether it is through mythical and historical figures or grotesques based on simple Soviet citizens, Vysockij’s songs pro-

vide a form of defamiliarization that leads his readers to see the absurdity of everyday events and behaviors in a fresh and perhaps cleansing light. It is, however, hard to disagree with Dmitrij Kurilov's contention that the evil connected with the Soviet system is not absolute in Vysockij's songs and that the absurdities about which he writes are of a truly existential nature (1999: 248).

There is, however, a fairly pronounced political element in the songs in which Vysockij employs the menippean device of the "representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man" (Bachtin 1984: 116). Vysockij has several works set in mental institutions.<sup>16</sup> As Vysockij assumes the role of the madman, it is hard to tell if his laments are about the state of life in the institution or in the entire USSR. The listener is left to interpret the meaning of "our" in the song "I told myself, 'Give up writing'..." ("Сказал себе я: брось писать...") in which Vysockij sings: "And if you were to tell Gogol' about our miserable life, / My God, that Gogol' wouldn't believe us!" (1991, 1: 118).<sup>17</sup> That an anti-Vysockij article published in *Tjumenskij kom-somolec* in 1968 cites these lines as evidence of Vysockij's anti-Soviet nature demonstrates how easy it was to interpret the song as an attack on all things Soviet.

Bachmač devotes several pages of his dissertation to an analysis of 'A Letter to the Producers of the Television Show "Seeing is Believing" from the Mental Institution from Kanatčikova Dača' ("Дорогая передача!.."). He cites Bachtin's observation that "In a folk grotesque madness is a mirthful parody of official intelligence, of the one-dimensional solemnity of official 'truth'" (Bachmač 1998: 90-91). He points out the ways in which the mental patients' speech parodies elements of the official discourse, citing verses about, among other things, jamming American radio broadcasts and crushing Israel (91). He concludes: "The theme of madness permitted the bard, through the language of irony and the grotesque, to express the truth about the surrounding world, where 'everything is wrong'" (93). To limit the song's critique of the "surrounding world" to the Soviet system, however, would do a great disservice to Vysockij. Even the verses "We didn't make a scandal – / We didn't have a leader. / There aren't many truly violent patients here – / That's why we have no chiefs"<sup>18</sup> in which the use of the word "вождь", an epithet often used to describe Stalin (and Lenin), could be seen to imply that Stalin (and maybe Lenin along with him) was violent, are probably best read as a universal condemnation of those with the will to power, rather than a narrow attack on past Soviet leaders.

V. *Carnival Elements in Vysockij's Verse*

A number of observers have commented on the carnival elements in Vysockij's works.<sup>19</sup> His ability to assume numerous personalities is seen as the wearing of masks. His characters are frequently fools who find themselves elevated to positions of power or glory as is the case with the above-mentioned scapegoat and foolish simpleton. One of Vysockij's comic masterpieces, 'The Honor of the Chess Crown' ("Я кричал: Вы что там, обалдели?.." and "Только прилетели сразу сели...") is a two song cycle about a sports club tough guy who is sent to play Bobby Fischer for the world chess championship. Though he has been elevated to a place among the sporting elite, the simple man remains unable to think about much more than eating, drinking, and physical violence. The theme of elevating a simple citizen to a position of power is repeated once in each song as the hero mentions a pawn's ability to become a queen. At the end of the second song, the hero bares his biceps and begins to rise from his chair, thus managing to force Fischer to agree to a draw. We are not shown the hero's dethroning, but we certainly expect it. Yet, while the hero is elevated to power like a carnival king, the other elements of the carnival are absent because he must repress his Russianness in order to be an ideal Soviet sportsman. He cannot drink during the match and they only serve coffee and omelets to eat. The comic tension builds as the Russian everyman struggles with his Soviet mask until finally he has all he can stand and reveals himself for the *muzhik* that he is. Of course the humor in these songs is not confined to the above-mentioned tensions. The listener laughs at Vysockij's narrator's belief that training in other sports will prepare him for success in the "sport" of chess. Vysockij makes puns on chess terms, taking advantage of the fact that the Russian terms for taking a piece are connected to eating and striking a physical blow. Finally the versification of the song enhances the humorous effect. The ABAB CDCCD rhyme scheme wherein the B and D verse are masculine rhymes creates a feeling of acceleration and panic, with a sudden braking at the last masculine rhyme of each stanza. This acceleration with an abrupt ending evinces a physical blow, underscoring the violent threats of the narrator "I don't need mate to crush him!" (1984, I: 384),<sup>20</sup> "Or a move with the horse to the head!" (387),<sup>21</sup> "Well why shouldn't he fear me / When I bench a hundred and fifty kilos!" (387).<sup>22</sup> The performance of the piece allows the author to make the audience feel the exclamation points found in the written text, as he lands each line like a blow to the audience's head. Yet the violence is playful, carnival violence which allows the artist and the listener to play out and mock simultaneously fantasies of a hypermasculine Russianness in contrast to the Soviet ideal of the cerebral, cultured chess champion, who defeats a Western opponent, thus demonstrating the superiority of the Soviet system.

Perhaps the most carnival of all images in Vysockij's works is the Pantagruelian appetite for alcohol demonstrated by the narrators of his so-called anti-alcohol songs. Fitting their Dionysian subject matter, the best known of these songs also contain images of rebirth. The song beginning "Oy, where was I yesterday – I can't figure it out to save my life [literally even if you *kill me*]" ("Ой, где был я вчера – не найду, хоть убей!.."; emphasis added – A.Q.) the narrator opens with an image of death and forgetting. The song's closing stanza, however, finds the hero reborn and ready to live, "It's a good thing that the widow / Was able to endure the whole thing / She took pity on me – / And took me in to *live* with her [emphasis added – A.Q.]" (179).<sup>23</sup> The ending of 'Police Report' ("Считай по-нашему, мы выпили не много...") finds the hero planning the next day with great optimism, no matter how misplaced.

The political aspect of Vysockij's anti-alcohol songs is minor, but not completely lacking. The drunk from 'Police Report' takes no responsibility for his condition, blaming instead the government run alcohol industry, saying "And if vodka weren't made of sawdust, / What'd five bottles do to us" (366).<sup>24</sup> The narrator of "Oy, where was I yesterday..." may have drunk most of his alcohol by choice, but there is a point in the song when he recalls that one of his tormentors forcibly poured vodka into his mouth. Taken by themselves, these readings may seem forced, but in one of Vysockij's most serious poems "I never believed in mirages..." ("Я никогда не верил в миражи...") the lyric persona laments, "And though we weren't mowed down by firing squads, / We lived not daring to raise our eyes, – / We, too, are children of Russia's terrifying years, / The stagnant times [безвременье] poured vodka into us" (II: 175).<sup>25</sup>

#### VI. *Politically Incorrect or Apolitically Incorrect? Possible Chauvinism in Vysockij's Works*

Returning to the survey mentioned in the present study's introduction, we find that the four comic songs among the respondents' top ten favorite Vysockij songs are all relatively devoid of political content.<sup>26</sup> The most popular of these songs, 'Dialog in Front of the Television' ("Ой, Вань, гляди, какие клоуны..."), is a simple family drama. Alcohol plays a role in this song, too, but there is no evidence that either character drinks out of despair caused by the system. The only possible conflict with Soviet institutions is caused by the complaints Zina sends to Vanja's workplace. While this is a fairly minor detail, it does echo the theme found in 'The Invisible One' ("Сижу ли я, пишу ли я...") of women using official institutions to effect changes in their personal relationships with men. We have already briefly discussed the second song on the list, 'Morning Calisthenics', which, other than the final

stanza, has little or no political connotations. Perhaps the fourth song on the list, 'Why Did the Aborigines Eat Cook' ("Не хватайтесь за чужие талии...") has as little political content as any of Vysockij's songs.<sup>27</sup>

Of all of the songs on the respondents' top ten, perhaps 'A Ditty about Nothing or What Happened in Africa' ("В желтой жаркой Африке...") is potentially the most controversial. If this song has any political commentary it is as a chauvinistic attack on official Soviet nationalities policy. The giraffe's justification of his love for the antelope echoes Soviet slogans of the equality of its peoples: "Now our fauna / Is equal to the last horn" (I: 227).<sup>28</sup> The song ends with the giraffe's daughter's marriage to a buffalo; an event that causes the giraffe family great grief. In the final stanza we are told simply: "Maybe the giraffe was wrong, – / But the giraffe isn't the one to blame..." (228).<sup>29</sup> Here the reader is left with much room for interpretation. The giraffe could have been wrong in deciding to marry the antelope, but he could have been wrong in his hypocritical stance toward his daughter's marriage. Thus, while a political reading of this song can certainly be challenged, Vysockij may be attacking the Soviet dogma that all peoples are equal or he could be condemning mixed marriage.<sup>30</sup> It must be said, however, that if there is racism in this song, it is arguably unique in Vysockij's literary oeuvre.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in the song 'Life Flew' ("Я сам с Ростова, я вообще подкидыш...") the narrator identifies with a frequent target of Russian racists who were also victimized by Stalinist mass deportations, the Chechens. There is also nothing in his many biographies that shows Vysockij to be racially prejudiced. Vysockij does have songs that deal with anti-Semitism, the most well known of which are "Miška Šifman is a brainiac..." ("Мишка Шифман башковит...") and "Why should I be considered a punk and a bandit..." ("Зачем мне считаться шпаной с бандитом..."). The latter of these songs is somewhat ambiguous in that the narrator is a Russian who aspires to become an anti-Semite. I have encountered people who attribute the views of the narrator of this song to Vysockij himself, although most recognize it as a social satire. The journalist Aleksandr Šojchet (2009) understands the distance between Vysockij and the narrator, but argues that the subject matter is not appropriate for such coarse humor. "Miška Šifman" undermines the foundation of anti-Semitism by revealing that Miška and the narrator are essentially identical, despite their radically different genealogies. These songs do have a political element, because although anti-Semitism is a personal failing, both songs imply that it is tolerated and even facilitated by the Soviet government.

There is at least one other area where Vysockij's disagreement with official Soviet ideology is somewhat less than progressive and that is the treatment of women.<sup>32</sup> Some of Vysockij's comic songs display marked misogynist tendencies. This is especially true of his early songs, though it can be argued that the misogyny found in these works is a parody of the criminal

mentality of the songs' stylized *blatnye* lyric heroes. Nevertheless, songs such as "I didn't beat women until the age of seventeen..." ("Я женщин не бил до семнадцати лет...") and "Why you bitch..." ("Что ж ты зараза...") contain considerable disrespect toward women, whether it is purely parodic or a hyperbolic expression of genuine misogynist tendencies. At times Vysockij even expresses anti-feminist feelings outside of his songs – but within his performances, introducing, for example, the song 'She's been to Paris' ("Наверно, я погиб: глаза закрою – вижу...") by saying: "That is, this song is directed against the emancipation of women, for the most part" (Vysockij 2009b).<sup>33</sup> Of course, this attitude toward women is another element Vysockij's humor has in common with the *anekdot* culture. Much of Emil Draitser's *Making War, Not Love: Gender and Sexuality in Russian Humor* is devoted to exploring the prevalence of misogynist themes in Russian jokelore. While this element of Vysockij's humor may make a western listener uncomfortable, one might find comfort in Draitser's caveat: "While male jokes are indicative of prevailing attitudes toward women, it would be wrong to assume that a man telling these jokes fully subscribes to the stereotypes he plays with" (Draitser 1999: 8). On the other hand the extent to which such attitudes were perpetuated by the counter discourse of Soviet nonofficial humor, including that of Vysockij, may have exacerbated the misogyny of post-Soviet Russian culture, as official myths of Soviet identity faded and a new Russian identity began to be constructed in part on the basis of the counter discourse found in humor.

The general lack of a strong political message in the respondents' favorite humorous Vysockij songs stands in contrast to their favorite serious songs, three of which – 'Wolf Hunt' ("Рвуть из сил – и из всех сухожилий..."), 'White Steam Bath' ("Протопи ты мне баньку, хозяйюшка...") and "I don't like" ("Я не люблю фатального исхода...") have heavy socio-political content. This may be taken as evidence that the listeners prefer their politics serious and their humor apolitical. Alternatively, however, one could conclude that listeners who favor political pieces ranked only serious songs in their top ten and that those voters would have chosen Vysockij's political humor over his other comic songs if the poll had been worded differently.

If Vysockij's humorous songs were limited in function to attacking the Soviet Union, they would have lost much relevance in today's world. Many of them laugh at vices that are universal and eternal. Others, it could be argued, perpetuate vices such as misogyny that are common throughout all times and places. For better and for worse, his jokeloric vision of the world allowed him to participate as a leading figure in the nationwide construction of Russian masculinity as a counter discourse to the official image of the Soviet man. Perhaps the strongest anti-Soviet effect of Vysockij's songs, however, was the defamiliarization he brought to common situations by



showing them through the eyes of simple folk, historical and folkloric figures, and those accused of being mentally disturbed. This carnival view of reality, stripped of the inertia of habit, is the enemy of any monolithic system that requires its routines and dogmas to be carried out automatically. Yet, that Vysockij's songs are relevant to this day reveals the extent to which such systems are not the exclusive domain of "totalitarian" states.

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NOTES

- 1 "При обыске у него забрали все пленки с моими песнями и еще кое с чем похлеще – с рассказами и так далее. Пока никаких репрессий не последовало, и слежки за собой не замечаю, хотя я надежды не теряю. Вот так, но ничего, сейчас другие времена, другие методы, мы никого не боимся, и вообще, как сказал Хрущев, у нас нет политзаключенных [...]" (<http://www.irrkut.narod.ru/stati/kgb.htm>). Here and throughout this article, with the exceptions of Michail Bachtin's works, all translations from the Russian are my own.
- 2 Andrej Skobelev and Sergej Šaulov, for example, call his songs a "touchstone of truth" (2001: 8) and Soviet society a "universal masquerade" and a "theater of lies" (19). Viktor Bachmač cites a poem by Ljudmila Lichoded in which she states "В угоду моде песен он не пишет, / На службе у лжецов не состоит. / Он служит Правде, Правдою он дышит [sic]. / Он Правде верит и на том стоит" ("He does not write songs to please the trends. / He does not serve the liars. / He serves Truth. He breathes Truth / He is loyal to Truth and on that he stands"; 1998: 97).
- 3 See Bakin (1984: 598-601).
- 4 One of Vysockij's most meticulous biographers, Mark Cybul'skij, counts over 60 films in which Vysockij's participation was rejected as an actor or composer. For a discussion of the difficulties he had in getting permission to act in films, see Bakin (1984: 365-368). For a discussion of legal problems connected with his concerts, see Bakin (252-265).
- 5 The best known songs in the Chinese cycle begin "The weather in Peking is very gloomy..." ("В Пекине очень мрачная погода..."), "Mao Zedong is a great big goon..." ("Мао Цзедун – большой шалун..."), and "Near the city of Peking..." ("Возле города Пекина..."). Throughout the current article, I shall reference all songs by their opening words. This will allow the reader to find the songs using the alphabetical concordance in Vysockij (1991: 513-533) or by using the search feature at the web site: <http://www.kulichki.com/vv/>. In instances where I cite the text of a song, I will provide a parenthetical reference to the volume and page number from Vysockij (1991).

- 6 See Vysockij's 1971 song, "I will completely clarify all the questions..." ("Я все вопросы освещу сполна..."), in which he writes, "And now I'll talk about the main thing. / One guy standing modestly in the corner, / Asked 'And what did you have in mind / In this song in this and in this line?' / The answer: I am not the reincarnation of Aesop, / I have no hostility hidden in my pockets – don't bother, – / And what I meant – that's what I wrote – / I've turned my pockets out – have a look!" ("Теперь я к основному перейду. / Один, стоявший скромно в уголке, / Спросил: 'А что имели вы в виду / В такой-то песне и в такой-то строчке?' / Ответ: во мне Эзоп не воскресал, / В кармане фиги нет – не суетитесь, – / А что имел в виду – то написал, – / Вот – вывернул карманы – убедитесь!"); 1991, 1: 324-325).
- 7 The key word here is "obvious". In the verse cited in the previous footnote Vysockij objects to the view of his poems as secret expressions of dissatisfaction. Vysockij appears to have felt that he made his social and political positions known clearly.
- 8 See Bakin (2005: 315) and Cybul'skij (2004: 511).
- 9 "Не страшны дурные вести – / Мы в ответ бежим на месте, – / В выигрыше даже начинающий. / Красота – среди бегущих / Первых нет и отстающих, – / Бег на месте общеприми- / ряющий!"
- 10 For an alternate reading of this text, see Bachmač (1998: 107) who contends that the listener sympathizes with the song's narrator. I remain unconvinced.
- 11 "Потом дрались не по злобе."
- 12 "И все хорошее в себе / Доистребили." For a description of how another song with superficially carnivalesque images is alien to the spirit of the carnival as interpreted by Bachtin, see Dmitrij Kurilov's analysis of the song 'Masks' ("Смеюсь навзрыд, как у кривых зеркал...") in which the masks, portrayed from a "subjective romantic" point of view, have lost their "regenerative power" and become tools of concealment and deception (1999: 248-250).
- 13 "Ведь пятьдесят лет советской власти! Ну это невозможно!"
- 14 An Internet search quickly reveals how ubiquitous this description is. Examples can be found in Kulagin's *Poëzija Vysockogo: tvorčeskaja evoljucija* (1997: 10) and on the website *Megaënciklopedija Kirilla i Mefodija* (2009).
- 15 See Bachmač (1998: 79-84).
- 16 Vysockij had experienced such institutions firsthand, having been treated for alcoholism in a psychiatric hospital in 1965 and 1968 (Bakin 2005: 155, 239).
- 17 "И рассказать бы Гоголю про нашу жизнь убогую, / Ей-богу, этот Гоголь бы нам не поверил бы!"
- 18 Мы не сделали скандала – / Нам вождя не доставало. / Настоящих буйных мало – / Вот и нету вожаков.
- 19 I recommend Dmitrij Kurilov's treatment of this theme in his article "Karnaval'nye" ballady Galiča i Vysockogo' (Kurilov 1999).
- 20 "Я его без мата задавлю!" Note also the playful, ambivalent use of the word "мат" meaning either "checkmate" or "foul language".

- 21 “Или – ход конем – по голове!”
- 22 “Ну еще б ему меня не опасаться – / Когда я лежа жму сто пятьдесят!”
- 23 “Хорошо, что вдова / Все смогла пережить, / Пожалела меня – / И взяла  
к себе *жить*” (emphasis added – A.Q.).
- 24 “И если б водку гнать не из опилок, / то че б нам было с пяти бутылок?”
- 25 “И нас хотя расстрелы не косили, / Но жили мы поднять не смея глаз, – /  
Мы тоже дети страшных лет России, / Безвременье вливало водку в нас.”  
Vysockij was not alone in attributing social causes to alcoholism. In *Moscow  
to the End of the Line (Moskva-Petuški*, also translated into English as  
*Russian Circles*), Venedikt Erofeev’s narrator implies that alcohol is a sur-  
rogate for something lacking in society: “This is what people have given me  
in exchange for that for which my soul longs! And if they had given me that,  
then really would I have needed *this*?” (“Вот что дали мне люди взамен  
того, по чему тоскует душа! А если б они мне дали того, разве нуждался  
бы я в *этом*?”; 1995: 45).
- 26 It is certainly no coincidence that these are among the songs most often  
performed by Vysockij, although other frequently performed comic songs  
with slightly higher political and social content such as ‘Marathon’ (“Я беру,  
беру...”) and ‘A Song about Reincarnation’ (“Кто верит в Маромета...”) were  
performed even more often but did not make the list.
- 27 Jakov Korman (2006) does not share my opinion here. He posits that Cook  
represents Vysockij’s lyric hero, the aborigines represent the rest of the  
people, and their chief represents Soviet power.
- 28 “Нынче в нашей фауне / Равны все порогово.”
- 29 “Пусть жираф был неправ, – / Но виновен не жираф...”
- 30 An example of the latter reading of this song can be found in Evgenij  
Merzon’s article ‘Vysockij kak zerkalo pravogo lagerja ili “S kem vy, mastera  
kul’ tury?”’ (Merzon 2003).
- 31 Other instances of what arguably can be seen as racism in Vysockij’s works  
include the use of the word “Papuan” (“Папуас”) in its common Russian  
meaning to imply “uncivilized” in the song “In the far off constellation Tau-  
Kita” (“В далеком созвездии Тау-Кита...”) and the use of the epithet “fierce  
savages” (“злые дикари”) to describe the Polynesian cannibals in “Why did  
the Aborigines eat Cook?” (“Не хватайтесь за чужие талии...”). He also  
sings the song “A Letter from a Tashkent Fruit Vendor at the Central Market”  
 (“Жора и Аркадий Вайнер!..”) from the point of view of an Uzbek fruit  
merchant, adopting the stereotypical Uzbek accent and making grammatical  
errors. The latter song is not included in Vysockij’s *Sočinenija*. It can be  
found at the following web site: <http://www.bards.ru/archives/part.php?id=15613>. Vysockij also employs Jewish and Caucasian accents in the jokes  
he tells at Andrej Sinjavskij’s home. None of the above cited examples,  
however, appear particularly mean spirited.
- 32 The key word here is, of course, “official”. The institutional, cultural, and  
domestic inequality imposed on women in the Soviet Union was, I believe,  
self-evident. Indeed, to underscore the lack of interest in defending women’s

rights in the USSR during the time of stagnation, there is no criticism of Vysockij's misogyny among the charges of "anti-Soviet" behavior leveled at him in the late sixties.

- 33 "Значит, эта песня направлена против эмансипации женщин, в основном."

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## SUBVERSIVE SONGS IN LIMINAL SPACE: WOMEN'S POLITICAL ČASTUŠKI IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

LAURA J. OLSON

### Abstract

Women are not known for their political satire, but they do traditionally engage in carnival laughter. During the Soviet period women engaged in political *chastushki*, which combine both types of humor. These could be either subversive and underground (and could lead to arrest) or official and used for reeducation. In the post-Soviet period, elder rural women demonstrated their attunement to both of these Soviet contexts. The community quality of the *chastushka* form and its context, the public village forum, held out the promise of safety. Political *chastushki* helped women construct a social identity with a distinct public voice.

Keywords: *Laughter; Chastushki*

Evaluating women's participation in totalitarian laughter is a challenge for cultural critics, due to the scarcity of public venues in which women participated in the production of humor. For example in literature, only a handful of female authors chose satirical humor as the focus of their art.<sup>1</sup> In the arena of amateur satirical theatrical performances, women had no place (or a purely ornamental place): the "laughter of the mind" was associated with men.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for women's peripheral participation in public satirical discourse are related to what Nancy Walker calls "a complex web of cultural assumptions about woman's intelligence, competence, and 'proper role'". Walker writes: "As long as woman is viewed as helpmate, sex object, and

domestic servant, she cannot at the same time be allowed the capacity for humor, with its implication of superiority and its fundamental critique of social reality” (1988: 98). The same is true in folk and popular cultures. Anthropologist Mahadev Apte surveys numerous studies showing that in patriarchy, women are largely excluded from the production of laughter (Apte 1985: 69).

But the assertions about women’s peripheral participation in laughter all have to do with a certain kind of humor: what Michail Bachtin terms unidirectional satirical laughter, and what Apte calls “verbal aggressive humor” or “tricky and clever” humor. Such humor laughs at the flaws and foibles of others, positing the speaker’s, and by extension the listener’s, superiority. Women do commonly participate in another kind of humor, which roughly corresponds to Bachtin’s concept of double-voiced or carnival laughter. This laughter is ambivalent and body-centered: it conjures up ironies and mediates between incongruities, is bawdy and playful in its mocking (Bachtin 1984: 11-12). Cultural critics may call this kind of laughter subversive, when it defies social rules rather than transmitting or upholding them (Green 1990 [1977]: 33). These women’s traditions are often practiced separately from mainstream culture, and in women-only groups. Apte observes that the collective nature of such folk practices helps to overcome prohibitions that would be applied if these women acted individually. In non-industrial societies, often only post-menopausal women can participate in aggressive, tricky or clever humor (1985: 71, 78).

I wish to focus here specifically upon women’s involvement in a type of folk discourse that combines elements of both of these types of humor: political *častuški*.<sup>3</sup> *Častuški* (sg. *častuška*) are short ditties (two, four, or six lines of trochaic trimeter or tetrameter) that are sung to instrumental accompaniment (accordion and/or balalaika) or recited. These songs are generally performed in spontaneous group situations: an individual singer or pair sing a *častuška*, and other singers join in with their own. In the twentieth century, scholars often identified *častuški* as a women’s genre, although men also sang or declaimed them; but politics is generally seen as a man’s topic. When women intentionally enter the arena of political discourse through the medium of sung folk satirical poetry, then we are seeing an interesting application of women’s folk discourse as a means of communication with a “public” audience – an audience linked with the nation, rather than women’s immediate social group (their cohort, their village). The two cases I wish to examine in this paper, which took place in the post-Soviet period, each involve elder rural Russian women performing politically satirical *častuški* for audiences beyond their own village. In order to understand this phenomenon, we need to take a closer look at the *častuška* genre itself and its changing functions as folklore in the Soviet period.



*Origins and Gender Associations of "Častuški"*

The first *častuški* to appear in print were published in P.V. Šejn's *Russkie narodnye pesni* (1870). The term was first used in 1889 in an article by G.I. Uspenskij; folk terms for the genre are numerous, and include *častuški*, *pripevki*, *prigudki*, *pribaski*, *korotuški*, *sobiruški*, etc. (Alexander 1976: 337; Pogadaev 2008: 42). This variety of musical terms is just one sign of the great variety of regional and local styles and usages of *častuški* (Gippius 1936: 102-103; Kuleva 2008). Scholars disagree about the origins of the genre. Some argue that *častuški* appeared in the late nineteenth century when city culture pervasively influenced rural culture due to industrialization (Zelenin 1994 [1901]: 27; Bachtin 1966: 11). The poetry of the *častuška*, with its rhyme scheme and tonic or syllabo-tonic verse, is clearly literary in origin. However, many other scholars have argued persuasively that *častuški* are versions of traditional short dance songs that were sung during weddings, calendar holidays, or other rituals (Sobolevskij 1902: 2-3; Eleonskaja 1914; Banin and Burmistrov 1997, Kuleva 2008, etc.).

The scholarly debate has some bearing on the question of the original gender of *častuška*-singers. Those who saw *častuški*'s origins in factory and tavern settings in the late nineteenth century attributed them to young men, for it was primarily men who worked in factories and who imported city culture to the village. Conversely, if one sees the roots of the genre in village dances, then the likely originators were women. However, as Dmitrij Zelenin has argued, even if its roots were in urban and literary culture, the *častuška* developed as a village genre and was folklorized there (1994: 37). In the village setting in the early twentieth century, *častuški* were observed to have been sung by both men and women at village holiday gatherings. The two genders often sang or declaimed *častuški* using different musical and intonational stylistic markers and vocabulary (Ėdemskij 1905; Eleonskaja 1910; Knatc 1928). By the mid-twentieth century, women predominated as creators and singers of *častuški*. The reasons for the shift included a greater proportion of men who migrated out of the village, and also the experience in World War II: while soldiers did not favor the genre, women who stayed in villages invented thousands of new *častuški* (Bachtin 1966: 47).

Many Russian *častuški* are about love; only a small percentage express satire about political or economic events or states of affairs. However, as Zelenin and others have shown, no matter what the subject, *častuški* represent an individual's point of view and often take a position against the traditional or socially prescribed outlook. Thus, the ethics of this genre can be characterized by daring, novelty, and challenge to authority (1994: 32; see also Husband 2004). To be sure, Isabel Tirado has shown that women's *častuški* from the 1920s about courtship, marriage, and the family expressed traditional values and gender roles, but there was evidence of new expectations

(Tirado 1993: 4). That is, the speakers in women's *častuški* seemed to take for granted that their individual opinions would be heard, as evidenced by their articulation of many conflicting opinions (see, for example, Tirado 1993: 17). Further, as Marcelline Hutton has observed, the women's *častuški* also expressed views about fashion, technology, religion, spousal abuse, divorce, and politics (2001: 150). Indeed, Zelenin likened the *častuška* to a newspaper gossip column in its attempt to convey the latest happenings of political and social life (1999: 465)

Throughout the twentieth century, *častuški* were typically associated with youth and youthfulness, even when sung by pensioners. *Častuški* reached a peak in popularity in the 1920s, and their popularity was further stimulated in the 1930s by officially sponsored public contests (Olympiads, *smotry*) for collection and performance – on the level of the collective farm, region, city and province (La Pasha 2001). After World War II, the genre became less popular with young people, and was associated with middle-aged or older people (Kolpakova 1967: 35; Dmitrieva 1972). Changes in folklore's traditional function played a large role in bringing women into this realm of political folk discourse.

#### *“Častuški” in the Soviet Context*

Although *častuški* have continued to be linked with village culture, they also spread to cities starting in the early twentieth century; Zelenin wrote in 1922 that urban and village elements were so intertwined in *častuški* that it was often impossible to tell whether a given text had been created in the city or village (Zelenin 1999: 467). A. Archipova and Sergej Nekljudov argue that the catastrophic events of the early twentieth century (wars, revolution, internal migration, hunger) led to a “displacement of peoples” which hastened the exchange of information between people of different social statuses, who heretofore had little chance for contact. This mutual “interference” had its effects upon folklore:

Крестьяне, например, чье осмысление действительности, как правило, не выходило за пределы кругозора своей деревни, обрели небывалую дотоле возможность соотносить происходящее вокруг с событиями государственного масштаба и с действиями власти; соответственно, вполне традиционные фольклорные тексты стали получать не имевшую ранее референцию к актуальной политической истории. (Archipova, Nekljudov 2010)

Peasants, for example, whose understanding of reality, as a rule, did not exceed the boundaries of their own village, acquired the possibility – which they had not possessed previously – to relate local events to the



policies: a sort of answer in a dialogue between the authorities and the “people” (for the metaphor of the dialogue see Archipova, Nekljudov 2010).

Throughout the Soviet period, officials in charge of the ideological reeducation of the population recognized the value of *častuški* as propaganda. For example, starting in the 1920s party leaders called for the use of lively, understandable, and relevant means to conduct anti-religious propaganda targeted specifically at rural women, who continued to practice Orthodoxy and to believe in the supernatural. In a time of budgetary scarcity, ethnographers were given funds to study folklore, including *častuški*, with the condition that they “introduce alterations and additions” in publications for mass consumption in order to help with antireligious propaganda (Andreev 1931: 3; Husband 2004: 97-98). The ethnographers who publicly embraced this tactic included the eminent folklorist Jurij Sokolov, who spoke about the need to rid Soviet society of prison and bourgeois folklore – all while he continued to add to his large collection of precisely this type of folklore (Archipova, Nekljudov 2010). Other authors of such texts included Komsomol members and members of so-called “agit-brigades”, composed of professional and amateur producers of theatrical and musical propaganda in regional houses of culture, factory clubs, and, more rarely, village clubs. The groups based in regional centers often traveled to villages to present their material. Here they would collect and adapt for new use local *častuški*, and also present newly composed *častuški* (Tirado 1993: 51-52; Bjalosinskaja 1966). The mode used in these poetic texts was a specific type of satire: as one critic described it, praising the satirical caricatures of Boris Efimov, who drew for *Izvestija*, *Pravda*, and *Krokodil* (the leading satirical magazine): “the healthy humor [...] of an optimist” (Gnedin 1935: 5; Norris 2009). Such humor remains within the limits of mimesis, leaving intact the principal reference points of good and evil, state and its structures (Ostromoukhova 2009). For example, one set of *častuški* criticized the leadership of the kolhoz agronomist in the sowing of millet:

Агроном Колесников	Agronomist Kolesnikov
По полю гуляет	Walks around the field
Просо поверху лежит	The millet is lying on the top
Он не замечает	And he doesn't notice
Припев:	Refrain:
Хорошо ли сеяли?	Did they sow it well?
Невнимательно.	Not attentively.
Куры просо клюют?	Will the chickens eat the millet?
Обязательно.	Absolutely.
(Bjalosinskaja 1966: 229)	

Such texts ended up being used only for a short time: they were "disposable", and became folklorized only with significant changes, or not at all. One can see the difference between this text criticizing the agronomist's direction of the millet-sowing and the genuinely folkloric texts. The spontaneously created folklore makes use of hyperbole ("The five-year-plan has killed us"), cursing language – also a hyperbolic expression – ("May you disappear"), and black humor ("Get up, Lenin!"). These *častuški* are carnivalesque in their evocation of death and rebirth, their reversals of established hierarchies (calling for Lenin to take on Stalin, wife cursing and disobeying both husband and Soviet power) (Bachtin 1984: 80-81). By contrast, the composed texts use mild expressions with simple negation of the desired behavior ("he doesn't notice"; "not attentively"), without disturbing existing values and hierarchies. As Archipova and Nekljudov point out, such implanted texts would have to correspond to the world-view of the recipients in order to be accepted and transmitted further; in the Soviet Union, they largely did not. Nonetheless, as I will argue here, they did influence the production of folkloric *častuški* among rural people (see also Tirado 1993: 51-52).

The sources of political *častuški* texts cited so far have been official legal documents. Despite the danger, a few individuals did carry out unofficial collection of political *častuški* during the Soviet period. One of these collectors was A.D. Volkov (b. 1923), who first heard political *častuški* during World War II while he was in the hospital and the patients would go on outings in the countryside. Within the hospital itself people spoke them in a whisper rather than singing them (Volkov 1999: 492). In the cities, the recitation of political *častuški* was limited to private contexts, in which people had confidence in each other and could be reasonably certain not to be overheard or observed. By contrast, village culture allowed for multiple public contexts in which satirical *častuški* could be performed. These included young people's parties, in homes in the winter and outdoors in summer (492). But with the advent of Gorbačev's policy of *glasnost* in 1986, the situation changed dramatically. Volkov wrote, "людей как прорвало!" ("it was as if it burst out of people"). Now it was possible to hear things that earlier people would have been afraid to whisper to each other (494).

### *Women's Political "Častuški" in the Post-Soviet Village*

My own examples occurred in rural contexts just after the boom in self-expression initiated by *glasnost*. My first example took place in the mid-1990s, in a village in Rjazan' *oblast'*. A group of women in their 70s (born 1919-1924) regularly performed *častuški*, including bawdy and political *častuški*, at local and government-sponsored celebrations in the regional center. During our visit, they performed their *častuški* for a visiting audience con-

sisting of an ethnomusicologist from Moscow, whom they had known for several years, and an unfamiliar group of Americans, who had come to study their regional musical style. Before singing the political *častuški*, the leader and author of the texts, whom I will call Valentina Blinnikova, leaned over and in a whisper asked the ethnomusicologist for permission to sing them. She recited two of their most bitter verses as examples. The ethnomusicologist gave her consent, and they commenced.

In my second example, which took place in Vologda *oblast'* in 2004, a woman in her late 70s (b. 1926), an author of political *častuški*, said she was not willing to share with unfamiliar visitors (myself and a Russian university student) her *častuški* about the kolkhoz, “колхозные частушки”, because she feared she would be arrested. Nonetheless she recited a few that she said were “nothing”, and allowed my assistant to film with my video camera individual pages of her notebook, where she wrote down her *častuški*.

Despite the encouragement of self-expression under glasnost and the official end of censorship in 1991, in the 1990s and 2000s these elder women were still afraid of being arrested or punished for their critical *častuški*. While we assured them that nothing would happen if their *častuški* were performed publicly, they had reason to fear reprisals. One reason may have to do with these women's long experience of repression and the mechanisms of censorship (which I mean in a broad sense – the necessity for prior approval for any publication or performance). Such experiences made a strong impression upon the Soviet population that has continued to this day; as Martin Dewhurst points out, the mindset affects the work of professional journalists, who still engage in old Soviet habits of censor-like editing and self-censorship (2002: 29-30). Paradoxically, performing self-censorship may constitute not just an ingrained habit but an unconscious desire: many Russians today wish for the restoration of censorship as a means of returning to the Soviet status quo of “certainties, limits, predictability and security” (Dewhurst 2002: 31).

Following Erving Goffman, I argue that *častuški*, like jokes, function as socially “framed” discourse that exists in a negotiated domain. The performance of *častuški* must be authorized by both performer and audience; such performances both reveal and disrupt power relations (Goffman 1974: 10; Preston 1997: 473). My examples show tension between women's local social power and their perceived powerlessness before the might of the State. As village elders, these women performed the traditional role of *bol'sučha*, female head of household. *Bol'sučhi* could and did command the obedience of all married women and unmarried men – in their own households, and in many cases, also in the whole village. Their position situated them as moral judges of others' conduct: while they could themselves be judged by their husbands or their peers, their social position included a societal expectation that they would pronounce judgment on all those who came within their sphere of power. As Svetlana Adonyeva writes, “The *bol'sučhi* oversaw the

behavior of all members of the rural community by helping to form public opinion and to make that opinion known" (Olson, Adonyeva 2012).

In the Soviet era, according to Adonyeva, this situation changed, but in ways that increased the moral powers of the *bol'sucha*. Increasingly in the 1940s and 1950s, male heads of household – *bol'saki* – did not behave as *bol'saki* but instead absented themselves from the home situation, since the source of prestige was the State rather than the homestead. With the gradual disintegration of the status of male householders and the rise of the cult of motherhood, the institution of the *bol'sucha* gathered strength. In the village – and this had influence in the city as well – female heads of household now held sway over their married sons and other men in the community as well as unmarried men. The only power above the *bol'sucha* was the State and its organs (including local representatives thereof) (Olson, Adonyeva 2012).

Both of the women in my examples appeared to emphasize their powerless status by, in the first case, deferring to the Moscow ethnomusicologist for approval, and in the second, playing the role of potential victim, with phrases like "I might be arrested". But the very performance of satirical *častuški* brought with it cultural capital. The women's reputation for witty *častuški* led to elevated social status locally, and it also raised their status vis-à-vis their visitors. The author of the *častuški* in my second example, whom I'll call Tat'jana Vorob'eva, sensed this and played upon it. She told me not to record her "колхозные частушки", but changed her mind several times during the interview and indeed sang and recited some. Finally she said if I visited again, we could "договориться" (make a deal). She had already proudly recounted how two notebooks of her *častuški* were in the regional museum; how, for *častuška* performances at the village and regional centers, she had won a vase, some fabric for a dress, a chocolate bar, and a third-place medal; and how a TV crew came for her 70th birthday to film a segment about her. Likely a visit by an American would be added to the list of the ways in which her words had been acknowledged. More than that, it was confirmation that her *častuški* – her life's creative work – were valued. Her voice was heard.

Indeed, it was precisely the hearing of that voice that Vorob'eva both feared and desired. *Častuški* are quintessentially public speech: the genre's raison d'être lies in its ability to make individual speech theatrical. Adoneva likens the genre to quotation marks that both allow the speaker to share responsibility for his or her utterance with the community, and permit the community to attribute the utterance to an individual (Adoneva 2004: 155-156, 164). With political *častuški* we clearly see this tension between the *častuška*'s public nature on the one hand, and its individual basis on the other. In the Soviet context, *častuški* commenting upon and invoking Moscow (the Center) were only performable due to their symbolic distance from the Center. From the individual's point of view, the use of the *častuška* form

effectively put what one sang in quotes so that individual responsibility was shared with the group. The public village forum functioned as a liminal space in which the sense of being surrounded by “свои” (one’s own) held out the promise of one’s safety.

As Margaret Paxson has argued, politically irreverent *častuški* also performed the function of coalescing villagers’ feeling of being a group (a “свои”-group) in opposition to the center of power. Likely the action of aiming collective and individual barbs at an enemy carried with it certain characteristics of the ancient Greek concept of *agon* – a scripted, conventional struggle (Adoneva 2004: 148, 152).<sup>4</sup> Some *častuški* that Paxson analyzes convey the sense of separateness from central powers, as if the singers were saying “leave us alone” (Paxson 2005: 305-306). But the state did not leave villagers alone: danger was ever present. An informant told Paxson about a situation in which outsiders, policemen, attempted to “civilize” the villagers by arresting those who sang *častuški* critical of an unwed mother. While the village space could function symbolically as a safe zone, it could not do so in practice, especially with the implementation of Soviet policies, such as the clubs or “дома культуры” (houses of culture), designed to control and civilize villagers (Paxson 2005: 307).

Thus, survivors of totalitarianism were all too aware that even if a person’s words were socially bracketed, one could still land in jail for them. For Vorob’eva, the threat of publication or collection of her *častuški* exposed her to danger (she was particularly worried about my recording devices). Paradoxically, in the glasnost era, the active exposé quality of journalism – a policy intended to increase debate – may have increased the feeling of a threat of exposure for rural women. In this context, oral performance of folk and popular culture – that which is not written down or fixed – may have provided a refuge from governmental control and menace. I refer to Mary Magoulick’s articulation of the reasons for women’s participation in folk and popular culture: “Women, like any underclass, have a better chance of maintaining control over their own artistic expressions in spontaneous and grassroots situations than they do in forms with high profiles and/or profit potentials”.<sup>5</sup>

If that is the case – if Tat’jana really fears being arrested, then why does she write down her *častuški*, rather than simply performing them as oral lore? She said she writes them down to remember them, and that her notebook served her as a kind of diary.<sup>6</sup> A prevalent stereotype of the Russian peasant excludes the notion that she or he will collect folklore, but we found that all over Russia, rural dwellers have their own collections of texts that they use and identify with. As Adoneva argues, these notebooks serve active *častuška* performers as a kind of “*častuška* dictionary” that enables them to find the right material to connect to any situation (Adoneva 2004: 173-174). The writings form a personal body of texts from which their owners can draw



when the social need arises. They are a social repertoire, similar to the personal stories that individuals insert into conversations at appropriate situations. We gain social status and help to construct our social identity with such contributions. In the case of Vorob'eva, many of these are texts she herself authored, so they are in a sense personal stories (or rather poetic texts that imply stories). These collections also constitute archives of memory. The authors can use them like a photo album to reminisce and remember important moments: when a visiting ethnographer asks about *častuški*, the notebooks come out – probably not upon first visit, but certainly upon subsequent visits.

The idea of authorship is important as well. In Vorob'eva's notebook of political *častuški*, she has written on the top of several of its pages the phrase "своего сочинения" (of my own authorship).<sup>7</sup> For these rural women, the *častuška* likely functioned as a political voice and an outlet for their intellectual talents. As *bol'shuchi* they had power within their own homes, and local power to judge members of the community; but as women and as agricultural workers, they were doubly marginalized in the Soviet Union. Traditional views of women's roles curtailed women's access to opportunities for advancement in the public sphere (Engel 2004: 172-173). Occupational segregation in the countryside severely reduced opportunities for women to find well paid and interesting work, leaving many women feeling unfulfilled while the country as a whole grew more educated and skilled (Bridger 1987: 158; Denisova 2003: 179-180, 266-267). In this context authorship (and particularly written authorship) may have offered a possibility to ensure one's own voice was heard.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, folklore was an arena in which rural women were encouraged to create during the Soviet period – the amateur artistic activity movement centered upon it. But which models of *častuška* texts did Vorob'eva copy in her compositions: the uni-directional, blunted satirical barbs of the officially composed texts or the carnivalesque mockery of grassroots naughty *častuški*? Both were influential, and her *častuški* may be visualized as spread out along an axis from uni- to multi-directional laughter.

In this context Vorob'eva's spoken comments about criticism of the political and economic situation are particularly interesting. During our visit, while Vorob'eva recited *častuški* critical of the kolkhoz, of Gorbachev, and of many aspects of daily economic life, her neighbor, also a woman in her 70s, voiced darkly negative comments about poverty nowadays: "Нет, много [...] и таких! Что очень плохо" ("There's a lot of people who are doing very badly!"). Vorob'eva reacted strongly to this, shouting: "У нас добра, Ангелина [...] ты не говори што худо!" ("We have it good, Angelina, don't say things are bad!"). Vorob'eva's cousin seconded this thought, linking criticism with lack of patriotism: "Много-то не хульте [...] нашу-то Россию-Матушку" ("Don't slam [...] our Mother Russia so much").<sup>9</sup> For them, to speak

criticism went against a deeply held value.<sup>10</sup> But *častuški* were apparently exempt, even though they expressed essentially the same sentiment. Why?

One possible reason is that the kinds of criticisms in Vorob'eva's texts were often very specific – reminiscent of the permitted satirical discourse in official publications, such as *Krokodil*, and of the government-authored satirical *častuški* implanted in villages. For example, Vorob'eva criticized the way the kolkhoz handled the flax, leaving it on the field to rot and forcing the village's pensioners to go out in the fields with rakes to try to save it:

Лен лежит, лежит ленок	Flax is lying, flax is lying
Почернел как уголек	It's gotten black as coal
Пришли бабушки с гравлям	The grannies came with rakes
Поднимали целым дням	To rake it for several days
Пенсионеры лен снимали	The pensioners raked up the flax
И трудились целым дням	They labored for several days
Но их труд не оправдался,	But their labor was all for naught
Замочило все к чертям	Everything got wet as hell.

To be sure, this set of *častuški* does not constitute “optimistic humor”, as did the politely worded *častuška* about the millet (“Did they sow it well? / Not attentively. / Will the chickens eat the millet? / Absolutely”). Vorob'eva's description of the flax as “black as coal” and the *častuška*'s final line “Everything got wet as hell” lend a dark tone to the basic story of kolkhoz ineptitude. Yet similar to the “authorized” *častuška*, it criticizes a specific agricultural misdeed rather than a systemic problem. Furthermore, like the implanted *častuški*, it uses official language (“трудились” [labored]; “труд не оправдался” [labor was all for naught, was not justified]) rather than the language of the street characteristic of many grassroots *častuški*.

This is moral satire: not funny, but sharp and barbed. Vorob'eva herself called it “ловко”, clever or adroit, suggesting a kind of satire in which one defeats one's enemy with verbal eloquence. This pair of *častuški* expresses the author's point of view as a *bol'suča-staruča* (an elder female head of household), by showing the speaker's alignment with the pensioners who tried to clean up the agricultural misdeed, and her attitude of superiority towards the authorities who committed the mistake. Vorob'eva's notebook is full of examples of *častuški* offering such a superior attitude. The following *častuška* about Gorbačev is a particularly good example. Not ambivalent or subversive, in fact it reconfirms Soviet values:

В президенты Миша лез	Misha climbed towards the presidency
Да его не выбрали	But they didn't elect him
Развалил страну советов	He ruined the 'Country of Soviets'
Из Кремля-то выгнали.	And they kicked him out of the Kremlin.

Some of her other *častuški* were more carnivalesque, however. One text was about *blat* [nepotism, bribery]: a tractor driver becomes a good choice of husband if one can get deliveries of needed goods from him. The text is joyfully ambivalent: although sung by a real-life "mother" (*bol'sučha* – Vorob'eva herself), the text is spoken from the point of view of a daughter, who argues that tractor-drivers are good catches because of the perquisites they bring a family. On the other hand, the text criticizes the economic situation in which hay and firewood need to be procured via illegal means:

Полюбила тракториста	I fell in love with a tractor-driver
Думала что мать убьет	I thought my mother would kill me
Не ругай меня мамаша	Don't yell at me, Mom:
Дров и сена привезет	He'll deliver firewood and hay.

In another *častuška* Vorob'eva criticized the quantity and quality of meat in double-voiced fashion. But she inserted this *častuška* within a story that limited its meaning, suggesting that only *some* meat is poor quality, and attributing the notion that "there is no meat" to a visiting tractor driver:

Пришел ко мне тракторист, вот который ко мне сейчас ходит-то,  
он на силосование был  
< что был?>

силосовав, силосовали, корм, да, вот, а куру-то видно худую  
резали, сухую. Вот. Говорит, поворот и говорят, что нет мяса. [...] нет мяса-то, нет ничего, однако все. А пока он сидев, чай пил, и я с им вместе сидела и мы все чай пьем вместе с им. Вот я частушку сложила:

The tractor driver, the one who comes to me now, came to see me, he was making silage. <What was he?> Making silage, for feed, yeah and well, probably they had butchered a skinny chicken, a dry one, see. So he says, they say there's no meat [...] there's no meat, there's nothing, but that's it. And while he's sitting and drinking tea, and I sat with him and we drank tea together. And I made up a *častuška*:

Корову резали опять,	Again they butchered a cow
Трактористам на обед	For the tractor drivers' lunch
Погрызем костья ребята,	Let's gnaw bones, Boys,
Даром мяса-то и нет.	Who cares that there's no meat!

This *častuška* is double-voiced in its ironic mediation between incongruous positions: the speaker suggests a strong disparity between the expected lunch for the hard-working laborers and the resulting bones, which leads to the ironic conclusion that "who cares" about the lack of meat anyway. Yet Vorob'eva's story attempts to limit this *častuška*'s ambivalence by tying it

explicitly to a single personal experience. Her comments make this *častuška* exempt from the interdiction on cursing Mother Russia, as if she were saying, “it’s not subversive speech, it’s about my personal experience”. But on the other hand, it is subversive speech. The *častuška* form allows its author to be both active and passive, emphasizes both personal initiative and group responsibility. This dual quality of publicly performed *častuški* makes these utterances tantamount to performatives, Adoneva argues: in bringing the private to the public, the *častuška* performance does not simply talk about reality, it affects reality (Adoneva 2004: 171, 179). In her analysis Adoneva is showing how the performance of *častuški* about personal life affects the local social reality: singing “I got even” with a rival helps one to get even. One might guess that political *častuški* constitute a different case, that here is one arena where the individual can never affect reality. Of course, a person cannot make meat appear on tables by singing a *častuška*; no one can get even with totalitarianism, or even with post-totalitarianism. But one can still affect the social reality with one’s song. One can perform interpretation, as if underlining or putting quotation marks around one’s words: “I am staking my claim to this utterance. Challenge me if you disagree!” If political *častuški* are performatives on the social level, that means their intent is not about changing the substandard economic and political reality. Rather, their intent is to raise the social status of the singer by suggesting she is in a position of power in relation to reality.

My other example, which took place earlier, in the 1990s, represents a very different application of the *častuška* genre. With these musical performances of the Rjazan’ collective, it is not an individual affecting social reality through the *častuška*. Rather, the group nature of the singing offers protection from accusations of subversive speech. The ambivalent, carnival quality of these political *častuški* also suggests that their pronouncements will not be taken as harmful criticism:

Эх ты, сыграй-ка, гармонист,  
Ты сармача у горюшка.  
Не от радости поём,  
А поём от горюшка.

Accordionist, play “Sarmača”  
For [our] misery  
We’re not singing from joy,  
We’re singing from misery.

Всего много, всего много  
Продают в палатках,  
А у наших стариков  
Все штаны в заплатках.

So much stuff, so much stuff  
Is for sale in the markets  
But our old folks’ pants  
Are in tatters.

Очень ловко сообразили  
Начальники высшие.  
Стала кучка богачей,  
А остальные – нищие.

Our leaders thought things out  
Really cleverly  
There’s a crowd of rich folks  
And the rest are poor.

Все старушки деньги клали <нрзб> на книжку клали Все правители всё знали, Сразу всех и обокрали.	All the old women put their money In the bank All the leaders knew what to do They immediately robbed everyone.
Довели нас демократы, На подворье нет овцы, Покупателей не стало, Везде только продавцы.	The democrats cheated us There are no sheep in the pens There are no buyers in the markets There are only sellers everywhere.
На деревне каждый двор Разводил раньше коров, А теперь правители Развели одних воров.	In the village every household Used to raise a cow But now the leaders Are raising only robbers.
Раньше пряли, сами ткали, Шили штаны модные, А теперь купили джинсы Год ходим голодные.	We used to spin and weave And sew our own fashionable pants But now if we buy jeans We go hungry for a year.
Раньше если обижали, Мы в райком скорей бежали.	It used to be if we got offended We'd run to the Regional Commission
Теперь грабят без стыда, Жаловаться некуда.	But now people steal shamelessly And there's no place to complain.
А мы частушки сочиняли И ногами топали, А теперь мы вас попросим, Чтобы вы похлопали.	We made up our <i>častuški</i> And stamped our feet And now we'd like you To clap for us.

Taken as a set, the political *častuški* of Valentina Blinnikova and her group take on the point of view of a local, grassroots group with intact common sense and deficient financial means. This group distinguishes itself from an "Other", – "bosses", "rulers", and "democrats", – who steal from and manipulate the poor folks. The criticisms are lighthearted due to the musical form and the manner of performance. For example, the major chord structure, the high whoops imitating the sound of laughter ("i-e-ha-ha!"), the clapping, and the accordion and balalaika accompaniment, which underlines each sung text with a cadence, all contribute to the lighthearted interpretation of the texts. It is as if their performance is saying, "we are harmless, we are fun". The musical presentation emphasizes the clowning nature of the *častuška*: it is social play.

The texts of these *častuški* also emphasize incongruity. They use the trope, typical for perestroika and early post-Soviet era, that everything is the

opposite of what it was. Contrasts are made between earlier vs. now, good vs. bad, Russian vs. foreign, Communism vs. democracy. Usually this dichotomy is emphasized with a dissimilarity between the meanings of the rhyming words, e.g. “высшие” – “нищие” (high-low), “клали” – “обокрали” (putting in – taking away).<sup>11</sup> The second term of the pair contrasts with the first, while the rhyme, which resolves difference into sameness and usually provides a feeling of reassurance or satisfaction, here underscores the irony of the disparity, and endows each piece with humor (Faber 1988).

This is criticism that appeals to common sense, a sense of moral decency and valuing of tradition; it is performative in that it assumes, implies, and acquires the listener’s agreement. “Why wouldn’t you agree,” it seems to say: “we are backed by the wisdom of the collective and of tradition; and anyway, it’s all in fun (but serious – wink!).” Like the verbal form (“we”) of these *častuški*, the sung form emphasizes the group aspect of the identity of the speakers: the first two lines of the first quatrain are introduced by the solo singer, Blinnikova herself, and after an instrumental interlude, the chorus repeats the couplet. Without a pause, Blinnikova sings the next couplet solo. Thus, each couplet is first sung by the soloist and then repeated by the chorus. This has the effect of a Greek chorus backing up what the speaker has just said. Musically, the pause in between the repetitions of each line has at least three important effects: first, the listener has to wait longer for the rhyme to be resolved in the second line of the couplet (one waits through two repetitions of the first line, plus instrumental interlude), which emphasizes the incongruity; second, it gives the musical feeling that the chorus is introducing, not echoing, the repeated line (since the chorus’s line is the introductory melodic phrase of the couplet); and third, it makes it seem as though each *častuška* grows logically out of the previous one (thus implying that they are a set rather than individual texts). Perhaps the musical solidarity of this collective provides the key to why this group was less afraid than Vorob’eva of performing their criticisms in public. Their social play makes their status slippery: they cannot be pinned down, and if “caught” they could simply point to their innocence as poor old folks, who only want a return to the former state of affairs.

Of course, this raises a question: what kinds of political *častuški* did these same women sing during the pre-Gorbačev Soviet era? Was there a corresponding place in their lives for such critique, even though their current *častuški* relate to the Soviet era with nostalgia? Since I collected no political *častuški* from them which could be definitely placed to the pre-perestroika era, I cannot answer this definitively; I can only speculate. The evidence of legal cases (Volkov 1999; Paxson 2005) suggests that many women did: the challenge of battling with the mighty giant of totalitarianism was tremendously attractive. This was true despite the equal power of the trope of what Paxson calls the “radiant past” – the time, always in the past, when

people lived simply, everyone was equal, and everyone got along. This nostalgia for the past provides inspiration for the future: it is a way of connecting with the group, the sense of belonging to a "свои"-community. It also provides a way of judging the present. Thus, to sing one's criticism of how things are now does not negate the nostalgia and the corresponding dream.

That that dream is both tangible and much desired comes across strongly in these *častuški*. It is clear that we are looking at the discourse of powerful older women, no longer bound to humility and obedience. Citizens of a new Russia, they are no longer frightened into silence, yet their discourse is informed by texts and moral categories that held sway during the Soviet period. But even if the ideas and ideologies behind those categories are fixed, the playful ambivalence of their humor makes the status of the singers a liminal one: in calling up laughter, these women stand upon ambivalent territory and become mediators. This role is a remarkable one for women: as Cathy Preston writes of women's joke-telling, "when we tell [a] joke, we laugh at cultural attempts to control and thereby erase us" (Preston 1994: 37).

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, entries on Valentina Dmitrieva (1859-1947), and Teffi (Nadežda Lochvickaja) (1872-1952) in *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* (Ledkovsky et al. 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> Bella Ostromoukhova, comments about paper at the Totalitarian Laughter conference at Princeton University 2009. See also Dmitriev (1998: 189): "Ввиду неразвитости феминистского движения в России чисто женский юмор в политике, кажется, совершенно отсутствует" ("In view of the lack of development of the feminist movement in Russia, women's political humor seems to be completely absent").
- <sup>3</sup> *Častuški* are generally trochaic trimeter or tetrameter and with a rhyme scheme ABCB. They are most commonly sung with accompaniment by accordion or accordion and balalaika, but may be sung without any accompaniment. I define political *častuški* broadly, to include any *častuški* offering commentary on political or economic realia.
- <sup>4</sup> Adoneva speaks of battles taking place in the forum of *častuški* within the community, whereas here I am emphasizing the insiders vs. outsiders element.
- <sup>5</sup> Magoulick (2006).

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- 6 Tat'jana's words were: "He пою, да забуду, я каждый день пела, бывает да постынут [...] Она [тетрадь] у меня никуда не девается. Это она у меня как дневник."
- 7 Whether she is in fact author can of course be questioned. In other words, Vorob'eva may not be entirely aware of the degree of "folk" authorship of her *častuški*. She may be recycling well-known material, either parts or whole *častuški*. My thanks to Mark Leiderman for this insight.
- 8 In the same vein, the rural female (b. 1915) author of an autobiography said she wrote in order not to disappear like a grain of sand. Kozlova, Sandomirskaja (1996).
- 9 Unidentified neighbor, Tat'jana Vorob'eva and Pavel Kozlov, interview with author, 27 October 2004.
- 10 The conversation could well have been influenced by my presence, and/or by the presence of her cousin.
- 11 For a similar example see Volkov (1999: 245, #1504).

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## THE *STIOB* OF AGES: CARNIVALESQUE TRADITIONS IN SOVIET ROCK AND RELATED COUNTERCULTURE<sup>1</sup>

MARK YOFFE

### Abstract

This paper discusses the humorous tradition of Russian *stiob* in light of Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and his theory of speech forms. In it I try to show the mechanics of *stiob*, the theoretical platform beneath it and the mechanics of construction of *stiob* utterances. In this article I provide a short historical overview of *stiob* as it is encountered in the Russian folk-humorous tradition from the early Middle Ages to modernity. Showing how deeply *stiob* permeates modern Russian cultural discourse I give examples from political life and dwell in detail on manifestations of *stiob* in Russian rock music. Here I focus my attention particularly on the creative findings of the Moscow rock band *Zvuki Mu*, and analyze the band's humor in light of the tradition of Russian Holy Fools (*iurodivye*).

Keywords: *Laughter*; "*Stiob*"; *Soviet Rock*; *Mamonov*

I approach problems of *stiob* ("crëb") not exactly from the point of view of a traditional literary scholar or theoretician. My professional background in this respect is mostly one of a collector and a fieldwork ethnologist, and many of my observations regarding *stiob* are informed by the firsthand experience received through interactions with members of the Soviet and Russian counter-cultural underground. I left the Soviet Union in the seventies – much too early, in the period when *stiob* had not yet become as prevalent a form of cultural discourse as it became later in the 80s and 90s, and as it still is to a great

degree today. I had to learn *stiob* on the fly, while I did my fieldwork in the Moscow and St. Petersburg rock music living environment.

I had to learn *stiob* for three major reasons:

1. to be naturally accepted by the relevant counterculture community;
2. not to miss anything that was happening around me in terms of verbal and non-verbal gestures;
3. and most of all for self-preservation, because as an alien and an outsider I was subjected to an endless amount of *stiob* often of a very aggressive variety. Being able to detect *stiob* and react to it accordingly gains you trust and respect, especially if you can out-*stiob* people who *stiob* you.

This paper does not claim to be a definitive work on *stiob*. It aims to share with the readers some of my observations about *stiob*, to share some of my findings, and most of all to invite further investigation and discussion of the subject. With *stiob* being an issue of rather huge proportions, and a phenomenon of complex, changeable and varied nature, I feel that it is best to study it with a group of diverse colleagues, bringing to the table their different perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

Having said that I will allow myself to make a rather bold suggestion: that *stiob* be studied and viewed similarly to *skaz* as a specific, definable and separate form of discourse, characterized by specific formal devices, specific stylistic means, specific verbal and non-verbal gestures, all of which form a codified system of turning discourse into *stiob*.

I would like to introduce several *stiob*-related items of vocabulary that I invented:

*to stiob* – to produce a *stiob* utterance, to aim a *stiob*-like utterance at someone;

*stiobbing* – act of producing a *stiob* utterance, as in: “They were mercilessly *stiobbing* him”;

*stiobber* – someone who produces a *stiob* utterance;

*stiobbee* – someone on the receiving end of a *stiob* utterance.

Unlike *skaz* however, *stiob* is not a purely literary phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> It is a general cultural phenomenon as it is encountered in music, on TV, in film, in the arena of political discourse, in visual arts, in design, fashion, simply in every-day verbal interactions of people. I suspect that it even seeped into architecture, because some of these super-eclectic, hideously post-modern private residences for the Russian nouveaux riches that surround Moscow and other cities are not necessarily products of bad architects, but they can be products of some kind of architectural *stiob*.

There is no easy way to translate *stiob*, and there is no single English word with corresponding meaning. In Russian the word literally means “to whip”, “to lash” – from the verb *стебать*: “стебать”, “стебнуть”, “стебывать” → “стегать”; “хлестать”.<sup>4</sup>

This however explains hardly anything about the current semantic usage of the term *stiob*.

John Dunn uses this definition of *stiob* as: “[a] type of intellectual mischief-making in which symbols are openly (i.e. in print) deflated by their demonstrative use in the context of parody” (he translates this definition from an article by Lev Gladkov and Boris Dubin ‘Ideologija bez strukturnosti’, that appeared in *Znamja* magazine in 1994).<sup>5</sup>

Berkeley anthropologist Aleksei Yurchak famously defined *stiob* as: a type of humor characterized by extreme “overidentification” with the object of mockery.<sup>6</sup> This is a good definition based on keen observation, but perhaps incomplete as it does not tell us all that there is to tell about *stiob*. I prefer to characterize *stiob* as a form of ironic mockery, parodic double-talk engaged in by the “initiated”, or those “in the know” who presume that their utterances, aside from signifying the obvious, also signify something else, often the opposite of what is being stated straightforwardly, often making fun of it, rendering it absurd or exposing its false and hypocritical nature. *Stiob* is a very complex form of humorous cultural discourse that deeply permeates Russian culture.

*Stiob* also is related to the English concept of *camp*, though *stiob* presumes much more than the traditional definition of camp: liking of tasteless, bizarre, and outlandish things. (This definition is derived from Susan Sontag’s *Notes on Camp*.)<sup>7</sup> The notions are related, but *stiob* is a much wider phenomenon. I dare say that camp is always *stiob*, but *stiob* is not always camp, or rather that camp is a sub-genre of *stiob*.

*Stiob* is essentially a conceptualist phenomenon. It is rarely done “just because”, but always has an attitude to relate, to make a point, or is based upon a concept underlying it. This is why *stiob* found its greatest artistic expression in the work of a variety of contemporary Russian literary figures and artists: the poet Timur Kibirov can be considered, among other things, a superb master of *stiob*. So are other conceptualist poets of his circle, such as Lev Rubinštejn, and Dmitrij Prigov. In visual art *stiob* is powerfully manifested in the work of the founders of Sots-Art Vitalij Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, and of the renowned conceptualist Il’ja Kabakov.

*Stiob* in sound, mostly in rock music (but it works similarly in other art forms), has a tendency towards bizarre post-modern musical and poetic collages and pastiches, where tunes and lyrics are endlessly borrowed from numerous attributable sources, quoted, misquoted, misattributed and spliced together in an absurd and provocative “intertextual” manner. Within one song there can be found “suggestive” elements of American blues, Ukrainian Jewish Klezmerim, Soviet revolutionary songs, French chanson and so on. Irreverent borrowing of unrelated elements woven together into a complex tapestry of allusions and associations is a hallmark of Russian rock, particularly rock with a clearly Russian if not to say nationalist tinge.

In music *stiob* is found in the work of most Russophile bands, belonging to what I call the nationalist tradition in Russian rock: *GO, Nol'*, *Djuna*, *Zvuki Mu*, *Sektor Gaza*, *Chuj zabej!*, *Laërtskij*, but most of all in the radical oeuvre of Sergej Žarikov and his Soviet period band *DK* and the late Sergej Kurechin.<sup>8</sup> Their works are marked by all the typical elements of *stiob*: practical jokes, parody, satire, irony, sarcasm, irreverent borrowing, double-talk of the “initiated”.

The effectiveness of *stiob* highly depends on its presentation: *stiob* has to be delivered in a dead pan manner, with a straight face, and the *stiobber* should never betray his attitude, show the humorous side of the utterance, or give an indication that what is being said or done is just a joke.

Generally *stiob* is not a good-natured form of discourse. Often it is a brutal form, it establishes a hierarchy between the ones who *stiob* others and the *stiobbees* on the receiving end, between the ones who are “in the know” and who “get it” on one side, and the suckers on the other, the ones who are on the “outside” and who “don’t get it”. The price for not “getting it” is high, because if you don’t get it you will be mocked and made fun of, and often mercilessly.

To deal with *stiob* is almost impossible without referring to some fundamental concepts developed by Michail Bachtin.

1. Firstly, *stiob* belongs to a category of cultural phenomena that Bachtin called “народно-смеховой” – the folk-humorous nature. Indeed, my observations show that *stiob* has two fundamental qualities: it is an ancient phenomenon and it flourishes in the atmosphere close to ethnic or national cultural tradition, including the humorous tradition. Moreover *stiob* is supposed to be a very *happy* sort of thing, and is utilized with a great degree of proficiency and success by nationalists of various kinds, particularly by the ones who are closest to the source of the national folk-humorous basis. This is very true in Russia where *stiob* clearly is a more powerful tool in the hands of right-wing nationalists than in the hands of more liberal Westernizers.

The famed Russian New Right, spearheaded by Édouard Limonov’s National Bolshevik Party with their brilliantly *stiobby* now defunct newspaper *Limonka*, was probably the high point of *stiob* in contemporary Russian national discourse. Within the New Right you find other great practitioners of *stiob*: the great late poet of *stiob* Egor Letov of *Graždanskaja oborona*, the *stiob* guru and theoretician Sergej Žarikov of *DK*, a witty and erudite ideologue of the New Right, another great late *stiob* show-man Sergej Kurechin, internet guru Michail Verbickij, Eurasian geopolitician Aleksandr Dugin, and the Muslim fundamentalist philosopher Gejdar Džamal’. Even the conceptualist poet Timur Kibirov is not that far in his sensibilities from this milieu.

2. Another Bakhtinian notion applicable to *stiob* is the concept of the carnivalesque as developed by the philosopher in his major books *Problems*

of Dostoevsky’s *Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World*.<sup>9</sup> Carnavalesque theory, boiled down to its essence, presumes temporary (for the duration of the carnival) suspension of the normal rules governing society and substitutes normal rules with provisional new ones: carnival presumes free merry-making, buffoonery, clowning, a circus atmosphere, humor, parody and the satirizing of everyday reality. It is the normal world turned inside out, when the King becomes a street sweeper, and the street sweeper becomes a King. Carnival stylistics deals with things that are otherwise taboo in society: lower body functions, sex, gluttony, drunkenness, etc. Closely related to taboos is Bachtin’s juxtaposition of official and unofficial culture. There is such a dichotomy in all societies: the official culture of the state/government and official church vs. the unofficial folk culture of simple people; the crude culture of urban streets vs. refined culture of upper social strata and various oligarchies. *Stiob* is a deeply carnivalesque phenomenon.

3. And finally Bachtin’s theory of speech forms postulated in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* explains something about *stiob* as well. With this theory *stiob* would fall under the category of “double-voiced utterances” (“двуголосые слова”), about which Bachtin says the following: “[...] an author may utilize the speech act of another in pursuit of his own aims and in such a way as to impose a new intention on the utterance, which utterance, nevertheless, retains its own proper intention. Under these circumstances, and in keeping with the author’s purpose, such an utterance must be recognized as originating from another addresser. Thus, within a single utterance there may occur two intentions, two voices.”<sup>10</sup> According to Irwin Titunik who studied double-voicedness while working on his theory of *skaz*, Bachtin includes among such utterances stylization, parody and *skaz*.

Stylization and especially parody are two fundamentally important elements that allow *stiob* to become what it is. Without utilization of these devices there would be no *stiob*. Parody, though, is a prevailing form-building ingredient of *stiob*. Stylization might be a part of it or might not be, depending on the intention of the *stiobber*, but parody in some form and to some extent will always be in a *stiob* utterance or gesture.

“Parody”, as it is explained by Titunik, who draws from Bachtin, “involves the presence within one and the same utterance of two not only different but opposed, clashing intentions: The second voice, having lodged in the other speech act, clashes antagonistically with the original, ‘host’ voice and forces it to serve directly opposite aims. Here speech becomes a battlefield of opposing intentions.”<sup>11</sup>



*A Concise Historical Overview of 'Stiob' in Russian Culture*

*Stiob's* origins in Russian culture are as ancient as carnival itself. You can find deep traces of it in early Russian literature. I detect the first traces of *stiob* in the mysterious 13th century text known as *Daniel the Exile's Lament* (*Molenie Daniila Zatočnika*) in which Daniel, a very gifted and erudite young man, fallen in disgrace, addresses his Prince with a poetic lamentation in order to arouse sympathy for himself and to show off his great learning and rhetorical ability. Along the way he reveals his talent for ironic discourse and his smart-Aleksey nature and personal pathologies.

You may notice very clear and overt manifestations of *stiob* stylistics in discourse both verbal and gesticular of the theme of the Russian *jurdivye* – holy fools who by calculated choice or by psychological pathology behave in the name of Christ in the most obscene and outlandish manner, walking naked in the dead of winter, while wearing only chains, covering themselves with feces while making from the steps of the churches apocalyptic pronouncements. They prophesize and preach often in a very convoluted, highly metaphorical, ironic and grotesque manner, employing a great deal of obscene vocabulary.<sup>12</sup>

One finds such holy fool *stiob* antics in performances of old Russian street jesters called *skomorochi*, whose performances were known for their obscene humor, irony and satire.

Traces of *stiob* are found even in the discourse of the infamous 16th century Russian tyrant Tsar Ivan the Terrible in his brilliantly ironic letters to treacherous Prince Andrej Kurbskij. Probably the most impressive manifestation of *stiob* is found, however, in the works of the 17th century Russian schismatic Archpriest Avvakum, whose brilliant literary works can only be compared to the depth of pathology underlying his fanatical religious zealotry. Avvakum, often acting like a typical holy fool, employs a whole array of very carnivalesque *stiob* devices – fake lamentations, ironic sermons, endless amount of self-deprecating talk, in order to reverse it at some point and to show himself in his spiritual glory and polemic brilliance. But most striking of all is his ability to use obscenity and lowest strata of language with inventiveness never seen before in Russian literature and not encountered again until the last quarter of the 20th century.

Later we find *stiob* in the works of the 18th century satirist Nikolaj Čulkov, who was punished for his bitter irony by Empress Catherine the Great.

In the 19th century *stiob* becomes more noticeable: Nikolaj Gogol' was a master of it, Dostoevskij was capable of superb *stiob* (as his *Notes from Underground* show).

Count Aleksej Tolstoj demonstrated great *stiob* in the Koz'ma Prutkov writings.

Early 20th century essayist Vasilij Rozanov was perhaps a bit less obscene, but just as pathological as Archpriest Avvakum and became a master of ironic *stiob* in Russian literature.

Futurists Vladimir Majakovskij, David Burljuk and Aleksej Kručenyč ushered *stiob* into public debate with their performances and art “happenings”, and in the 1920s members of the Obėriu group Daniil Charms and Aleksandr Vvedenskij perfected the art of *stiob* in literature. After Charms and Vvedenskij there was practically no evident *stiob* in Russian literary and artistic life for a long time, except for elements of it found in Andrej Platonov’s novels and stories and to a greater extent in Michail Zoščenko’s satirical short stories. Specifically I would see *stiob* of the most masterful and charming quality in his badly misunderstood *Stories about Lenin*.

However, generally under the “late” Stalin and until the end of the 1950s *stiob* was suppressed and quiet for obvious common reasons. It started to seep back into Russian discourse in the 1960s in the early songs of Russian singer-songwriters (“bards”). A brilliant example of *stiob* originating in the dissident bardic tradition was the parodic poem by Nikolaj Williams’ ‘Komunisty mal’ čišku pojмали’ (‘Communists Caught a Boy’), known as a song in Boris Grebenščikov’s repertoire. *Stiob* is also at times clearly visible in songs of Vladimir Vysockij, the best and most influential representative of this singer-songwriter movement.

In 1970 however, a ground-breaking event took place which canonized *stiob* for posterity: Venedikt Erofeev wrote his immortal *poėma Moscow to the End of the Line (Moskva-Petuški)*, which was almost entirely written in *stiob*. (There can be written numerous dissertations dedicated to the issue of whether Moscow to the End of The Line is *stiob* or not. I find it to be a real *stiob* manifesto since in this *poėma* are, from my point of view, present all essential structural elements of *stiob*: over-identification with alcohol and its mythology, with Soviet cultural iconography, and symbolism of national geography. It contains double-voicedness, double-talk and lowering of one’s own image.) Russian literature and moreover the whole national discourse was never the same after the appearance of this short masterpiece. The degree to which Erofeev’s *stiob* influenced Russian literary and even non-literary speech is enormous. Since the 1980s, it seems that the young and hip cannot even speak in any other style. Double-entendre, double-voicedness, double-talk became the “hip” speak of the day. And it remains so today.

In the late 70s *stiob* was adopted as one of the domineering stylistic trends in newly formed Russian rock samizdat. It is already evident in the first (1977) issue of Boris Grebenščikov’s zine *Roksi*, the very first Russian rock zine. From that point on *stiob* is constantly present in rock zines: *Zerkalo*, *SDVIG*, *UCHO*, *RIO*, *Smočok*, *Urlajt*, *Zombi*.

In Russia of the late 1980s *stiob* was adopted by the general public as “one of the possible ways to speak and address issues”. In the 1990s sleek

commercial publications which by their nature are very far from counter-culture utilized *stiob*. You could find it on the pages of serious newspapers such as *Nezavisimaja gazeta* or *Kommersant*. (According to the legend I heard in Moscow, in the late 1980s when *Kommersant* was beginning to morph into the newspaper for the new commercial elite of Russia, its editorial board invited the well-known Moscow children's writer and film critic Aleksandr Timofeevskij, a well-respected member of the counterculture and one of the most brilliant practitioners of *stiob* in literature, to shape *Kommersant's* image creating the *stiobby* style for which the newspaper is now known.)

Sometime in the early 1990s someone decided that *stiob* is the way to communicate with the new rich in Russia: *stiob* became the modus operandi in Russian fashion shows, fund raising happenings, performance art shows, art exhibits, night club shows, all sorts of presentations, openings, and events. From these bastions of daring hipness *stiob* spread into theatres, TV and film studios, and editorial offices. In today's Russia if not everyone speaks in *stiob*, at least everyone is familiar with it.

The Russian rock community believes it has a sort of exclusive patent on this form of discourse. Interestingly, after Erofeev's book it was not literature but rather rock music that more widely adopted *stiob* as the style of its own. I believe it is from rock that *stiob* was borrowed by *Kommersant* and everyone else.

As long as society is divided into us and them, culture and counter-culture, official and unofficial strata, there will be *stiob*. In general, *stiob* is somehow present in nearly every culture, in every nation's discourse, but some societies manifest it more than others. I would dare to suggest that the greater the social strife and social stratification in a nation, the more there will be *stiob* in its cultural scene.

### *Two Examples*

Let me illustrate the above points regarding parody and stylization within the framework of *stiob* with two examples taken from the arena of Russian political discourse, and not from works of literature or art.

Many will remember the March 1995 *Playboy* interview<sup>13</sup> with Vladimir Žirinovskij, the flamboyant, semi-absurd, leader of the Russian Liberal-Democratic Party, prone to hooligan antics.

One needs to keep in mind that the famous Žirinovskij style, his aggressively-nagging tone, his mannerisms of a lumpenized Soviet every-man, are not of his own invention. According to Éduard Limonov, Žirinovskij's style was designed and spoon-fed to him by rock musician Sergei Žarikov, an original member of his shadow cabinet, formerly of the Moscow band *DK*,

who is an undisputable supreme master of *stiob* stylistics, and who is believed to be Žirinovskij’s crucial image-maker.<sup>14</sup>

During that infamous interview Žirinovskij basically refused to answer any questions, and spent most of the time trying to convince his young female interviewer and her even younger translator to engage in group sex with his body-guards, saying in tediously nagging manner that perhaps the view of their young bodies intertwined in one carnal embrace would be able to excite him, and since sex for him is inseparable from politics, it might inspire him to answer the interviewer’s questions. Otherwise, Žirinovskij felt burned out and unable to engage in a serious conversation.

If you follow the transcript of the interview closely, you can notice that the leader of the LDPR was engaged here in a most typical kind of *stiob*, the one of the most blatant and cruel variety. It was designed as if he was quoting, in parodic manner, someone who would seriously speak in this way. Žirinovskij, himself being “in the know” as were his body-guards, understood quite well that there is no chance that the interviewers would be talked into group sex. He also understood how utterly inappropriate was his discourse and his tone, and he deeply enjoyed his absurd joke. Here he substituted a persona of himself – a politician important enough for *Playboy* to request an interview with, replaced by a crude Soviet lumpen able only to speak of sex. Žirinovskij obviously savored his double superiority over the interviewers, double because first: he knew that he was joking, and they did not; and second: as a celebrity interviewee he controlled the interview from the start and at every level. There was a particular cruelty to his joke, as there often is to *stiob* jokes, in that the *stiobbees*, people on the receiving end of the *stiob* were in a totally no win situation: should the women agree to group sex, they would be seen as dumb and naive simpletons by Žirinovskij and his entourage. In this case the women would show that they absolutely did not get the joke and foolishly took it at face value.

However should they refuse, get outraged, and storm out indignation, they would again show themselves as dumb and naive, as they were unable to read through a very transparent joke, because only an idiot would suggest to Western interviewers to engage in group sex, no one would seriously do that, and certainly not such a public person as Žirinovskij. So for the interviewers there was no dignified escape from Žirinovskij, and in the end they chose to leave with indignation.

I see another example of *stiobby* double-talk, double-voicedness, involving stylization and parody in some of the well-known gestures of another politician, this time American.

Barack Obama is known to easily and seamlessly adapt a variety of non-Presidential voices slipping into hip college-kid talk or into black ghetto-speak depending on his needs. Thus the American President consciously and with deliberate ironic and humorous intention breaches the established

protocol of Presidential discourse and does it for a variety of reasons: mostly in order to decrease the amount of pathos in his interlocutor's speech, or showing that hiding behind specific lingo or jargon will not detract the President from reading between the lines.

Having touched upon Barack Obama's manner of adapting for humorous or parodic effect discursive elements of low urban black culture, I would like to point out that *stio*b is truly a cross-cultural and cross-temporal phenomenon.

It is specifically within black American discourse that I find an interesting parallel to the formation and usage of *stio*b in Russia. Particularly telling in this regard are the cultural practices of 19th and 20th century black America and the way African American speech was constructed due to local social and ethnic strife and stratification in the U.S. American Bakhtin scholar Dale E. Peterson in his article on Dostoevskij's *Notes from Underground* refers to Henry Louis Gates Jr's influential study *The Signifying Monkey*<sup>15</sup> when he writes:

Significantly, the terminology that Gates employs to express his sense of the African American experience difference is derived from the linguistic theories and discourse analysis of the Russian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin. The fundamental premise of Gates's argument is that African American speech has always necessarily been constructed as a "double-voiced" discourse. In a pun that Bakhtin would have appreciated, Gates argues that black folk invented a practice of witty, behind-the-back *signifyin(g)* at the expense of what the master's standard dictionary was *signifying*. In short, the expressive culture of African Americans has always conducted a hidden insubordination and a knowing contestation of the dominant culture's assigned meanings: Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black signifyin(g) difference.<sup>16</sup>

It is obvious that African-American culture has produced its own *stio*b out of its own set of historical circumstances, and it works the same way it worked for Soviet counterculture during the post-Stalin years of Soviet oppression and works now in Russia when its counterculture fights new capitalism. It works through irony, it speaks to the initiated. It lampoons the straight, buttoned up, utterly "uncool" participants in official culture, the ones who bought straightforwardly, stupidly and naively its most obvious, straightforward messaging and who are unable to read behind the lines, to hear the word that is not uttered but is presumed, to see the gesture that is not made, but is there. This is why today some hip white American teenagers are ashamed to be white. This is why some hip Soviet teenagers spoke to each

other as if quoting from editorial articles of Soviet propaganda newspapers. This all comes from *stiob* sensibility. Counterculture makes its stand against the domineering culture with *stiob* as its main tool.

This illustrates that although Russians have a very firm hold on *stiob* as well as great mastery of it, they do not really own it. *Stiob* respects no historical or geographic boundaries. Its vivid examples in contemporary Western culture are abundant: from fake news of the parodic newspaper The Onion, to Jerry Seinfeld’s fabulous televised series, to the TV persona of Stephen Colbert’s hyper-right wing anchorman, to the absurdist radio antics of Howard Stern and G. Gordon Liddy, to *stiob*-permeated cinematic carnivalesque tapestries of Sergio Leone, Guy Ritchie, Emir Kusturica, the Coen brothers, and the King of American cinematic *stiob* Quentin Tarantino.

However, there is one area of Western culture that strangely and for the most part is and always was almost entirely devoid of *stiob*.<sup>17</sup> This *stiob*-less realm is Anglo-American rock music. Indeed, amazingly, this very tradition which gave the World the gift of rock, tends to be inevitably humorous and serious. It is true, there were and are occasional novelty acts like the 1960s British psychedelic phenomenon Crazy World of Arthur Brown, or 1970s American shock-rocker Alice Cooper, or modern day American “project” band Tenacious D.

The Beatles had certain *stiobby* sensibilities, which were often manifested in almost impenetrable in-jokes. Some of Tom Waits’s antics can be viewed as *stiob*. American bands Cake, The Presidents of the United States of America and Canadian Barenaked Ladies are rare examples of rock bands with *stiob* tendencies. Frank Zappa stands alone as a full-fledged Anglo-American rock *stiobber*.

In this sense the Russian rock tradition, especially of the Soviet period is rather different.

Speaking of Soviet rock of the 1980s, the period of its most speedy and monumental growth, experimentation, struggle and ultimate victory over the Soviet ideological and cultural machine, it is hard to focus on a single band as a prime example of *stiob*.

*Stiob* in these days permeated practically all Soviet rock with very few exceptions. Back then Russian rock could be either serious, heavy-footed and ideological, or *stiobby*. Sometimes it was both.

*Stiob* was woven into the fabric of music like bluesy progressions that made up the very essence of rock. It was a time of total *stiob*. And no one probably owned these stylistics more completely than the best and most famous Russian band ever – Moscow’s *Zvuki Mu*. In fact, if you come to think of it, if you take *stiob* out of *Zvuki Mu* then there would not be much left of it. *Zvuki Mu* was the quintessential embodiment of *stiob*.

*Zvuki Mu* was of course a band, and as such it was a collective project, and it does owe a great deal to the contributions of its individual musicians,

particularly to the musical talents of its keyboard player Pavel Chotin and drummer Aleksej Pavlov. But in its essence *Zvuki Mu* was created by the anachronistic, primordial, time-twisting bizarre holy fool-like genius of its front man, poet and composer Petr Mamonov.

When in the late 1980s the band's British producer and eminent musician Brian Eno saw Mamonov on video for the first time he was shocked:

In his image I recognized something truly ancient, medieval. And this was [...] almost scary. It's unbelievable how one could preserve this centuries-old code – I really saw nobody like Peter.<sup>18</sup>

It would be probably better to say that Mamonov did not preserve some ancient code, but intuitively was able to recreate it, to find his way into it with astonishing precision. Of what precisely it is the code is hard to say, but this is what his *stiob* is made of. This code harkens back to the medieval European tradition of court jesters, of carnivalesque buffoons, and of Byzantine holy fools (*jurodivye*) about which I wrote earlier in my historical overview of *stiob*.

What impressed Eno was first of all Mamonov's grotesque bodily plasticity, his facial contortions and bizarre gesticulation, his awkward and clumsy expressiveness. Brian Eno characterized it as follows:

I'd never seen anything like it. And I coined this phrase for it: "total facial theater". Because the lead singer, Peter Mamonov, has the most absolutely remarkable face. You simply can't take your eyes off the whole performance. It goes through so many weird contortions. It's so expressive of the songs themselves.<sup>19</sup>

“Театральность юродства бесспорна, и это неудивительно, потому что стихия театральности вообще очень сильна в средневековой жизни” (“The theatricality of holy fools is unquestionable, and this is not surprising, since the elements of theatricality are so pervasive in Medieval life”), says A.M. Pančenko in the book *“Smechovoj mir” drevnej Rusi*.<sup>20</sup> “Юродство стремится возбудить равнодушных ‘зрелищем странным и чудным’” (“Holy fools aspire to excite the indifferent with ‘a spectacle strange and bizarre’”)<sup>21</sup> and by that to undermine in their souls belief in the correctness and inevitability of the given world order, to sow the seeds of doubt, to make people think.

Erudite Russian rock critic Artemy Troitsky brings up the following parallel between the image created by Mamonov on stage and in many of his interviews and the one of the medieval jester created by the imagination of Andrej Tarkovskij in his film *Andrej Rublev* and played by actor Rolan Bykov:

There’s an episode featuring a desperate and obscene jester later destroyed by the Tsar’s soldiers – that’s Mamonov as well. The artist and the buffoon, the truth seeker and the liar, the native child and villain, all coexist comfortably inside Petya to form an integral character.<sup>22</sup>

Igor’ Meškovskij, the drummer of the early 1990s Moscow band *Gaza* shared with me the following memory of the impact *Zvuki Mu* had upon some of their audience: once after the concert a middle aged woman came up to Mamonov and said: “I despise you! You are worse than [...] fascists!”<sup>23</sup>

No one can say that *stiob* does not hurt! And Mamonov’s holy fool *stiob* was indeed very effective. His preternatural ability to adapt voices, images, masques and personas confused and bewildered and shocked into enlightenment. Mamonov’s pastiche of voices and images was full of complex cultural illusions of the Russian past and present, within the span of a single concert, and often even one song. One moment he is a “fool of God” mumbling on the church steps, another moment he is a feverish alcoholic on the verge of collapse, then a shell-shocked invalid of several wars, who suddenly morphs into Moscow’s petty bureaucrat, simultaneously arrogant and convulsively bashful, and then in the next metamorphosis he suddenly turns into a cool dude of the urban underbelly, a skirt chaser and devil-may-care fellow, or pathetically self-important and pompous proletarian “hegemon”, and the next moment he is once again a pathetic petty official, an incarnation of all petty officials of Russian literature: awkward, tongue-tied to the point of retardation, only unlike his literary forerunners endlessly tormented by pathological but almost inexpressible lust.

Mamonov himself said that *Zvuki Mu* works “with the problem, which was addressed already by the Russian classics: small people” (“с проблемой, которая поднималась не раз еще русской классикой – маленькие люди”).<sup>24</sup>

One of Mamonov’s favorite characters was a small pitiful man, in a preposterous shabby suit, most likely a drunk and an invalid, probably with some kind of brain damage, perhaps due to syphilitic calcification of the brain, and therefore in bad control of his bodily functions, unable to firmly stand and walk, convulsively moving his legs contrary to the music’s rhythm, dragging his feet, and bending his body while squeezing his legs together as if in constant need of the restroom. His elbows were incongruously spread apart, his shoulders were spasmodically twitching. His head jerked on a sine-wy thin neck, as if by itself, unintentionally, due possibly to brain damage or meningitis. His face was distorted by ever changing grimaces: of pain, of idiocy, of lust. His mouth, lacking half of its teeth, turns into a yawning slot which opens from time to time to produce half-human sounds, words which



are put together in phrases like those of a classical holy fool with their seeming meaninglessness and with poignancy at the same time.

It is interesting that the tongue-tiedness of his characters accompanies Mamonov in his public persona even off stage. For instance when Troitsky in an interview asked Mamonov's opinion of Perestroika he received the following reply which I can interpret only as *stio*b, if not an indication of mental illness:

My personal feeling is that I still can't [...] I still have quarrels with my wife [...] We can't pack the cheese in nice boxes like they do in Germany [...] When I wake up in the morning there's no hangover [...] Very strange.<sup>25</sup>

Or on the issue of creativity Mamonov shared the following:

One poet said – if you cannot manage to write – don't write! I can't manage it [...] The first line is burning my brain, like a neon slogan, and I can't stop [...] I sometimes can't sleep all night, I am tortured by this new song [...] Maybe, I'm a homosexual, I don't know [...] That's why I will always live with my wife, Olga, because she understands [...] Treats it politely.<sup>26</sup>

Mamonov's characters possess the same tongue-tied absurdity of expression. Thus during the concert between the songs he suddenly accepts the bullying and dismissively arrogant look of a small bureaucrat, not sure of his power, but still attempting to be at least a little menacing: “Я вот тут на минуточку заехал, на минуточку тут из министерства...” (“I dropped by here for a minute, for a minute from the ministry...”).<sup>27</sup> Here tongue-tiedness, tautology and pleonasm become the main means of characterizing the stage persona created by Petr Mamonov.

And this tongue-tied awkward human fragment still wants to express himself, even if not on a level of completed sentences and phrases, of which he is seemingly incapable, but more on a level of singular words, often not connected to any context, and therefore acquiring futurist-like self-importance. Lost in the torrent of uncontrollable words Mamonov's character attempts to scream, and this scream becomes a song:

Ночью я придумал слово,  
Совсем коротенькое слово:  
Отвяжись, Отвяжись!

At night I invented a word,  
A very short word:  
Leave me alone, leave me alone!<sup>28</sup>

This is as if Mamonov’s human is hopelessly lost in a forest of words, out of which he finds, “invents”, one that long exists.

His emotion is crude, just as the word he “invented”, but this is his personal, individual emotion, and he feels that he has suffered to have the right to scream out this word in the face of an unloved person, a woman, by whom he needs to be left alone.

Like a drowning person emerging from suffocation for a gasp of air he screams: “Leave me alone!”

Мне не звони,  
Я не хочу.  
Кончились наши дни,  
Я тебя не люблю.

Don’t call me  
I don’t want you to  
Our days are over  
I don’t love you.<sup>29</sup>

This liberating “invented” word allowed him to finally state what he was trying to express.

In another song with the suggestive title ‘Diatez’ (‘Diathesis’ – an allergic rash) Mamonov’s human who is often suffering either emotional or sexual drama tries as awkwardly as ever and with inherent tongue-tiedness and crudeness to stand up for what he peculiarly perceives as his manly dignity. Once again, like a holy fool he shamelessly exposes himself, once again he is lost among words, within grammar, unable to deal with such intricacies as verbal tenses, but still coming through with his message:

Не думай, что я краснею,  
Когда на тебя залез.  
Не думай, что я краснею,  
Просто это диатез!

Don’t you think that I am blushing  
When I climbed on top of you.  
Don’t you think that I am blushing,  
This is simply my diathesis!<sup>30</sup>

Should this be considered *stiob*? I believe it should.

However, this is clearly not the kind of *stiob* defined by Yurchak’s “overidentification” with something. This is different, this is deeper and more sinister. Here Mamonov adapted other people’s voices, and speaks out as if he is for real, without ever giving you a “wink, wink” to indicate that he is

joking. You walked away never knowing what the hell it was, where is Mamonov's authorial attitude, where is the message, and what the message really is. In face of this total ambivalence you walked away hoping that it was a joke, because the world where this is not a joke is truly a horrible place.

But this is *stiob* par excellence, i.e. "кромешный" total *stiob*, "юродивый" (holy fool) *stiob*, the one that made humor and satire such a powerful tool through the ages.

This is the phenomenon that D.S. Lichačev and A.M. Pančenko described in their influential work quoted earlier, "*Smechovoj mir" drevnej Rusi*, speaking about the phenomenon of holy fools.<sup>31</sup>

In the historical tradition of *jurodstvo* (holy fools' behavior), in buffoonery of the holy fools they saw a penetrating critique of the surrounding world. The fool is wise, but secretly, with his special wisdom. The holy fool's criticism of the world order is expressed through his behavior, his antics, his speeches. This is a criticism of reality based upon its conflict with life's ideal as perceived by the holy fool.

Petr Mamonov has and always had this holy fool-like perception of reality deeply ingrained in him. He talks along these lines in his 2003 interview with Dennis Ioffe and Michail Klebanov: "Мы ложь, ложь. Правда одна – Бог. А мы – ложь. Поэтому нам нашим разумом решать нечего. Надо на Господа уповать" ("We are a lie, a lie. The truth is one – God. But we are a lie. Therefore we should not solve things with our mind. We should put our trust in God").<sup>32</sup>

For the holy fool relationships of the world of culture and anti-culture are thrown upside down: he claims that the world of "culture" (that is, of reality) is in fact the world of anti-culture. It is not real, it is fake and wrong and therefore the holy fool behaves the way one has to behave within the world of anti-culture. The holy fool is antisocial in the ideal sense of this phenomenon. Unlike "normal people" he sees and hears something different, something real, and has a clear idea about the ideal world, about the way things should really be in the universe. Hence the significance and strangeness of his utterances. His world of anti-culture is turned toward the "reality of the beyond" not in the mystical sense but in the sense of presumption of existence of the unseen ideal.

The world of the holy fool is dualistic in its foundation, it is two-sided: for the ignorant it is laughable, silly, and for ones in the know it is specifically significant. The holy fool is like a visitor from this anti-world, the world inside-out, who clearly sees absurdities of reality in the light of his "genuine" true knowledge.

This is where the roots of *stiob* lie. This is the *stiob* that was practiced by Mamonov and many other prominent *stiobbers* during the colossal culture wars that shook the Soviet Union during the 1980s. This was the soft power that turned the flow of Soviet cultural discourse. The rest is history.

As a conclusion I would like to say that *stiob* does not just happen. *Stiob* is a discursive form that is always deliberate, calculated, and produced through application of canonical *stiobny* devices I have described above. They are: using of ironic double-talk for the initiated, making double-voiced utterances, where obvious absurdity of what is being stated with a straight face means exactly the opposite of what is being stated. Parody, stylization, double-entendre are all composite elements of quality *stiob*. The effectiveness of *stiob* depends not only on ironic mastery of the *stiobber* but on unsuspecting naïveté of the *stiobbee*. *Stiob* falls apart if its addressee is keen enough to suspect it and to adapt in return *stiobny* discourse *stiobbing* the *stiobber*. In fact there is nothing more annoying than listening to the mutually mocking conversation of two *stiobbers* trying to out-*stiob* each other. Their talk becomes more and more obscure, self-referential, lost within the depths of a super in-joke universe. But as I said before *stiob* is not a kind of form of communication. It is a cruel form, designed to make fools out of others and to elevate oneself above the crowd of blockheaded squares who miss what is supposed to be an obvious joke. In its buffoonish mockery *stiob* harkens back to an ancient Russian tradition of folk humor and satire and the tradition of Byzantine and Russian holy fools. But if holy fools engaged in *stiob*-like activity earnestly, modern day *stiobbers* such as Petr Mamonov construct their *stiob* deliberately applying a variety of devices found in their well-stocked *stiobny* toolkit.

The goal of this work is an attempt to show the universal nature of Russian *stiob*, which with all its global qualities never separated from its national, archaic roots.

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NOTES

- 1 I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of the late professor of Russian literature Irwin Titunik of the University of Michigan, who was and still remains an immense inspiration for me and his other students. One of Mr. Titunik's notable contributions to the field of Russian literary criticism is his work on the theory of *skaz*. Through his association with Russian émigré avant-garde art circles Mr. Titunik also became a passionate connoisseur of *stiob* and a superior practitioner of it.
- 2 One may consult Michail Klebanov's essay on related matters included in the current issue.
- 3 On *skaz* see in particular: I.A. Kargašin, *Skaz v russkoj literature. Voprosy teorii i istorii*, Kaluga, 1996.

- <sup>4</sup> See: Vladimir Dal', *Tolkovyj slovar' živogo velikoruskogo jazyka*, Moskva, 1982, p. 320. The verb *смебать* now bears also a remote sexual connotation as exploited by Boris Grebenščikov in the well-known *stiob*-song *Močalkin Blues* where *смебать* is semantically rhymed with *ебать* (= to "f\*ck"). This connotation reinforces the active, somewhat more militant nature of the one who does *stiob*, enforcing himself upon the passive "object" of it.
- <sup>5</sup> John Dunn, 'Humor and Satire on Post-Soviet Russian Television', in: *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humor in Russian Culture*, Ed. Lesley Milne, London, 2004, p. 186.
- <sup>6</sup> See Aleksei Yurchak, 'Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Nightlife', in: *Consuming Russia*, Ed. Adele Marie Barker, Durham, London, 1999, pp. 76-109, and his book *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was no More: the Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, 2005, pp. 249-254.
- <sup>7</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York, 1964.
- <sup>8</sup> On nationalism in Russian rock see my: 'Conceptual Carnival: National Elements in Russian Nationalist Rock Music', in: *Rock'n'Roll and Nationalism: A Multicultural Perspective*, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 97-119. On the concept of *stiob* vis-à-vis Kurechin see Aleksei Yurchak's recent paper: 'A Parasite From Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved that Lenin was a Mushroom', *Slavic Review*, Spring 2011; as well as the stimulating essay by Michail Klebanov, included in the current issue.
- <sup>9</sup> Michail Bachtin, *Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo*, Moskva, 1965; Michail Bachtin, *Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i Renessansa*, Moskva, 1965.
- <sup>10</sup> I.R. Titunik, 'The Problem of Skaz (Critique and Theory)', *Papers in Slavic Philology*, 1, Ed. Benjamin A. Stolz, Ann Arbor, 1977, p. 285.
- <sup>11</sup> Titunik, p. 286.
- <sup>12</sup> On this fascinating topic see such fundamental descriptive studies as: S.A. Ivanov, *Blažennye pochaby: kul'turnaja istorija jurodstva*, Moskva, 2005; Natal'ja Rostova, *Čelovek obratnoj perspektivy: opyt filosofskogo osmyšlenija fenomena jurodstva Christa radi*, Moskva, 2008; *Russkie jurodivye i blažennye*, sost. N. Rubina, A. Severskij, Čeljabinsk, 2003; A.M. Moldovan, *Žitie Andreja Jurodivogo v slavjanskoj pis'mennosti*, Moskva, 2003; Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique*, Stanford, 1992; Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: the Holy Fool in Russian Culture*, Lanham, 1987; Michel Evdokimov, *Pèlerins russes et vagabonds mystiques*, Paris, 1987.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Playboy Interview: Vladimir Zhirinovskij: Candid Conversation', *Playboy*, 42, No. 3, March 1995, p. 47.
- <sup>14</sup> Édouard Limonov, *Limonov protiv Žirinovskogo*, Moskva, 1994, st., 33.
- <sup>15</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, New York, 1988.

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- 16 Dale E. Peterson, ‘Underground Notes: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and the African American Confessional Novel’, in: *Bakhtin and the Nation*, Lewisburg, 2000, p. 34. Here he quotes from Gates, p. xxiv.
- 17 For a preliminary discussion on “American *stiob*” see a recent paper by the same prolific Yurchak: Alexei Yurchak and Dominic Boyer, ‘American *Stiob*: Or, what late-socialist aesthetics of parody reveal about contemporary political culture in the West’, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, May 2010.
- 18 Artemy Troitsky, *Tusovka: Who’s Who in the New Soviet Rock Culture*, London, 1990, p. 76.
- 19 From interview with Tom Laskin, from *Zvuki Mu Publicity Kit*, prepared by IPA/International Production Associates, Inc., 1990.
- 20 D.S. Lichačev, A.M. Pančenko, “*Smechovoj mir*” *drevnej Rusi*, Leningrad, 1976, chapter “Jurodstvo, kak zrelišče”, p. 108.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 22 Troitsky, p. 76.
- 23 Personal conversation with Igor’ Meškovskij, Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 1990.
- 24 Interview with Petr Mamonov “My pytaemsja vozvratit’sja k ponjatiju ličnost’...”, Anton Kozlov, *Russkaja mysl’*, 25 May 1990.
- 25 Troitsky, p. 82.
- 26 Troitsky, p. 85.
- 27 *Soviet Rock Video*, No. 4, New York, 1990.
- 28 Song *Otvjažis’*, in *Zvuki Mu, Modern Songs from Russia*, London, 1989.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Song *Diatez*, *Diathesis, Soviet Rock Video*, No. 4, New York, 1990.
- 31 Lichačev, Pančenko, *op. cit.*
- 32 Dennis Ioffe and Michail Klebanov, interview with Petr Mamonov (2003), <http://mellotron.ru/21.08.2003/1>.



SERGEJ KURECHIN: THE PERFORMANCE OF LAUGHTER  
FOR THE POST-TOTALITARIAN SOCIETY OF SPECTACLE.  
RUSSIAN CONCEPTUALIST ART IN RENDEZVOUS

MICHAEL KLEBANOV

**Abstract**

It can be argued that all we know about Sergej Kurechin, a man who played a remarkable role on the exuberant scene of Russian Conceptualism, is concerned, in one way or another, with acting and performance. He was a theatrical and musical performer onstage, whether playing solo or with his Pop-Mekhanika ensemble. He was acting at interviews and TV shows, embarking on prolonged quasi-scientific soliloquies in front of bemused audiences. Even his political pursuits seem to have amounted to a kind of deluding buffoonery. Kurechin's many modes of performing always, or nearly always, involved laughter: the probing kind of laughter revelling in the newly found political freedom of action in the Gorbachovian Society of Spectacle and subsequently, in the Yeltsinian reality of "discarded values". The paper endeavours to trace the origins and uncover the subtleties of Kurechin's facetious attitude in its apparent ubiquity, with a special focus on his contribution to the peculiar Russian phenomenon of *stiob* that eventually became his primary strategic tool of manipulation.

Keywords: *Laughter; Sergej Kurechin; Russian Conceptualist Art; "Stiob"*

The phenomenon of Sergej Kurechin, undoubtedly one of the most remarkable to watch and listen to at the close of the Soviet era, has long abided in want of serious introspection.<sup>1</sup> Born in Murmansk in 1954, he arrived in Leningrad in the 1970's and within years secured his place on its exuberant underground art scene. Switching from rock groups to jazz bands and back

again, Kurechin eventually earned renown as a virtuoso pianist and an inventive keyboard player always aiming at the fusion of various genres and styles. Starting from the 1981 collection of freestyle piano exercises, *The Ways of Freedom*,<sup>2</sup> keyboard experiments dominated his solo career in music.

As a whole, Kurechin's legacy is quite impressive in its diversity: apart from being a recording and performing musician, he tried his luck as a film and theatre composer, a film actor, an author, a radio host, and even a radical politician. Nevertheless, his most remarkable achievement was arguably the *Popular Mechanics*<sup>3</sup> happening show where he acted as a stage director, a music conductor, and a leading showman in one person. During the last years of the Soviet regime, *Popular Mechanics* stood out even at the backdrop of chaos sweeping over the nationwide mass-media and performance venues while the authorities were gradually losing their interest in these well-trying means of audio-visual propaganda. Whether a non-conformant jazz musician or a groundbreaking multimedia artist, whatever Kurechin did was seemingly adjudged audacious by virtually everyone, including those who would not approve.

Given that, there is something special about Kurechin, a moment of crucial importance that cannot be missed whenever his name is mentioned. It can be argued that virtually everything he would do in front of an audience, whether a performance, an interview or a public speech, was fraught with laughter. Moreover, it was no kind of obvious or easily accessible laughter; on the contrary, often it was as ambivalent as it was manifestly present. The paper aims to analyse the complex nature of Kurechin's laughter from various standpoints (philosophical, historical, socio-cultural) and the role it played in his strategy of public behaviour.

### 1. *The Genealogy of Laughter: "Projecting the Russian Cosmos" Between Humour and Irony*

It may appear remarkable that such written recollections of Kurechin as we have available contain many impressions, at times apparently exaggerated, and very few analytical observations.<sup>4</sup> As regards the latter, one of the likely instances pertains to Sergej Žarikov, once a controversial underground rock partisan, and still a major influence on the Russian counterculture. It is a rare attempt to provide a non-superficial definition of *Popular Mechanics*:

Это миметическая проекция "русского космоса" 80-х в процессе его становления.

Этот курехинский космос был конгениален тому, что мы называем "совком" – звучало все намеренно плохо, казалось абсурдным, блоки подчеркнуто не стыковались – такая помойка советского second hand перед тем, как ее либо подожгут, либо вот-



вот этих “героев вчерашних дней” (которые, впрочем, позиционировались у него в качестве самих себя!) отправят в утиль.<sup>5</sup>

This is a mimetic projection of the “Russian cosmos” of the 80’s in the process of its establishment. This cosmos of Kurechin was congenial to what we call *sovok*. Everything sounded intentionally bad, seemed absurd, the parts of performance were pronouncedly mismatching: either a kind of Soviet second-hand junkyard just about to get burnt, or those “yesterday’s heroes” (who but represented themselves in his shows!) just about to get scrapped.

Even this short passage may induce the suspicion that Kurechin’s motivation to mime the “Russian cosmos of the 80’s” hardly proceeded from any feelings of respect or admiration. The term *sovok*, usually associated with Aleksandr Zinov’ev’s *Homo Sovieticus*,<sup>6</sup> is being used here in a wider sense. More than just a person carrying a set of social habits, *sovok* is the entire political and social framework facilitating these habits. It is easy to see that its “mimetic projection” by Kurechin, as Žarikov puts it, splits like a good Deleuzian universe into two planes: that of objects and that of events. Accordingly, representation of the late Soviet reality by *Popular Mechanics* was twofold, and that in no less than two senses. On the one hand, this show with its scale and setting unthinkable in the stalwart years of the Communist rule willingly featured performance artists of some of the only kinds the state used to permit: the *éstrada* (Pop-Variety performers), the “VIA” musicians, and even the home ensemble of the KGB.<sup>7</sup> Isolated from their established habitat and placed in the totally bewildering atmosphere of *Popular Mechanics* next to the associates as bizarre as indie rock warriors, avant-garde artists and household animals, these “self-representing yesterday’s heroes” appeared particularly absurd and out-dated. On the other hand, the show admittedly strove to imitate the very Soviet *Produktionsweise* as of the 1980’s, the long and failing echo of Marxist theories as well as of the pompous slogan “The Soviet means the Excellent” (alternatively, “the Best”) dating back to the austere days of Stalin. Beyond the plain universal metaphor, needless to say, *Popular Mechanics* did look in a way like a travesty of the late Soviet entertainment industry, ostensibly professional but in fact doomed to failure and collapse in concert with the regime that supported it. Within the context of Kurechin’s production framework, the exponents of the crumbling genres were literally caused to play the extraneous role appointed to them through playing what used to be their own role.

This important, albeit definitely not solitary aspect of *Popular Mechanics* amounts, of course, to one simple fact: both the functioning objects and the mode of function in question used to be the attributes of state power whose apostasy suddenly exposed their absurdity and vulnerability. There is no clear statement in Žarikov’s words with regard to whether Kurechin

laughs or weeps at this absurdity, and whether he actually chooses to abuse this vulnerability rather than rue it. What is doubtless is that he does labour to promote their exposure rather than try and hide them. This way of action can certainly evoke an uncomfortable association with the Russian idiom “выставлять на посмешище”, literally meaning “to expose to derision”. However, if Kurechin ever intended to deride anything with his shows, it seems that he avoided pronouncing it clearly. It is the smile almost continuously playing on his lips throughout the performances of *Popular Mechanics*<sup>8</sup> that provides the best possible visual evidence that some kind of laughter must be perpetually present there. Once the laughter is presumably indirect, can that smile prove to be, say, ironic?

Discussing Gyorgy Lukacs’ critical theory, Paul de Man observes that he defined irony as “heterogeneous and contingent discontinuity”.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of de Man’s own assertion that “definitional language seems to be in trouble when irony is concerned”,<sup>10</sup> it would be hard to deny that this definition by Lukacs can be very successfully applied to *Popular Mechanics*. The “discontinuity” alone perfectly matches the fact that “the parts of performance were pronouncedly mismatching”. To be sure, it should be the question of personal judgement based on a subtle balance of experience and common sense as to whether Kurechin’s shows were sufficiently heterogeneous and discontinuous. Here is therefore a compact but emotional account of a typical one, given by the avant-garde jazz player Sergej Letov, a constant and vital participant of *Popular Mechanics* for most of its existence.<sup>11</sup>

[Идет] большой торжественный концерт, посвященный Дню милиции, в котором Соловей Алябьева исполняется одновременно с выступлением ансамбля песни и пляски КГБ, а Кола Бельды поет “Увезу тебя я в тундру” в сопровождении группы “Кино”, пионеры-горнисты отдадут салют гигантской раскрашенной пенопластовой “Венере Милосской”, Тимур Новиков и Африка представляют “традиционную русскую забаву – битву динозавра со змеей” [...] в конце концов все – духовой оркестр моряков, камерный симфонический и народный в сопровождении дюжины электрогитар [...] сливаются в унисоне целотонного рифа! Танец Гаркуши (“Аукционъ”), бегут стада ослов и пони, мартышки едут на велосипедах!!... поверх рифа – рев и визг саксофона, звук, заслоняющий все!!!<sup>12</sup>

[There goes] a grand ceremonial concert dedicated to the Day of the Soviet Militia, where Aljab’ev’s<sup>13</sup> Nightingale is being performed along with the Song and Dance Ensemble of the KGB doing their part, whereas Kola Bel’dy<sup>14</sup> sings “I Will Take You to the Tundra”, accompanied by Kino;<sup>15</sup> young Pioneers with bugles are saluting the

giant painted Styrofoam Venus of Milo; Timur Novikov<sup>16</sup> and Afrika<sup>17</sup> present the “traditional Russian entertainment, the fight between a dinosaur and a serpent” [...] eventually, all – the sailors brass band, the chamber ensemble and the balalaika orchestra, accompanied by a dozen of electric guitars [...] – merge into a single whole-tone riff! Garkuša<sup>18</sup> is dancing, herds of donkeys and ponies racing, marmosets riding tiny bicycles!!!... And over the riff, roaring and screaming of a sax, overtrumping everything!!!

Gilles Deleuze, who counterpoised the “Stoic humour” against the “Socratic irony”, argues that paradox “is initially that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities”.<sup>19</sup> The Stoics, as he observes, used the paradox in the fashion resembling that of Zen Buddhism whose “Koan” tradition practises making sense by confronting opposing, unrelated and even “rationally incompatible” meanings. Deleuze pairs paradox with humour, “the art of surface”, versus irony with its “depths and heights” pretensions. “Paradox appears as a dismissal of depth, a display of events at the surface, and a deployment of language along these limits.”<sup>20</sup> Kurechin’s strategy of navigating *Popular Mechanics* does seem to have involved the destruction of the rationality of good sense and common sense alike. It certainly and necessarily presumed a display of events “at the surface”, always endeavouring to stretch this surface ever further; and its language was obviously bound to reach the limits. Admittedly, the “Stoic humour” of Deleuze does not equal the plain laugh of derision, but would it be advisable to reduce Kurechin’s suggestive smile to it, either?

For Gyorgy Lukacs, says de Man, the importance of “discontinuity” as the essence of irony lies in invoking the awareness of the distance separating the actual experience from the comprehension of it. “The ironic language of the novel mediates between experience and desire, and unites ideal and real within the complex paradox of the form.”<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding that, even if irony that is apprehended this way is suspected of facilitating some kind of a paradox, there is still no reason to believe its language is necessarily that of surface. The problem with irony is that it tends to disappear from the surface: and that quite regardless of the intentions of those trying to employ it. “One always feels terrible when one has read a text and one is told later on that it is ironic.”<sup>22</sup> Starting his special essay on irony with complaints about its elusiveness, de Man eventually comes to define it, in principle (while ironically reminding that irony will escape comprehensive definition anyway), as *disruption*. He warns, moreover, that in order to grasp “the concept of irony” one must be able to imagine this disruption occurring “at all times”.<sup>23</sup> This must also mean that such a ubiquitous disruption (de Man uses the term “parabasis”, borrowing it from German Romanticism) will break any

continuity and fragment any homogeneity. The above-cited description of a typical *Popular Mechanics* performative setting presents us with a complex image of the sequence of multiple actions whose variety can only rival their own seeming incongruity. Judging by these tokens, one might almost think that the chief intention behind it all was to embody the very concept of irony as de Man would see it.

There are, of course, other concepts, particularly those that are more preoccupied with the intention of delivering a message versus the way it is perceived. For instance, Dennis Green argues in his treatise on irony in medieval poetic speech that irony, first and foremost, “presupposes conscious intention and cannot arise fortuitously”.<sup>24</sup> Regarding the necessity to separate irony from falsehood, he then maintains that an ironic statement intends to destroy the element of pretence and “negate the illusion by allowing the truth to be visible at the same time”.<sup>25</sup> Notably, these words practically echo the similar observation made earlier by the Russian philosopher Aleksey Losev:

Ирония возникает тогда, когда я, желая сказать “нет”, говорю “да”, и в то же время это “да” я говорю исключительно для выражения и выявления моего искреннего “нет”.<sup>26</sup>

Irony arises when I, while wishing to say “no”, say “yes” and at the same time utter this “yes” with the sole purpose to express and expose my sincere “no”.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Green has to resort to the terms of negation every time he needs to redefine, for his own ends, the difference between either irony and metaphor or irony and allegory.<sup>27</sup> The important point he does not stress beyond his particular goals is that irony is able to establish connection through negation. Paul de Man, who spoke of irony as the “positive power of an absence”,<sup>28</sup> followed its ability to negate itself persistently down to its tendency to disrupt the very principle of trope function. However, the fact is that if metaphor, or allegory, or any other “regular” trope does provide positive correlation between meanings, the degree of this correlation may vary. It may seem quite natural that Green builds his operational definition of irony around the notion of the “initiated” and its opposite,<sup>29</sup> referring to those intended to grasp and miss the ironic message respectively. The problem is that the circle of the “initiated” cannot really be controlled even by the speaker, and this is exactly what de Man talks about. In any case, the value of the ironic message can hardly be measured by its clarity: on the contrary, it only increases its chances to be mistaken for plain truth. The power of irony is negative, just as irony itself: the more obscure is the language it uses, the closer it approaches to paradox with its “negative synthesis”. Finally, there is no hidden meaning behind the plain words for the

initiated to see; things lie on the surface but one should make an effort to unravel them. “The ironist leaves work for the audience to do”:<sup>30</sup> the more, perhaps, the better.

Dennis Green speaks of poets – or, to be more precise, of medieval poets who essentially were singers and, in a sense, musicians as well. In any case, they were a part of audio-visual culture of their time. Some, particularly those keeping to structuralist or semiotic positions, would argue that whatever is true of the irony of verbal text can also be applied to other kinds of “text”: whether musical, scenic, or behavioural. At the very least, Paul de Man found it necessary to underline that Lukacs was the first critic to use irony as a structural category.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of that, as far as Sergej Kurechin’s smile is concerned, it would have been a singular and perhaps impossible task to prove that his spoken intentions had nothing in common with those he preserved for his multi-media projects. Still, there are easier tasks: for instance, to find out that if there ever was a component of little significance in his multi-faceted artistic activity, that was writing. Kurechin left us very few written texts, most of them gathered in the posthumous collection *Nemoj svidetel’* (*The Mute Witness*).<sup>32</sup> Alongside that, however, we have quite a lot of samples of his spoken word, from the more conventional format of interviews to what seems to have been conscious artistic actions: although such a differentiation may always prove arbitrary in his case. There are, however, evidences beyond any doubt. The jazz critic Aleksandr Kan tells in his narrative on the St Petersburg jazz scene that as early as in the mid-80’s Kurechin had a habit of premising the *Popular Mechanics* shows with lengthy verbal preambles that sounded rather unlike a formal foreword. “Долго рассказывал что-то о своей психике, о том, что он – насекомое, о мутациях в организме, о врожденном идиотизме и прочих захватывающих вещах”<sup>33</sup> (“He spoke at length about his psyche, that he is an insect, of internal mutations, inborn idiocy and other fascinating things”). Kan further describes a totally radical event where Kurechin actually substituted the whole show with an unusually long speech of a similar nature:

Он увлеченно и без тени улыбки рассказывал о турецких янычарах, которые на своих подводных лодках проникли в Петроград 17-го и были замешаны в военно-революционную интригу с английскими шпионами, Лениным, Троцким и прочими сюрреалистическими персонажами [...] Проговорив так полчаса и подведя рассказ к некой завершающей точке, раскланивается и уходит со сцены, так и не прикоснувшись к роялю. Публика сидит как замороженная. Чисто вербальная *Поп-механика* – без единого музыкального звука, без единого костюма, декорации и в полном одиночестве. Концептуальный акт не хуже кейджевского 4’33.<sup>34</sup>

He spoke animatedly and with no shadow of a smile about the Turk Janissaries who invaded Petrograd on their submarines and got involved in the war and revolution related plot with British spies, Lenin, Trockij, and other surrealistic characters [...] Having spoken like that for half an hour and arrived at some final conclusion, he bows and leaves the scene without even touching the piano. The audience sits as if spellbound. That was purely verbal *Popular Mechanics*, without a single musical sound, with no costumes or decorations, and in an ultimate solo mode;<sup>35</sup> a conceptual act to rival 4'33 by John Cage.

Apparently, Kurechin did consider the spoken word an inextricable part of his performance strategy. As regards the parallel with John Cage in this passage, it seems too generalized, capturing but the basic Conceptualist spirit of things. It is true that Kurechin was well aware of Cage, met him in person in 1988,<sup>36</sup> and dedicated an album to him.<sup>37</sup> Given that, the leader of *Popular Mechanics* should have known even better how to avoid the trodden path. While he could not possibly supersede the ultimate radicalism of Cage, he chose to flummox his audience by extending the non-musical component of the performance over sheer silence. In fact, once the Cagean silence ever took place, his followers proceeded to do their best to distract the audience from it. The radical minimalist composer La Monte Young in particular, especially in his Fluxus period, came forward with a number of attempts to furnish this silence with non-musical elements of distraction. Here, for example, is the score of his 1960 *Composition #4*:

Announce to the audience that the lights will be turned off for the duration of the composition (it may be any length) and tell them when the composition will begin and end. Turn off all the lights for the announced duration. When the lights are turned back on, the announcer may tell the audience that their activities have been the composition, although this is not at all necessary.<sup>38</sup>

The same composer's *Piano Piece for David Tudor #1* is perhaps even more provocative, anticipating to some extent the air of the future Kurechin's actions:

Bring a bale of hay and a bucket of water onto the stage for the piano to eat and drink. The performer may then feed the piano or leave it to eat by itself. If the former, the piece is over after the piano has been fed. If the latter, it is over after the piano eats or decides not to.<sup>39</sup>

Still, it is necessary to differentiate between the anti-art stance of Fluxus, devotedly maintained by Young, and the path eventually taken by Kurechin. The Belgian minimalist composer and musical theorist Wim Mertens who studied Fluxus as early as in the 70's,<sup>40</sup> points to the paradoxical

discrepancy between their ambition to make art “comprehensible to everybody” and their actual tendency to express themselves “in aggressive, destructive brutality and in the deliberate irritation of the audience”.<sup>41</sup> Correspondingly, it can be argued that Young’s compositions of the aforementioned kind must have had a baffling effect on the unprepared audience: comparable to that, say, of the Koan practice. Humour seems to be present there, but hardly any irony. The situation may appear ridiculous and is certainly destructive with regard to the common sense of an academic musical performance as it should have still been preserved around 1960. There are no “initiated”, at least not among the audience, but the latter must feel confronted by something very overtly disconcerting and is obviously left some hard work to do, so as to make sense out of it all.

It might suffice to observe that Kurechin was apparently able to influence his own audience in some subtler and deeper way rather than just flummoxing or irritating it (“The audience sits as if spellbound”).<sup>42</sup> It can also be noticed that he was able to go ever further than Cage or Young, beyond substituting the content of musical art with its concept. In fact, he managed to drain the concept of musical art even of such content as could be reckoned purely conceptual (that is, Cagean), and substituted it with another, only circumstantially related medium (that of introductory speech) while simultaneously reducing even that to its pure concept (since its content had nothing to do with the actual performance). The same Aleksandr Kan who witnessed and gave an account of that radical gesture by Kurechin refers to his art, in the first place, as “paradoxically ironical”.<sup>43</sup> Although these words seem to be dropped somewhat offhandedly in Kan’s book, they might offer the key to the spellbinding effect that Kurechin could allegedly evoke. Traces of both irony and paradox betray their heavy presence in his artistic philosophy, and it is possibly their combined power that had such an impact on the general public. This fusion of misleading incongruity of irony and confounding humour of paradox constitutes, at least in Sergej Kurechin’s outstanding and influential case, the crucial element of the phenomenon known as “stiob”.

## 2. *The Ambiguity of Laughter: The Controversy of “Stiob”*

As a social habit peculiar to St Petersburg cultural tradition, “stiob” (“crëb”) is definitely an abundant ground to investigate. In its most basic mode, “stiobbing” may refer to ridiculing that tends to veer towards mortifying and even humiliating. Conceivably, if “stiob” does deserve to be distinguished from other varieties of ridicule, it must be for the unique impression it leaves. The first diligent attempt to examine “stiob” in scholarly terms can be attributed to the Russian American scholar Alexei Yurchak who dedicated to this phenomenon a fair number of observations in his study of late Soviet

subcultures, ranking it among the species of “dead irony”.<sup>44</sup> It is quite remarkable that Yurchak unequivocally defines “stiob” as a “peculiar form of irony”, stressing the excess of “overidentification” with the object as its main definitive feature: “it was often impossible to say whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two”.<sup>45</sup> He further emphasizes the difference between the Bakhtinian concept of carnival with its periodicity and the “all-year” life-creational nature of the “stiob” sub-culture. Referring to the carnivalesque discourse of opposition, he cares to point out that the policy of “overidentification” allowed “stiob” to avoid actual identification with any of the opposing sides, thus contributing to its characteristic ambiguity.<sup>46</sup> Another important element of “stiobbing” attitude that Yurchak is keen to register is what he calls “decontextualization” of content resulting in “unexpected” or “indeterminate” message that could even “appear baffling or absurd”.<sup>47</sup>

It may seem curious that Aleksei Yurchak, for whatever reason, passes in complete silence over Sergej Kurechin in his study of “dead irony”. The fact is, however, that the above-mentioned observations may prove quite applicable to Kurechin’s personality and art, will we choose to discuss his “overidentification” with cultural institutions he would exploit, “decontextualization” that he subjected the participants of *Popular Mechanics* to, or the “baffling” effect he was able to produce. The question is whether all we know about Kurechin can be reduced to these observations, and “stiob”, to a “form of irony”. Perhaps, the biggest concern in this regard is that Yurchak seems to employ the notion of irony for granted, failing to provide not only his own appraisal but even any references to the available research of this challenging concept. Obviously, the message of “overidentification” can be more or less concealed, depending on the presence and character of the initiated. In this sense there is no substantial difference between “stiob” and any variety of irony, but is it really what makes “stiob” so special?

“Decontextualization” appears more interesting since it relates to the element of paradox in “stiobbing”; yet something still has to be accentuated: the inadvertent presence of shock and surprise that proceed, among other things, from the suddenness of action. Speaking of the specific artistic groups presented by Yurchak in his study as self-organized exponents of “stiob”, this way of action was particularly characteristic of the Necrorealists:<sup>48</sup> but the author is not very explicit on the presence of irony or even humour in their discourse.<sup>49</sup> Still, these typically Koan features are missing from his definition of “stiob”, although interpretation of the informal union of artists *Mit’ki*<sup>50</sup> as a kind of virtual Zen monastery where “stiob” was practised daily in an “anti-carnival” mode does not seem quite out of place. It should be added that since the *Mit’ki* in fact originally presented a relatively limited circle of the initiated, every act of “stiobbing” must have been expected to have a hidden ironic meaning (tenably, hence the relaxed environment they



were famous for) but nonetheless come as a surprise when surfacing in its particular shape of a humour-tinted event. Directed outside the circle, however, their “stiob” could prove quite incomprehensible. When this esoteric subculture became a popular fashion – the process that started in the mid-1980’s and climaxed in the 1990’s – the circle of the initiated was inevitably broken, and their peculiar “stiob” bereft of its hermetic qualities and adapted for popular use.

As regards Kurechin, it can be argued that he intentionally disseminated “stiob” far and wide while its historic practitioners like *Mit’ki* proceeded to dissolve within the rows of the general public. His famous appearance on the Soviet TV show *Pjatoe koleso* (*The Fifth Wheel*) in 1991 where it was proclaimed that Lenin was a mushroom<sup>51</sup> can certainly be referred to as his first opportunity to test this strategy in front of a really wide audience. It might seem only too natural that Alexei Yurchak as a frontline scholarly expert on “stiob” chose that particular event as a subject of his recent, first-ever special study of Kurechin where it is actually admitted that the latter might have used “stiob”, too.<sup>52</sup> The curious thing is, however, that the current paper with its focus on *laughter* may prove to be only partially concerned with Yurchak’s effort which, somewhat surprisingly, appears to be not about laughing or “stiobbing” per se. On the contrary, it seems to culminate at the daring suggestion that Kurechin, whether in his public discourse in general or in the case of the “mushroom lecture” in particular, cherished hidden feelings of concern and responsibility. “His goal was not to ridicule the system but to give it a new, unfamiliar, way of looking at itself. In this way, he offered the kind of ‘positive construction’ for which he had argued.”<sup>53</sup> This “argument” is derived from the author’s interview with Kurechin where the latter said, among other things: “Ridicule is rooted in skepticism toward something and for that reason seems inappropriate to me. Skepticism does not offer any positive program; it is unable to offer any positive construction [...] Because when a person offers a positive construction he is responsible.”<sup>54</sup>

Given that, the first question coming to mind is whether the word “serious” is applicable to Kurechin at all, and if it is, how it should be interpreted. Putting it even more provocatively, can one be serious enough to take Kurechin seriously? Even though his “stiobbing” attitude was admittedly universal, it may be possible to identify his most characteristic targets. In the first place, much attention was paid to those who attempted to penetrate the ambiguity of his playacting, particularly to journalists. “Интервью Курехина верить нельзя. Он издевается над журналистами”<sup>55</sup> (“Kurechin’s interviews can’t be trusted. He jeers at the journalists”). In the 1995 interview to the *Medved’* magazine, rather capacious and comprehensive in comparison to most of the others, he concludes his response about the scope of his works in a typical fashion:

[Есть также] несколько как бы документированных “Поп-механик”. Но в них ничего не понять, потому что там только грохот какой-то. Там главное – смотреть, фонограмма ничего не дает.<sup>56</sup>

[There are also] several [shows by] *Popular Mechanics*, kind of documented, but they are quite incomprehensible because all you can hear is some kind of racket. There, the most important thing is watching, the soundtrack gives you nothing.

A shrewd glance may possibly discern irony in these words, a hidden sneer at the implied journalist ignorance. This interpretation, however, is likely to prove dubious. The problem is that a soundtrack of a fully-fledged *Popular Mechanics* show *does* sound like racket, or clamour, at least in the moments of culmination. Admittedly, Kurechin’s infatuation with “noise music” cannot be questioned (the commemorating album co-authored by one of the maîtres of the genre, Otomo Yoshihide,<sup>57</sup> might suffice). What is questionable, though, is whether anything about “noise music” is essentially concerned with “comprehension”. Along with that, issuing the soundtracks of *Popular Mechanics* attests to a conscious and determined effort on behalf of its leader. Who then is being ridiculed here: the interviewer, the record company, “noise music”, or perhaps Kurechin himself? If irony is there, it appears truly and continuously disruptive, but who are the initiated? At the same time, the situation seems full of paradoxically conflicting messages. The only lucid fact is that the interviewer desists from pursuing the subject any further.

Alternately, trying to pursue it would probably not help a lot, either:

С.К. Я тоже так считаю, к сожалению.

? А почему – к сожалению?

С.К. Я не знаю.<sup>58</sup>

Kurechin: Unfortunately, I think so, too.

Q: Why “unfortunately”?

Kurechin: I don’t know.

Similarly, the constituents of the general public who would place themselves in the questioning position when facing Kurechin would be rewarded with the same kind of attitude. This is what positively happened on the occasion of his first massive appearance on Soviet TV when *Popular Mechanics* took part in the “Музыкаль’ный ринг” (“Musical Boxing Ring”) show based on the intercommunication between the artists and the audience. Although modest in scale if compared to the future pageants, this performance must have proven quite shocking by the cultural standards of the Soviet

Union, in 1987 still “a stolid nation of genteel classical recitals and world-class doctrinaire pianists”<sup>59</sup> at least to some extent. Undoubtedly, neither Kurechin howling and snarling in accord with Sergej Letov’s orgiastically screeching saxophone; nor Afrika harping at the pendent set of antique smoothing irons (proudly presented as “the first Soviet synthesizer”);<sup>60</sup> nor the group of masked persons struggling to conjoin ill-fitting, absurd-looking metal objects while accompanied by the chamber orchestra overlaid with electric guitars had anything to do with the Soviet cultural mainstream. Speaking almost exclusively on behalf of his troupe, Kurechin casually employed the compulsion to converse with the audience so as to provide the verbal ingredient of the show. Despite resorting at times to a caustic irony (“the contemporary acoustics impedes apprehending a lot of nuances”), or an open sneer (“if you grow tired of listening, let me know”), he seemed to adhere to “stiobbing” as a common rule. As far as the issue of acoustics is concerned, music pundits can be accounted for the initiated, while the sneer regarding the listener’s possible fatigue was directed at the self-proclaimed (and overtly hostile) connoisseur of the academic avant-garde. More subtlety is needed, though, to discern the genuine motivation behind the response to the reproach that *Popular Mechanics* earned because of their alleged state-of-the-art pretence:

Мы ничего не придумываем [...] мы просто берем какие-то пластины [...] музыкальной культуры и стараемся просто исполнить их с максимальной любовью.

We aren’t trying to invent anything [...] just picking certain strata of [existing] musical culture and striving to perform them with as much affection as possible.

This sounds, it may be observed, like the proclamation of the very Post-Modern agenda that Kurechin was most often associated with during his lifetime.<sup>61</sup> Notwithstanding that, it would not be easy to contradict the elements of this message soundly, be it the mixture of various musical genres or the presence of affection. One can perceive, nonetheless, the manifest contradiction between the music that sounded and the words that followed it: manifest, and yet elusive. The music was obviously a revelation to the majority of the audience, without the exception of the middle-aged lady who had voiced her reproach in a mentor’s tone. Correspondingly, Kurechin proceeded to settle all issues of purpose, meaning and content of his art with one short sentence: “Вся музыка, которую исполняет сегодня Популярная Механика – это музыка о любви” (“All the music that *Popular Mechanics* performs today is about love”).

Evidently, the topic of shock is inseparable from the topic of expectations. Judging by either approving or disapproving but equally earnest faces in the audience that attended the show, they came to witness “a cultural event” while having expectations developed beforehand and deemed appropriate for the occasion: much like the early audiences of Fluxus or Cage that expected a “classical” concert. Arguably, this must be the preeminent reason why Kurechin’s counterparts at “Muzykal’nyj ring” apparently fell into the snares of “stiobbing” rather than enjoy the paradoxical humour of the action and discourse they were presented with. No such obstacle seemed to inhibit the teenagers who took part in the “Rok-urok” (“Rock Lesson”) TV programme in 1995,<sup>62</sup> expecting presumably nothing but an encounter with the celebrity renowned not the least for his pranks. Kurechin’s remarks on that occasion sounded much in the same key. When asked why, in spite of his countenance divulging a “soft, intelligent and educated person”, he was expelled from all the schools he attended, the guest warned the audience against the false impression, insisting that in fact he was a “tough scumbag”. In response to the question about his feelings for Bach, he admitted not listening to “classical music” at all because of the disgust it induces. It is remarkable that although the teenagers would start listening to each one of Kurechin’s replies with diligent attention, they almost invariably laughed in the end. It also seems quite emblematic that they chose to put a question to him about the “Leningrad culture of *stio*”.<sup>63</sup> The answer is worth reciting: “Я не очень люблю это слово – “стеб” [...] Когда я вижу в искусстве какой то стеб, мне становится не по себе [...] Это когда люди из себя выжимают иронию, а иронизировать сегодня, по большому счету, не над чем” (“I don’t really like this word, ‘stio

b’ in art, I feel uneasy [...] It occurs when people are wrenching irony out of themselves, but today there is actually nothing to aim irony at”). At this point, Kurechin’s earnest expression all of a sudden switches to a mocking smile: “В искусстве сегодня не должно быть безысходности, искусство должно нести людям прекрасное, нежное, мягкое, обволакивающее, радужное...” (“Today, there should be no hopelessness in art; for people’s sake, art ought to be beautiful, tender, soft, swathing, iridescent...”).

In this arguably quite consistent context one may wonder what led Alexei Yurchak to the assumption, if not confidence, that contrary to many others he succeeded to capture Kurechin in a rare, if not unique moment of grave sincerity. Notwithstanding that, the 1995 interview that he refers to seems to contain very characteristic samples of Kurechin’s speech, including the very sentence that inspired the title of Yurchak’s paper: “I am a parasite. And also a bastard, a cretin, and a piece of shit.”<sup>64</sup> According to the author’s account, Kurechin further develops this idea, suggesting that a parasite is as beneficial for the organism it affects as it is possibly harmful. “His analysis was anything but a joke,” contends Yurchak; and indeed, it is this cutting-

edge concept in parasitology that lies at the base of his suggestion that Kurechin, in general, was beset with “positive” and “constructive” ideas and had no mind for ridiculing or jeering. One may feel compelled to inquire whether Alexei Yurchak is ready to take at face value any other of Kurechin’s numerous scientific revelations, such as those featured in Sergej Debižev’s documentary *Kompleks Nevmenjaemosti (The Complex of Insanity)*<sup>65</sup> or even the very “mushroom lecture” he himself admits as a “hoax”.<sup>66</sup> This oddity is only too apparent against the main body of Yurchak’s work that all in all offers a detailed, inclusive and shrewd analysis of what is probably the most famous Kurechin-related episode. Moreover, the overall vision of Kurechin as a “parasite” (with reference to Michel Serres, as Yurchak puts it) seems to prove both adequate and insightful. The only serious issue here is that of loose conclusions that obviously proceed from the author’s objective to emphasize, perhaps beyond reasonable measure, the “tragic” aspect of the “mushroom” event.<sup>67</sup>

### 3. *The Politics of Laughter: “Stiob” as an Instrument of Power*

It can only be regretted that we learn nothing from Alexei Yurchak’s narrative about the dynamics of Kurechin’s facial expression during the above-cited interview, since this issue seems to be directly concerned with the latter’s refusal to concede the use of “stiob” or irony on a variety of occasions. We can remember that at the event recounted by Aleksandr Kan, Kurechin spoke “with no shadow of a smile”. Likewise, he remained gravely serious when speaking at “Muzykal’nyj ring”, although the smile would reappear in the rare moments of open confrontation with the audience, or while listening to some questions, or when playing. The same roguish smile, we can remember as well, accompanied his “conducting” the grand *Popular Mechanics* shows. What can be suggested is that the “no-smile mode” would be employed so as not to betray the hidden ironic component of the speech that otherwise could be interpreted as open mockery because of the way it contradicted its context.

As regards the “smile mode”, its presence on the surface must have been crucial to attest to the humour of paradox, lest the intention should be mistaken for either purely didactical or absurdly straightforward (in Tertullian’s spirit of *credo quia absurdum*). It may then seem unsurprising that during the performance where the spoken word was absent the smile was continuously present, since the performance was in effect full of mockery. There was the mockery of conducting music, with the “conductor” hovering above the scene suspended on ropes or jumping energetically in front of the row of musicians. There was the mockery of directing the theatrical show, since the “director” was present at the stage as if during the rehearsal, yet hardly directing even the mass improvisation, with the course of action

evolving all over the place mainly regardless of him. There was the mockery even of theatrical action itself, when all would go suddenly still, and the “conductor”, i.e. the “director”, would freeze in place looking at the audience with a grievous or condescending mien. There should have been the mockery of the audience, if only for this very reason, but also perhaps for those listed above; and plausibly, there was the self-mockery on Kurechin’s own behalf, of the self as a conductor, director and performance artist, if not anything else. It is as if he would not forget the words that Friedrich Nietzsche reportedly put above his door:

Und – lachte noch jeden Meister aus,  
Der nicht sich selber ausgelacht.<sup>68</sup>

Yet again, that was no plain mockery or derision, otherwise it would hardly be possible to grasp why artists of such diverse backgrounds willingly took part in *Popular Mechanics*, and the audience felt “spellbound” rather than, say, insulted. There was certainly something in Sergej Kurechin that had the capacity of influencing people. Sergej Debižev contends:

Он мог вызывать у людей любые настроения и восхищался этой возможностью [...] Исходя из собственного опыта, он мог вызывать у людей любые состояния сознания, используя магию, напор, который от него шел [...] Используя эту возможность, он манипулировал духовным состоянием людей.<sup>69</sup>

He was able to incite any kind of mood and relished this ability [...] Proceeding from his own experience, he could evoke in people any state of mind using the magic, the energy that emanated from him [...] With this ability, he manipulated people’s spiritual condition.

In this respect, there can be little doubt that Kurechin used “stioб” as a key tool to manipulate people with, even if it was fashioned after his own personal taste. At any rate, it seems to have been quite effective. To all appearances, the objects of his “stiobbing” did not usually feel just embarrassed or ashamed, as if mortified, nor just perturbed or suspicious, as if in presence of irony, nor just puzzled or bewildered, as if faced by a paradox. Stirred into a complex blend, they all would result in a spell that made people feel literally *lost*. It can be assumed that in the event mentioned by Aleksandr Kan the required effect was produced by the absurd content of the speech in accord with the boldness of gesture. The evidence is, though, that Kurechin could gauge this kind of reaction by the means of speech alone. Sergej Debižev remarked that conversation with him could shift anytime from a joke to the “powerfully intellectual level”, so that people of “little competence” would fall into a stupor.<sup>70</sup> Commenting on Kurechin’s “mushroom lecture”,

he used quite the same words: “это была не шутка [...] люди вообще ничего не поняли, они просто впали в ступор”<sup>71</sup> (“it wasn’t a joke [...] people understood nothing at all, they simply fell into a stupor”).

It can be added that Debižev as the director and script writer of the iconic movie *Dva kapitana 2 (Two Captains II)*<sup>72</sup> featuring Kurechin in the leading role of the First Captain plausibly arranged for Kurechin’s role to produce a similar effect: although the First Captain’s involvement in writing the script cannot be excluded, either. Judging from Debižev’s own words, when Andrej Tolubeev who was engaged as a narrator was first reading the script, he “fell silent and was lost in thought” upon reaching the sentence “на банкете у лорда мэра он выступил в английском парламенте”<sup>73</sup> (“during the banquet at the lord-mayor’s he delivered a speech in the English Parliament”). Hence, in presence of a discourse bearing the same features whether intended for a stage performance, a public appearance, a movie role, or a private conversation, does it make sense to try and determine when Sergej Kurechin was acting rather than not? What does seem certain is that if his ways were in any sense akin to those of Fluxus, it would be for their shared aspiration to obliterate the opposition of art and life. However, whereas the exponent of Fluxus like La Monte Young strove to bring “life” within the formalized bounds of art institution, Kurechin clearly aimed at disseminating art wherever he went: of course, in and on his own terms. Consequently, “stiob” as a strategy could be applied anytime and surface anywhere with the disruptive omnipresence of irony and the blunt force of a Koan exercise.

Some of the other persons who happened to know Kurechin closely voice a similar opinion. Jurij Šalyt<sup>74</sup> suggests in his memorial notes, notably titled “Mozart of St Petersburg”,<sup>75</sup> that keen knowledge and skilful manipulation of the “laws of psychology of perception” might have been among the preeminent sources of Kurechin’s ability to keep his audience in the state of “tense attention”. The jazz contrabassist Vladislav Makarov mentions that the leader of *Popular Mechanics* was searching for “special methods of affecting the audience”.<sup>76</sup> Debižev, in his turn, articulated his peculiar opinion of these methods: according to him, they were rather Surrealist than Post-Modern. Kurechin, says he, endeavoured to bring incompatible things together “in a regular Surrealist fashion”. “Он соединял их для того, чтобы у зрителя за счет энергии абсурдно-сюрреалистической вызвать эмоциональный шок, который ему был необходим. Культурный, эмоциональный, эстетический”<sup>77</sup> (“He combined them, using the energy of absurdity and surrealism, so as to instigate an emotional shock among the audience: a cultural, emotional, aesthetic shock”). Assuming that “stiob” as a skilful combination of shock, hidden message, and probably Surrealist attitude as well served Kurechin as a dominant *modus operandi*, we can append its definition as a function of power. Moreover, the evidence is that with the means of this tool Kurechin was able to extend its power virtually to

everybody. “Ему удавалось всех политиков, бизнесменов, влиятельных людей вовлекать в какие-то безумные вещи, чудовищные проекты, которые заканчивались вечно скандалами или неизвестно чем”<sup>78</sup> (“He managed to involve all those politicians, businessmen, influential people into all kinds of crazy things, monstrous projects that would always end in scandals or who knows what”). In this sense, Kurechin must be accredited for a positively singular accomplishment: he succeeded in involving into “a kind of crazy thing” none other but John Cage himself during his Leningrad visit in 1988. After the scheduled concert, Cage was persuaded to take a walk with the group of young people led by Kurechin, and eventually joined in the improvised “performance” where the role of a leading instrument was allotted to water, repeatedly poured from vessel to vessel.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, Kurechin’s power of “stiob” appeared to be as variegated as it was all-conquering. Arguably, most people would refer to its verbal aspect as most accessible, if this word is appropriate here, which either amounted to manipulating facts and concepts that comprised his pseudo-scientific “lectures”, or was backed up by similar manipulations with visual materials as manifested in the “Pjatoe koleso” event or in *Dva Kapitana Dva*. The *Popular Mechanics* shows, in their turn, employed the combined effect of incoherent imagery and incompatible music accompaniment. We have to bear in mind, however, that Sergej Kurechin was a musician in the first place: this is how he started his career, and this is where his “stiobbing” takes its roots. If *Popular Mechanics* embodied the mockery of the “professional dignities” of the entertainment industry, Kurechin as a composer and a performing musician clearly pursued similar goals with respect to the musical establishment. Surely, he did not necessarily have to resort to verbal means for this purpose, not even in order to avoid an open confrontation with the audience. Following the multifunctional pattern of Kurechin’s involvement with *Popular Mechanics* it can be suggested that his musical “stiob” was intended to undermine the very position of a performer or a composer rather than any conventions of performance or composition. Such an objective should have been easier to reach wherever these conventions were already reduced to a reasonable minimum.

The musical genre Kurechin pursued since the early days of his career (late 1970’s) can be loosely labelled as *free jazz*.<sup>80</sup> Although free jazz, as its name suggests, has always been less prone to inhibit musicians with any limitations than the majority of other musical genres, it still retained its own peculiar kind of “common sense”. Freedom of improvisation has never been an excuse from improvising in earnest. It seems that even this minimal rigour was enough for Kurechin to try and encroach upon; and again, he apparently managed to produce his trademark effect of unfathomable ambiguity without either antagonizing the audience or failing in his formal (technical) professionalism. According to the same Aleksandr Kan, at the jazz concert in



Novosibirsk in 1983 Kurechin let a clockwork froglet prance along the keyboard while playing.<sup>81</sup> For all its outward farcicality, this gesture can be argued to have significance beyond mere ludic connotations. At the very least, its message was nothing short of confusing. Given Kurechin's reputation for eccentricity and experimenting, could anyone in the audience be certain that the froglet was really not a legitimate part of the performance mingling the rhythm of its whirring hops with the staccato of piano improvisation? Still, the action was too bizarrely nonconforming to any possible code of musical performance, not even to that of free jazz; and yet there could be no place for the initiated. In extremis, the froglet could be interpreted as a "joke": which, considering the far-reaching boundaries of the genre, might well endow it with a status historically similar to that, say, of Beethoven's musical jokes.

This case of "displacing" the performer's position, however, is only too obvious, maybe even superficial. Basically, this tendency was entrenched in the very essentials of Kurechin's performing style, most notably his exceedingly fluent piano technique. It is hardly by chance that his first solo recording, *The Ways of Freedom*, reportedly caused "uproar and controversy":<sup>82</sup> the effect that may otherwise be simply referred to as confusion. "One is tempted to believe that the tape's been sped up," the Allmusic critic Chris Kelsey notes,<sup>83</sup> voicing the misconception that apparently was quite popular at the first reception of the album. He proceeds to sum it up cautiously: "The artist's formal sense was not very sophisticated, at least at this early stage of his development. His idea of form was mainly to explore one idea until its possibilities were exhausted, then move on to the next." In fact, the basic method that Kurechin applies in *The Ways of Freedom* is even more guileless. Instead of looking for new harmonies or constructing complex, polymorphous improvisations he chooses to dwell on a plain theme, often borrowed from the colloquial dictionary of mainstream jazz, and process it through a series of variations, at times almost minimalistically repetitive, adding up frequency and speed rather than intricacy. The resulting effect is an aural analogy of early film technologies, bound to appear stereotypically comic. It can be inferred that the overall confusion and "controversy" that ensued when the album was exposed to the public were produced by the combination of this uncommonly dexterous technique and the ludicrous material it was applied to. Accordingly, it was a combination of mockeries, the earliest in Kurechin's career to draw public attention, with a jazz musician, performer, improviser on one hand and their audience on the other being its principal targets. Needless to say, Kurechin did not limit this practice to the "early stage of his development" but rather proceeded with it to the very end. In 1991 Leo Records released an entire album of his piano "combinations",<sup>84</sup> aptly named *Some Combination of Fingers and Passion*, where updated inventory is employed to transmit "passion", jazz templates being

buttressed with enhancements like tango motives and cabaret tunes processed after the same fashion. Some of these combinations also feature in Kurechin's versification of jazz scat singing that mostly amounts to mournful howling but is ostensibly passionate enough to be appraised by a Western listener as an authentic Russian contribution to the field. It will suffice to add that the impression this album appears to leave is, apart from anything else, that of power, judging by at least some of the critical remarks.<sup>85</sup>

It may be appropriate to conclude that Kurechin's laugh at the "Russian cosmos of the 80's" amounted, first and foremost, to the jeer of the waxing power at the power falling into decline. Lenin was not the sole symbol of the Communist authority to be denigrated. A year earlier (in 1990), the scene of the *Popular Mechanics* performance in Liverpool was adorned with a huge portrait of the more recently deceased Leonid Brežnev. The troupe, explained Kurechin on the BBC air, cherished the dream to see Leonid Il'ič among its rows, but much to his misfortune, he died. Notwithstanding that, the dream did obviously come true, if only in a manner of "stiobbing". Even prior to that, though, when Egor Ligačev, very much alive and incumbent top Communist leader, denounced *Popular Mechanics* as "an ideological and artistic jumble", Kurechin just proceeded to disparage his confronting stance: "after this I will ever list Ligachev among the spiritual fathers of *Popular Mechanics*".<sup>86</sup> Following this trend, he might have estimated the incorporation of the KGB ensemble into his project as an ultimate victory.

Finally, the statement should be made with regard to what this element of victory over totalitarianism was achieved for. Since one of the most popular sentiments related to this issue is concerned with liberating the Russian cultural tradition from the yoke of Communist ideology, it might be of some interest to learn what Kurechin himself thought about it:

Я очень много занимался русской философией, и считаю, что основным моментом русской культуры является тотальное безумие [...] Что такое тотальное безумие – это попытки соединить вещи абсолютно несоединимые в нормальных условиях.<sup>87</sup>

I have long studied Russian philosophy and think that the basic feature of Russian culture is a total madness [...] What is a total madness? It is the attempt to bring together things that cannot be brought together in normal circumstances.

Would it be advisable to take these words seriously? Perhaps, to the same measure as anything that Kurechin would say in public. What cannot be questioned is that the circumstances he used to generate in order to bring disparate things together were anything but "normal" in the contemporary socio-cultural terms. Will it be sufficiently sound to assert that these circumstances are peculiarly related to Russian tradition? Michael Benson, the first

English-speaking journalist to interview Sergej Kurechin as early as in 1988, must have intuited something about it, since he speaks about “uniquely Slavic seriocomic sensibility” and even “Slavic irony”.<sup>88</sup> He does not expand much on this subject, but after all, his labour is not scholarly. There definitely is an affinity between *Popular Mechanics* and the culture of “skomorochs”, the street actors that flourished in Russia centuries ago, and whose performances featured mock songs and “ГЛУМ” (“jeer”) satirical acts along with live animals.<sup>89</sup> Along with that, even within the context of St Petersburg tradition, “stiob” as a practice, if not as a name, is tenably not the pure product of the late Soviet period, tracing back to the days of Daniil Charms and further into history to his predecessor Aleksej K. Tolstoj and his associates. This could be an issue for separate investigation; in the while we may have to admit that “stiob” is the phenomenon that not only originated in Russia, but is also most comprehensible to those associated with Russian culture, which may prove the crucial reason why *Popular Mechanics* never had real success in the West.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, it may be able to provide ultimate reinforcement to the argument that the legacy of Sergej Kurechin can be best appreciated in the reverse perspective of totalitarian and post-totalitarian experience. His public escapades, his extraordinary shows and frenzied projects seemed to draw inexhaustible energy from the post-totalitarian atmosphere of the late Soviet and post-Soviet society revelling in its own kind of a Debordian spectacle, suddenly liberated from ideological constraints, and not yet tired of the routine it would eventually become.

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#### NOTES

- 1 It must be noted that the very word “serious”, once applied to Kurechin, may be deemed quite ambiguous, being one of the problems that this paper is focused on. Therefore, the statement about the “serious introspection” should not be interpreted in disregard of the recent significant contribution by Alexei Yurchak (‘A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom’, *Slavic Review*, 70, No. 2, Summer 2011). Nonetheless, there seems to be some controversy about Yurchak’s paper that is directly concerned with the notion of “seriousness” and must necessarily be discussed.
- 2 Leo Records, 1981.
- 3 The *Popular Mechanics* (Russian variants: *Populjarnaja mehanika*, *Pop-mechanika*) ensemble was founded by Sergej Kurechin in 1984. There is no clear evidence as to the origin of the name. There may have been a reference

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to the eponymous US science and technology magazine published since 1902 (ISSN 0032-4558); this version is quoted by the Russian Wikipedia (<http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Поп-механика> 15 May 2012), although without any reference. Sergej Letov (see below) mentions in his memorial narrative (Sergej Letov, 'Pominal'nye zapiski o Sergee Kurechine' ['Sergej Kurechin: In memoriam'], retrieved from Sergej Letov's website: [http://www.letov.ru/letov\\_kurehin.html](http://www.letov.ru/letov_kurehin.html); 15 May 2012) that the name was suggested by the influential Leningrad jazz critic Efim Barban and referred to the series of books by the Soviet scientist Aleksandr Fersman, but unfortunately, these books are not listed among the latter's works. The book named *Populjarnaja mehanika*, by Volodar P. Liševskij, was published in Moskva (Nauka) in 1979, so that Letov's version might possibly be corrected with reference to it. As regards the cast, *Popular Mechanics*, just as Kurechin's previous enterprise, *Crazy Music Orchestra*, was initially comprised of the emissaries of Leningrad avant-garde jazz and underground rock scenes, but subsequently grew to involve classically trained musicians, performance and visual artists, other persons of various backgrounds willing to participate, and finally, animals. The ensemble's typical performance developed in accordance, from purely musical to multimedia stage show.

Kurechin's productions and group performances amalgamated music, theater, circus, ballet, cinema, erotic dances, live animals and birds, movable decorations, paintings and other visual arts in what could be described as Noah's Ark with Zappa and Warhol, all together in a Soviet-type underground happening show loaded with pranks and witty allusions.

(Steve Shelokhonov, 'Biography for Sergej Kurechin', retrieved from IMDb web site: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0476122/bio> 15 May 2012)

*Popular Mechanics* commenced to perform actively around 1986, toured extensively all through the USSR, and since the late 1980's performed also in Europe, US and Japan.

4 The most extensive research effort ever exerted on Kurechin can be found in the final assignment of the undergraduate student of the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in Moscow (see: Tat'jana Karklit, 'Fenomen Sergeja Kurechina v otečestvennom kinematografe konca 80-načala 90-ch godov' ['The Phenomenon of Sergej Kurechin in the Russian cinema of the late 80's and early 90's'], retrieved from Sergej Letov's website: <http://Kurechin.letov.ru/Karklit/diplom/index.html>; 15 May 2012).

5 Sergej Žarikov, 'Populjarnaja mehanika Egora Letova' ('The Popular Mechanics of Egor Letov'). Retrieved from the Special Radio web site: <http://art.specialradio.ru/?id=316> 15; May 2012.

6 Alexander Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus*, New York, 1986.

- 7 Referred to as “the song and dance ensemble of the KGB” by Sergej Letov (*op. cit.*). Referred to as “a KGB employees’ choir” by Anton Nikkila, ‘Russian industrial noise: Pioneers, youth league and party members’, *The Wire*, November 2001.
- 8 For an instance, see the video recording of the *Popular Mechanics* performance in the Big Concert Hall, St Petersburg in 1993. Retrieved from Sergej Letov’s website (<http://Kurechin.letov.ru/Kurechin-video.html>; 15 May 2012).
- 9 Paul de Man, ‘Georg Lukacs’ Theory of the Novel’, *Blindness and insight: essays in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism*, Minneapolis, 1983, p. 56.
- 10 Paul de Man, ‘The Concept of Irony’, *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 165.
- 11 Until 1993; see <http://Kurechin.letov.ru/Kurechin-video.html> 15; May 2012.
- 12 Sergej Letov, *op. cit.*
- 13 Aleksandr Aljab’ev, Russian classical composer of the 19th century, particularly famous for his romances.
- 14 A Nanaj (small Tungusic nation living predominantly in the Russian Far East) “ēstrada” singer, most popular in the 1970’s, particularly for the song mentioned in the passage.
- 15 A Leningrad underground rock, later pop band that continuously played a backbone role in Kurechin’s shows. There are two books about their late leader, Viktor Coj, authored by Aleksandr Žitinskij: *Viktor Coj: stichi, dokumenty, vospominanija* (*Viktor Coj: Poetry, Documents, Memoirs*; with Marianna Coj) Sankt-Peterburg, 1991; and *Coj forever: dokumental’naja povest’* (*Coj Forever: a Documentary Narrative*), Sankt-Peterburg, 2009.
- 16 A Leningrad avant-garde artist and art curator, one of the most influential personae of Soviet Nonconformist Art, its Leningrad brand still awaiting major research work. For more information, see his biography on the website *Iskusstvo Rossii* (*Art in Russia*) ([http://www.gif.ru/people/novikov/city\\_876/fah\\_886/](http://www.gif.ru/people/novikov/city_876/fah_886/); 15 May 2012). See also: Olesja Turkina, Viktor Mazin, Timur Novikov, *Timur*, Moskva, 1993; Olesja Turkina, ‘The Last Hero’, *Art Exis. Collector Book*, Paris, 2007, pp. 10-11; Geurt Imanse, ‘On Timur = On Beauty’, *Art Exis. Collector Book*, Paris, 2007, pp. 42-43.
- 17 A Leningrad performance and installation artist, a long-time associate of Kurechin. For more information, see his biography on the website *Iskusstvo Rossii* ([http://www.gif.ru/people/bugaev/city\\_876/fah\\_886/](http://www.gif.ru/people/bugaev/city_876/fah_886/); 15 May 2012).
- 18 Showman and singer of the Leningrad/St Petersburg indie band *Aukcion*.
- 19 Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, London, 2004, p. 5.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 21 Paul de Man, ‘Georg Lukacs’ Theory of the Novel’, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 22 Paul de Man, ‘The Concept of Irony’, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 24 Dennis Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance*, Cambridge, 1979, p. 5.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 26 Aleksej Losev, *Istorija estetičeskich kategorij*, Moskva, 1965, p. 326.

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- 27 Dennis Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.
- 28 Paul de Man, 'Georg Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel*', *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 29 Dennis Green, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 31 Paul de Man, 'Georg Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel*', *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 32 Sergej Kurechin, *Nemoj svidetel' (The Mute Witness)*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1998. This edition includes several interviews and collaborative texts, whereas those signed by Kurechin alone are represented by the likes of his "self-interview", the tale 'Journey around Russia' (reportedly "written in one day") etc.
- 33 Aleksandr Kan, *Poka ne načalsja džaz (Until the Jazz Begins)*, Sankt-Peterburg, 2008, p. 276.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.
- 35 The event in question can therefore be interpreted as a display of the *Popular Mechanics* philosophy (in its "solo mode") infiltrating even Kurechin's own solo performing practice that, with all its eccentricities, would usually presume that some "real" (instrumental and/or vocal) music was to be played.
- 36 See Anton Nikkila, *op. cit.*
- 37 *Dear John Cage*, Long Arms Records, 1996.
- 38 Cited per: Wim Mertens, 'La Monte Young', *American Minimal Music*, London, 1983, p. 24.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 23. A curious parallel can be drawn between this "piano piece" and the poem 'Improvizacija' by Boris Pasternak where the motif of the piano being fed is employed in an arguably less humorous fashion.
- 40 Over the past two decades, there have been issued a number of special publications on *Fluxus*, including: Eстера Milman, ed., *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country, Visible Language*, Special Issue, Vol. 26, Nos. 1/2, Providence, 1992; Thomas Kellein, *Fluxus*, London and New York, 1995; Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, San Diego, California, 1998; Ken Friedman, Ed., *The Fluxus Reader*. Chichester, West Sussex and New York, 1998; etc.
- 41 Wim Mertens, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.
- 42 Aleksandr Kan, *op. cit.*, p. 276.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 44 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, Princeton and Oxford, 2006, p. 238.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 48 As Yurchak himself actually indicates (see: *op. cit.*, p. 248).
- 49 It can be noticed that verbal imagery used by Necrorealists that Yurchak refers to in his book, for instance, of the "political bodies" and their metamorphoses (*op. cit.*, p. 252) is quite akin to that of the Surrealists. On the parallels between Kurechin and the Surrealists, see below; however, the discussion on whether Surrealist discourse can be likened or reduced to what Yurchak defines as "stiob" can arguably exceed by far the extent of the

current paper. Nevertheless, it seems important to emphasize that Yurchak's argument about "this kind of *stiob* aesthetic" being peculiar to "late socialism" may prove dubious for more than one substantial reason.

50 To whom the respective chapter of Yurchak's book is largely dedicated.  
51 For the transcript, see the website "Šokovaja terapija" (<http://shock-terapia.net/autor/kurehin>; 15 May 2012).

52 "Others recognized the extreme irony of *stiob*..." (Aleksii Yurchak, 'A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurechin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom', *Slavic Review*, 70, No. 2, Summer 2011, p. 309).

53 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

55 Tat'jana Karklit, 'Interv'ju s Sergeem Debiževym 4 maja 2004 goda', *op. cit.*  
56 Sergej Kurechin's interview to *Medved'* magazine (No. 8, 1995). Retrieved from Sergej Letov's website: (<http://Kurechin.letov.ru/Karklit/diplom/Kurechin-Medved.html>; 15 May 2012).

57 Kenny Millions, Otomo Yoshihide, *Without Kurechin*, Long Arms Records, 1999.

58 Sergej Kurechin's interview to *Medved'* magazine, *op. cit.*

59 As the British journalist Michael Benson who met Kurechin about the same time would put it. See 'Sergej Kurechin: Uncivil engineering', Interview, December 1988.

60 "*Ujugon*": the invention that should be accredited to St-Petersburg poet Arkadij Dragomoščenko.

61 Those who were his close friends had to speak out from time to time in denial of this association. See for instance Sergej Debižev's reply to the question whether Kurechin was a "Post-Modernist": "Ни в коем случае" ("By no means") (Tat'jana Karklit, 'Interv'ju s Sergeem Debiževym 4 maja 2004 goda' [Interview with Sergej Debižev on May 4th, 2004'], *op. cit.*); or Boris Grebenščikov's answer to the similar question: "Сергею Анатольевичу никогда в жизни не пришло бы в голову слово 'постмодернизм'. Он мог его использовать только как ругательный термин" ("Sergej Anatol'evič would never let the word 'Post-Modernism' slip. He could only use it as a pejorative term") (Michail Margolis, interview with Boris Grebenščikov, *Izvestija*, 08.08.09. Retrieved from the website of the newspaper *Izvestija*: <http://www.izvestia.ru/culture/article3132813/>; 15 May 2012). Boris Grebenščikov is an influential Russian rock musician who worked with Kurechin closely in the 1980's. He acts in the movie *Dva Kapitana Dva* as the Second Captain.

62 See: 'Sergej Kurechin. Zapis' peredači ROK-UROK 1995' (<http://art-sluza.info/2008/12/01/%d1%81%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b3%d0%b5%d0%b9-%d0%ba%d1%83%d1%80%d1%91%d1%85%d0%b8%d0%bd-%d1%87%d0%b0%d1%81%d1%82%d1%8c-%d0%bf%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%8f/#more-339>; 15 May 2012).

63 In fact, the alternative form "stiobki" was used.

- 64 Alexei Yurchak, 'A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom', *Slavic Review* 70, No. 2, Summer 2011, p. 329.
- 65 St Petersburg Documentary Film Studio/Dva Kapitana, 1992.
- 66 Alexei Yurchak, 'A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom', *Slavic Review*, 70, No. 2, Summer 2011, p. 309.
- 67 "Kurekhin's revelation was clearly comic, causing many people to laugh. It was, however, also tragic, because instead of suggesting that the moral foundation of Soviet history had been distorted during previous periods (by Stalin and others) and could, therefore, be recovered, it suggested that this moral foundation was ephemeral from the outset" (*ibid.*, p. 331).
- 68 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Die Froehliche Wissenschaft*, Leipzig, 1887, p. I.
- 69 Tat'jana Karklit, 'Interv'ju s Sergeem Debiževym 4 maja 2004 goda'.
- 70 "Особенность разговора с Курехиным заключалась в том, что в любую минуту он мог быть переведен из шутки на мощный интеллектуальный уровень, и люди малокомпетентные впадали в ступор" (Tat'jana Karklit, 'Interv'ju s Sergeem Debiževym 4 maja 2004 goda', retrieved from Sergej Letov's website: <http://Kurechin.letov.ru/Karklit/diplom/Debižev-Kurechin.html>; 15 May 2012).
- 71 Tat'jana Karklit, 'Interv'ju s Sergeem Debiževym 4 maja 2004 goda', *op. cit.*
- 72 Aurora Film, Nicola Film, Russia/Germany 1992.
- 73 *Ibid.*
- 74 The head of the chamber ensemble that took part in the *Popular Mechanics* shows since the 80's.
- 75 Юрий Шалыт, 'Петербургский Моцарт' ([http://Kurechin.letov.ru/Kurechin\\_mozart.html](http://Kurechin.letov.ru/Kurechin_mozart.html); 15 May 2012).
- 76 Владислав Макаров, 'Атональный синдром нового русского джаза' (<http://www.specialradio.ru/art/031.shtml>; 15 May 2012).
- 77 Tat'jana Karklit, 'Interv'ju s Sergeem Debiževym 4 maja 2004 goda', *op. cit.*
- 78 *Ibid.*
- 79 See for the detailed account: Olesja Turkina, 'Džon Kejdž v Peterburge' ('John Cage in St Petersburg'), retrieved from website of The New Academy of Fine Arts, St Petersburg (<http://www.newacademy.spb.ru/keij/keij.html>; 15 May 2012).
- 80 The label Leo Records (<http://www.leorecords.com>; 15 May 2012) that issued Kurechin's first ever record, *The Ways of Freedom*, is known as one of the world leaders in publishing free/experimental jazz artists over the past three decades. This label has subsequently released some of his other oeuvres: *Absolutely Great!* (1988), *Some Combination of Fingers and Passion* (1991), and more.
- 81 "Курехин – бесспорный лидер записи – вполне в духе царившей среди джазменов-авангардистов этики, оставлял партнерам немалый простор для импровизирования [...] А в конце выступления – исключительно



строгом, почти академичном – Сергей [...] высадил на крышку рояля заводного прыгающего лягушонка” (“Kurechin, as an unquestionable leader of the session, let his partners improvise freely, in full accord with the commonplace ethics of avant-garde jazz [...] In the end of the performance that in general was exceptionally strict, almost academic, Sergej [...] put on the piano lid a clockwork prancing froglet”). See annotation on Zvuki.Ru website: <http://www.zvuki.ru/R/P/6381/>; 15 May 2012.

82 See annotation on the Leo Records webpage: [http://www.leorecords.com/?m=select&id=CD\\_GY\\_014](http://www.leorecords.com/?m=select&id=CD_GY_014); 15 May 2012.

83 Chris Kelsey, ‘Sergej Kurechin. The Ways of Freedom: Review’ (<http://www.allmusic.com/album/the-ways-of-freedom-r142377/review>; 15 May 2012).

84 See the Leo Records web page: [http://www.leorecords.com/?m=select&id=CD\\_LR\\_179](http://www.leorecords.com/?m=select&id=CD_LR_179); 15 May 2012.

85 The Leo Records web page cites the jazz critic Graham Lock: “A frothy concoction of wit, whimsy and flashing virtuoso power delivered at time with madcap elan” ([http://www.leorecords.com/?m=select&id=CD\\_LR\\_179](http://www.leorecords.com/?m=select&id=CD_LR_179); 15 May 2012).

86 Michael R. Benson, ‘Sergej Kurechin: Uncivil engineering’, *op. cit.*

87 Sergej Kurechin’s interview to *Medved* magazine, *op. cit.*

88 Michael R. Benson, ‘Sergej Kurechin: Uncivil engineering’, *op. cit.*

89 There is a fair number of scholarly works on the subject of “skomorochs”. See, for instance: A. Faminyn, *Skomorochi na Rusi (Skomorochs of Rus’)*, Moskva, 1995; A. Belkin, *Russkie skomorochi (Russian Skomorochs)*, Moskva, 1975; V. Košev, *Skomorochi i skomorosh’ja professija (The Skomorochs and Their Profession)*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1994; S. Jurkov, ‘Smechovaja storona antimira: skomorošestvo’, *Pod znakom groteska: antipovedenie v russkoj kul’ture (XI-načala XX vv.)* (‘The Laughter Side of the Anti-world: The Skomoroch Tradition’), Sankt-Peterburg, 2003; Russell Zguta, *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi*, Philadelphia, 1978, etc.

90 According to Sergej Letov: “Зарубежные же выступления показали, что европейская публика не принимает веселого безумия [...] Запад не понял и не мог принять смещения планов реальности. Прославленная Поп-механика вызывала разочарование” (“The touring abroad had shown that the European audience does not accept jolly madness [...] The West did not and could not understand the shift in the perception of reality. The famous Popular Mechanics invoked nothing but disappointment”; Sergej Letov, *op. cit.*).



ПОСТСЕМИОЗИС АНДРЕЯ МОНАСТЫРСКОГО В  
ТРАДИЦИЯХ МОСКОВСКОГО КОНЦЕПТУАЛИЗМА:  
ЭКФРАЗИС И ПРОБЛЕМА ВИЗУАЛЬНО-ИРОНИЧЕСКОЙ  
СУГГЕСТИИ

(ANDREI MONASTYRSKII'S POST-SEMIOSIS IN THE TRADITION OF  
MOSCOW CONCEPTUALISM: EKPHRASIS AND THE PROBLEM OF  
VISUAL-IRONIC SUGGESTION)

ДЕНИС ИОФФЕ  
(DENNIS IOFFE)

**Abstract**

The article surveys the problem of textual expression in Moscow Conceptualism. It discusses the peculiar way this movement constructed its pictorial art, creating a unique example of ekphrasis. It seems that the key to adequate understanding of the legacy of the Conceptualist experiment in Russian culture is the language of the comical and the diversity of the humorous agenda. Moscow Conceptualism authorizes and encourages the use of multiple languages in addition to pictorial expression per se. The article therefore analyses the ways in which Conceptualists juxtapose verbal textuality with more traditional "artwork".

Russian Conceptualism made extensive use of cognitive dissonance, exploiting the contradictory, conflicting feeling conveyed by their art to illustrate the ironies covertly undermining society's official discourse. The common Conceptualist goal was to demythologize the mainstream narrative of a happy socialist society by means of ideological mockery primarily based on the concept of "stioob". Ekphrastic representations worked to create bitter parodies of Soviet metaphysics, travestyng typical slogans of official propaganda. The essay explores unique mechanisms of embedding textual practice in the art of the elder conceptualist Il'ia Kabakov and his

younger contemporary Andrei Monastyrskii. The latter's ironic art theory is discussed in greater detail.

Keywords: *Laughter; Andrei Monastyrskii; Ekphrasis; Moscow Conceptualism; Stiob; Il'ia Kabakov*

### 0.0. Статус вопроса

Размышления об особом статусе экфразиса в ракурсе московского концептуализма и деятельности группы “Коллективные действия” можно начать с небольшого предупреждения. Постструктуралистское направление искусствоведения, развивавшееся на Западе в восьмидесятые годы, часто вело речь о своего рода “конце искусства”, провозглашая наступающую *тотальность репрезентации*. В то же время эстетическую производительность фигуративно-визуальных видов искусств предлагалось осмыслять в рамках того, что мы можем называть удобным термином *текстуальное производство*, то есть симбиотически семиотическое искусство, творимое и воспринимаемое по законам вербального текста.

Что представляет из себя “концептуальное искусство”, и чем западный и международный концептуализм<sup>1</sup> отличается от русского<sup>2</sup> своего извода? Если излагать этот вопрос в самом сжатом виде, то окажется что чуть ли не центральным аспектом дифференцирования будет отношение “русских концептуалистов” ко всей проблематике текста и к использованию той или иной текстуальности в своих работах или акциях.

Мы исходим из понимания того, что в *экфразисе* заключена, в изначально-терминологическом смысле, основополагающая онтологическая идея описания, обозначающая мыслительный процесс, – если придерживаться этимологии – заключения во фразу того, что дается в первичном виде зрительного образа. Экфразис занимает некое промежуточное положение между чистым миметическим описанием и рефлексивным повествованием, он одновременно, как заметил в свое время Юрий Шатин, “управляет как пространственным, так и временным аспектами” и создает “особую семиотику художественного текста”.<sup>3</sup>

Можно заметить, что в московском, и, шире в русском концептуализме<sup>4</sup> вербальноцентричная нарративизация становится собственно неотъемлемой, центральной частью конечного художественного произведения. Как будет далее видно в аспекте нашего разговора о способах знаковой визуализации в ракурсе “Коллективных действий” – без присутствия словесной нарративизации собственно “пластическая радость” произведения лишается какой бы то ни было очевидной значимости.

Из данной точки размышления далее можно было бы следовать несколькими путями в плане развертывания аргумента эссе: попытаться законодательно встроить нижеследующие примеры в своего рода общемировую историю экфразиса (еще не написанную), показав уникальность русского извода современного концептуализма, предоставив своего рода “генеалогическую экспертизу” в ретроспективном освещении этого вопроса. Альтернативным вариантом было бы показать тот сложный механизм возникновения самой потребности в экфразисе в каких-либо более конкретных контекстах. Постулируя краеугольный вопрос о том, почему “традиционные” пластические формы неожиданно воспринимаются концептуалистами как недостаточные, как неспособные выразить всю полноту художественной интенции.

В силу изначального плана настоящей статьи, как и в силу недостатка масштабного места (для удовлетворения заявок по вышезаявленным темам потребовалось бы написать нечто наподобие монографии) мы не следуем ни одним из вышеуказанных путей. Мы *de facto* отдаем здесь предпочтение третьему – создавая своего рода метакомментарий, указывая на само наличие уникального рода экфразиса, но при этом как бы не входя в детальные историко-культурные объяснения в аспекте того, почему всякий привлекаемый нами казус оказывается универсально важным и принципиально значимым в более глобальном плане, оставляя это усилие для отдельной (вос)последующей работы.

В контексте многогранной жизни знака работа московского концептуализма и, в частности, деятельность двух наиболее важных его представителей – Ильи Кабакова и Андрея Монастырского может представляться весьма характерной для целого периода развития этого направления искусства, не только в российском, но и, вероятно, в международном ракурсе рассмотрения.

### 1.0. *Экфразис как проблема*

В платоновском диалоге ‘Федр’ мы находим замечание о том, что “дурная особенность письменности”, которая “сходна с живописью”, состоит в том, что “ее порождения стоят, как живые”, но при этом неспособны обрести дар собственного слова.<sup>5</sup> В фактической неспособности “письма” вживе репрезентировать “пластическую красоту”, в том сильном виде, как она доступна в фигуративных видах искусства заключаются как бы своего рода изначальные границы экфразиса, позволяющего всякий раз вести речь лишь в рамках уже ранее всеми “увиденного” визуального произведения, как бы еще раз воскрешая его смыслы.

Именно о способах построения визуальной знаковой наррации и стоит вести разговор в ходе осмысления деятельности московского кон-

цептуализма со всеми его “описательными текстами” и литературной вербализацией, взаимодействующей с визуальным искусством.

Визуальное – в том числе пространственное и акционно-перформативное искусство, которое интенционально творится и, что важно, воспринимается подготовленными адресатами-зрителями/участниками по законам литературного, художественного, вербального текста, – может, на наш взгляд, являть любопытный казус особого, отчасти инверсионного экфразиса, как бы развивающего и продолжающего уже знакомые, более традиционные формы существующих экфразистических описаний.

## 2.0. *Илья Кабаков как источник*

Деятельность “старшего” концептуалиста Ильи Кабакова, иногда считающегося основателем всего направления, во многом способствовала появлению на подпольной арт-сцене Москвы фигуры Андрея Монастырского. Неслучайно также, что само отношение Монастырского к такого рода “фигуре отца” было и остается крайне амбивалентным. Надо помнить, что свою родовую фамилию “Сумнин” художник меняет на “Монастырский”, тем самым как бы подчеркивая свой обособленный эстетический статус, свою специфическую эстетическую и философскую самость и акцентируя свои перформативные идеи, “локализованные” по сути вне “кабаковского” московского искусства. Так в национальном сознании аскетический и абстинентный монастырь противопоставляется всеядно пьяному безудержному кабаку. В таком “раскладе”, при первой же физической возможности убывший в безальтернативную столицу Мира убийственно-страшный город-Сад Нью-Йорк Илья Кабаков репрезентирует собой в этом смысле как бы лубочно-“внешний” русский концептуализм → “все на продажу”! Как и роскошный ярко-зеленый Жук (созданный в ныне далеком 1982-ом году) активно продающийся на подмостках всепоместного Сотби; в то время как гораздо менее “переводимый” на язык международных буржуа интимно-исповедально-русский полу-подпольный Сумнин-Монастырский как бы по факту призван подлинно олицетворять некоего рода иной, если не сказать противоположный по духу идеал художественного подвижнического жизнедействия.

Многие инсталляции Кабакова, в том числе его знаменитые “комнаты” и его альбомы, по сути несут в себе твердокаменное ядро репрезентации особой “коммунально-речевой” культуры человеческой повседневности с ее описательно-вербальной сложносочиненной активностью. Одна из недавних объемных немецких книг, посвященных творчеству Кабакова называлась весьма красноречиво – “Текст как базис для визуальной экспрессии”.<sup>6</sup> Вербализация художественного

опыта, использование знаковых возможностей текстуальности для усиления описания того, что зритель видит всякий раз перед собой, несомненно, должны считаться одними из наиболее характерных приемов работы Кабакова. Кабаков много раз отмечал в своих эссе, что он артикулирует отношение к слову и к образу как взаимосвязанным между собой величинам. Между ними, заключенными в единое графическое пространство, возникает своего рода обоюдная коммуникация, порождающая в свою очередь нарративизацию, рассказ. Использование словесного описания в художественном пространстве дает, согласно Кабакову, дополнительный потенциал для создания особой выразительности утверждаемой художественной идеи или концепта.

Речь здесь также идет о фигуративизации особого изначально словесного дискурса, который обретает физически осязаемую плотность художественного музейного артефакта. В плане вектора этой деятельности можно отметить интересную медиальную инверсию экфразиса: ведь перед нами такое искусство, которое как бы косвенно описывает вербальные практики посредством своих визуально-акционно-инсталляционных средств. Упомянем здесь немало распространенную в рекурсивном творчестве Кабакова практику, когда в гигантском произведении “видятся” реальные фрагменты человеческой информативной речи, которая как бы символически “проговаривается” в голове у изображаемого всякий раз персонажа. Подобного рода текстуальность становится примечательнейшей составной частью едва ли не всей системы такого рода сложносочлененных артефактов.

Кабаков, плодотворно поработавший на ниве магистрального укоренения концептуализма в российской культурной ситуации, предстает в этом смысле адептом условно проповедовавшегося этим движением нового синтеза. Кабаков как бы антитетически соединяет в себе противоречивые фигуры Сола ЛеВитта (Sol LeWitt), Джозефа Кошута (Joseph Kosuth) и, допустим, Лоуренса Вейнера (Lawrence Weiner). Это кабаковское “невозможное” соединение и, по Борхесу, “умножение” сущностей парадоксальным образом несколько не говорит о какого-либо рода тупейном “подражании”, ибо ни стилистически, ни даже “вещественно” Кабакова практически ничего в сущностном плане не связывает с вышеупомянутыми персонажами. Русский художник усваивает эти величины чисто трофейно поглощая их эвристику, вычитая из них западную ось внешней публичности, присваивая те их функции, которые могут быть сколь-нибудь релевантны для его собственного курса, ему самому покуда неведомых действий. Основополагающим фундаментом здесь служит упомянутая апостолом Павлом необычайная “уверенность в невидимом”,<sup>7</sup> то есть упор на пре-созданную “идею”, на некий чистый форматный и ферментный “концепт”, который далее в той или иной форме реализуется в создаваемом произведении. Кабаков, будучи сти-

листически совершенно не похожим на своих западных коллег, тем не менее несет тот же заряд конструктивно неожиданного и “удивляющего” эготизма, столь характерный для всего мирового артистического концептуализма. Как верно подмечают авторы сборника *Философия и концептуальное искусство*: “Главная особенность, отличающая искусство концептуализма от всех других видов искусства состоит в том что оно всякий раз воссоздает некое ‘ожидание’ чувственного удовлетворения, каковое далее сознательно разрушает.”<sup>8</sup> Неожиданное и болезненное разочарование зрителя, тонкий укол и упрек по адресу ментальной неразвитости всякого “смотрящего” – первейшая цель концептуального искусства.

Вся совокупная работа Кабакова в обще-идеологическом смысле своем была неизменно направлена на “партизанскую критику” окружавшей его тоталитарной власти упырей и кликуш, связываемых с господствующим строем той страны, где художник родился и жил. Те или иные элементы этой тонкой критики производились при помощи различных художественных конструктов, апеллирующих к “реформации” самого процесса создания “изобразительности” как таковой. Подобная “художественная” критика, заключенная в ткань изобразительного, также могла при необходимости функционировать как некое гротескное “рече-говорение”. В своих беседах сам художник не раз подчеркивал, что его искусство – это своего рода ответ на “доминирование словесного океана, когда неизбежен высокий уровень реакции общественного тела на тотальное присутствие текста”.<sup>9</sup> Протест против логоцентрической диктатуры “советского” текста выливался в особых семиотических приемах, которые Кабаков использовал для функционального усиления доступных ему креативных средств изобразительности.

Илья Кабаков может быть, вероятно, при желании воспринят как горяще-энергетический лидер среди значительных деятелей современного искусства в отношении использования и “вмонтирования” реальных вербальных субстратов в ферментную ткань генерируемых экспозиционных артефактов. Речь тут может идти о так называемой “сигнификативной стороне речи”: как уже не раз отмечали многие критики, некоторые работы Кабакова надо в прямом смысле внимательно и последовательно распознавать и знаково *прочитывать*. Вся многомерная и многоплановая деятельность Кабакова, особенно в свете его дневников и мемуаров, представляет собой одновременно литературу + живопись: то есть, как пронизательно отмечал в свое время Михаил Рыклин, “взаимодействие ведущего кода” и “периферийного кода”.<sup>10</sup> Визуальная ипостась Кабакова овеществляет некий особый речевой код, конструирует специальное семиотическое или симбиотическое пространство, в котором располагаются его “тексты-артефакты”, неутомимо *повествующие* и даже как будто *самоговорящие*. Не случайно свою масштабную

работу о Кабакове Борис Гройс назвал “Художник как рассказчик”. Вопрос “нарратива” и нарративизации мира, прихотливое использование вербального элемента в деятельности русского концептуализма (отличающегося своей общей логоцентричностью) выходит на передний план. Если экфразис предполагает принципиальное взаимодействие планов “вербального текста”, “речи” с одной стороны и художественного экспоната (картины или скульптурной конструкции) с другой, то русский логоцентрический концептуализм представляет в этом смысле особо интересный казус. Здесь необходимо отметить, что и русский лубок также включал в свой телос “вербальный текст” в качестве по сути неотъемлемой части самого фигуративного произведения. Справедливым будет отметить некоторый пересекающийся компаративный момент и с маяковскими Окнами Роста как и со многими другими представителями “плакатной индустрии” разных исторических периодов. Принципиальное несходство и “несовпадение” концептуалистского метода работы со словом и лубково-плакатных традиционных форм может стать темой отдельного исследования, которому мы надеемся посвятить нашу публикацию в будущем.

### 3.0. *“Коллективные действия” в аспекте экфразиса*

Техники вербального описания некоторых художественных акций, проводившихся группой “Коллективные действия” в середине восьмидесятых годов, представляют несомненный интерес для всей рассматриваемой нами “экфрастичной повестки дня”. Здесь имеет место особый тип семиозиса (или “постсемиозиса”, по определению Монастырского), служащего пониманию всей художественной практики “Коллективных действий” и особого вида взаимодействия вербального и визуально-перформативного типов “дискурса”, в том числе и чисто “поэтического”, связанного с деятельностью самого Монастырского.<sup>11</sup>

Речь может идти о двух моментах: об искусстве, которое интенционально строится по законам “текста”, и о вербальном “художественном” описании тех актов перформанса, что происходили в рамках работы “Коллективных действий”. Очевидцы и участники этих акций могут пониматься в качестве реально активных агентов экфразиса, выводящих сигнификацию всего происходившего действия на новый смысловой и “означиваемый” уровень восприятия. Вербальная нарративизация объектов концептуального искусства с помощью дескрипций-рассказов его очевидцев и участников становится, таким образом, основным объектом обсуждения.

Справедливо было бы заключить, что практически каждый перформанс группы “Коллективные действия” всегда имел и свой вербально-описательный эквивалент, помимо собственно самой физики развер-



тивания пространственной акции.<sup>12</sup> Описание художественного действия входит в первичный генезис разрабатываемой акции, и сама вся эта деятельность до известного предела как бы выстраивается по законам повествовательного текста. Если вести разговор о чисто литературных влияниях, лежавших в основе творчества “Коллективных действий”, то первое, что приходит на ум, это абсурдистская традиция ведущая свою линию от дадаистской театральности напрямую к русскому (не вполне состоявшемуся) театру обэриутов, а также к особой перформативности акционности Беккета и Ионеско.

Уникального рода сценарность, лежавшая в основе концептуальной прагматики едва ли не всех “постановок” группы “Коллективные действия”, актуализировала, в духе развивавшегося тогда рецепционизма, вопрос результирующей реакции своего потенциального зрителя: отсутствующего или же по счастью находящегося рядом с самими играющими актантами. Вообще, деятельность “Коллективных действий” непредставима без фигуры отстраненного незримого наблюдателя, того, кто в дальнейшем может дать адекватное вербальное описание происходившей акции, развернувшейся у него перед глазами.

Справедливо будет указать, что едва ли не все акции “Коллективных действий” проводились в расчете на их дальнейший точечный экфразис, на некую последующую литературную обработку и нарративизацию художественной акции, осуществляющуюся либо самими участниками, либо теми, кто, благодаря своему критическому восприятию, как бы волонтарно включался в процесс созидания этого сообщения о прошедшей акции.

В качестве иллюстрации можно также припомнить довольно красноречивый диалог, состоявшийся в свое время между Андреем Монастырским и критиком-концептуалистом (и математиком) Виктором Тупицыным; Тупицын осведомляется: “В вашем случае эти гигантские объемы – арена, на которой инсценировались определенные фигуры текстуальности... Каким образом это становится семиотекстом?”<sup>13</sup>

В ответ Монастырский указывает, что семиотичность его перформансов неизменно проходит “через реакцию”.

Это был двойственный процесс. [...] изначально мы определили для наших зрителей и для самих себя, что снятие семиозиса, который мы прежде идентифицировали с интерпретацией, уже закладывалось в механику действия таким образом, что возникновение этой интерпретации в момент действия как бы исключалось.<sup>14</sup>

Задачей Монастырского было магически остановить внутренний рефлексивный монолог участников и, как следствие, семиозис, чтобы

включать и выключать его в зависимости от своих акционистских интенций и режиссерских идей.

По его свидетельству, в начальном периоде работы “манифестировалось различие между изначальной невозможностью этого семиозиса в момент развертывания механики действия и апостериорными интерпретациями. Так формировался гигантский текстовой корпус описаний, создавался корпус книг *Поездки за город*.”<sup>15</sup>

Как поясняет художник, суть была в большой степени “в том, что и зрители, и организаторы, которые в равной мере любили комментировать то, что, собственно, происходило, написали немало описательных текстов по следам наших акций.”<sup>16</sup> Любопытно, как Монастырский освещает этот момент, отмечая, что участники делали это “как бы в порядке компенсации за невозможность толкования и осмысления самих акций в момент их реализации: ибо тогда эти акции можно было только почувствовать, ‘продегустировать’ созерцательно, совершенно рассеянно и, главное, необязательно”.<sup>17</sup>

Мы можем отметить здесь еще одну – ментально-просветляющую – функцию экфразиса, заставляющую по-новому взглянуть на описываемое художественное явление. Основная мысль Монастырского, сквозящая во многих его рассуждениях, сводится к тому, что без последующего описания его визуальных акций, без того, что было в дальнейшем в книжном виде опубликовано под грифом “описательные тексты”, все как историческое, так и чисто-смысловое, базисное существование рассматриваемых художественных акций могло бы оказаться под очень большим вопросом.

То, что не описано, того как бы и не существует; визуальность, которая не зафиксирована в каком-либо рефлексивном описании, не может претендовать на культурную значимость и на какую-либо роль в жизни искусства. Виктор Тупицын интересуется у Монастырского: “Считаешь ли ты, что это не было выдаванием желаемого за действительное, что так оно все и было?” На что Монастырский отвечает: “Все это не было иллюзией именно потому, что это зафиксировано в описательных текстах.” Тупицын уточняет далее, что здесь может пониматься под “иллюзией”: а именно, есть ли это “фиксация интенции под видом фиксации результата? или же фиксация желания под видом фиксации его объекта?” Монастырский отмечает, что “существует гигантский архив с рассказами участников и статьями о том, что было на самом деле.” “Будь это иллюзией, ни книг, ни архива не возникло бы,” – говорит художник.

В этом диалоге Тупицын справедливо замечает, что подобный подход “в принципе – зависит от установки и, в данном случае, от презумпции существования тексто-пустотных, эмпирических практик, чья априорность констатируется путем апостериорного признания не-

обходимости их текстуального осмысления и рефлексии, то есть имеется в виду *постсемиозис*, возникающий на основе подобной констатации.”<sup>18</sup>

Монастырский в общем и целом как бы соглашается с определением Тупицына в плане того, что отношение к знаку, умственное почтение к подобного рода манипулятивному описанию акции, есть для его группы своего рода постсемиозис, то есть не прямой семиозис, являющийся собой своего рода механический обмен знаками, который искусственно опосредован, а временами прихотливо модифицирован внешней вербализацией, осуществленной всяким конкретным “говорящим” очевидцем.

Монастырский ведет речь о довольно жесткой регламентации, которой был подвержен весь, на первый взгляд прихотливо-хаотический, процесс акционности и ее последующей фиксации на письме. По словам Монастырского, “этот момент интерпретации или семиозиса мы изначально предусматривали при построении текста акции, и это было очень важно.”<sup>19</sup> “То есть мы отрефлектировали семиозис как структурный элемент перформансов,” – далее сообщает художник-устроитель.

#### 4.0. *Ирония как смысл концептуалистского универсума*

Особым аспектом функционирования концептуалистской семиотики должен считаться вопрос всепроникающей и вездесущей иронии, проблема восприятия иронического, амбивалентного, амфиболического дискурса, столь эксплицитно развиваемого московским концептуализмом во многих своих важнейших проявлениях. Вопросам юмора и смеха в московском концептуализме посвящена статья Елены Калинински, публикуемая в настоящем выпуске. Вся деятельность таких видных деятелей русского (московского) концептуализма как законодательные братья-диоскуры Дмитрий Пригов и Лев Рубинштейн,<sup>20</sup> кажется, была построена на смеховой иронии осмеяния. Необычайно близки смеху и насмешке также и многие другие деятели, близкие к московскому концептуализму будь то лианозовцы или Генрих Сапгир.

Пародийный момент концептуализма и соц-арта представляется *ergo* по сути вполне очевидным. Пародия невозможна без иронии и наоборот. Юрий Тынянов в свое время весьма удачно обособлял пародию от комического дискурса.<sup>21</sup> То, что представлено в московском концептуализме совсем не комично, однако глубинно пародийно, как принципиально пародиен (но не комичен), скажем, навязший “соц-арт”. Пародия, используемая русским концептуализмом ведет свое происхождение от исторической иронии и тотальной двусмысленности используемых порядков речи.

Как известно, слово “ирония”, образованное от греческого *eironeia* (насмешничающее притворство), имеет один отличительный признак, весьма актуальный для концептуализма, – некий “двойной смысл”, где “истинным” является не прямое высказывание, но противоположное ему суггестивно “подразумеваемое”. Как известно, чем больше противоречие между ними, тем сильнее, паче чаяния, сам изначальный эффект “иронии”.

Очевидно, что понятие литературной иронии, возникшее в пятом веке до нашей эры (со специальным жанровым персонажем комедии “ироником”), претерпело по ходу времени немало изменений.<sup>22</sup> Ирония, согласно своему семиотическому предназначению, демонстрирует болезненное несовпадение между знаком и его идеальным значением, между миром идей и миром их актуального представления (неоромантический символизм, Кьеркегор в своем докторате *О понятии иронии с постоянным обращением к Сократу*, опубликованном в 1841-ом году относительно сократической иронии). А также в осмыслении К. В. Ф. Золгера *Эрвин* (опубл. в 1815-ом году), известных эстетических философиях иронии Гегеля, Жан Поля и Шлегеля, по сути и введшего понятийное словосочетание “романтическая ирония” в опубликованном им в 1797-ом году сборнике *Критические фрагменты*, где находит свое первоисторическое применение столь значимое в нашем (и в общекарнавальном ракурсе от М. М. Бахтина) контексте знаковое выражение как “трансцендентальная буффонада”, призванное декретировать и дескрипировать “свободную игру творческих фантазмов” вокруг самых типических жизненных практик общего и “всем понятного” ситуативного дискурса.

Именно таким образом концепт иронии оказывается конструктивным: ре-конструкция посредством микронной деструкции точки апории, или *montage-through-démontage*, как это было бы у Ж. Деррида. Разделяя, ирония как бы диалектически сближает разделенное. В специфическом характере связи иронии с буквальным и скрытым смыслами кроется невозможность ее автономной абсолютизации. Однако, абсолютизация объекта иронии представляется в определенном плане абсурдной – иначе в чем тогда смысл деструктивной функции иронии, направленной на сам-объект? В конечном итоге, ирония выступает как своего рода “не-субстанция”, то есть дополнительный элемент познания “вещества” через “анти-вещество”. Представляется, что “называть вещи противоположными именами” – греческий *antiphrasis*, т. е. осмысленно-концептуальное употребление понятий в противоположном (в их изначальи) смысле – слишком сложное, утомительное и даже расточительное занятие, чтобы стать всеобщей стратегией художественного поведения. Однако, для фрагментарного “у-зревания”, у-знавания и о-смысления уже казалось бы знакомых и “точно понятых” вербальных арте-

фактов сие может быть весьма полезным и освежающим, предлагая тот сорт “просветительного инсайта”, который часто ведет к открытию “новых горизонтов чтения и понимания” – если вспомнить не только о Вольфганге Изере, но и о Харольде Блюме и Поле де Мане.<sup>23</sup>

Любопытно, что в *Поэтическом словаре* Квятковский использовал немало примеров именно из Пушкина (наряду с Батюшковым и Майковым) для иллюстрации “классического” амфиболического языка.<sup>24</sup>

Кажется, что в случае с такими “прото-концептуалистами” как Пушкин и Северянин может идти речь о некоем рудиментарном *антакласисе* (*antaklasis*) – несколько странном повторе слов, наделенных модифицированным, иноположным изначальному значением, столь характерным, по мысли покойного М. Л. Гаспарова, именно диалогическому субстрату литературного конструкта.<sup>25</sup> Известно, что *амфиболия* (*amphibolia*) призвана констатировать более или менее сознательную двусмысленность, возникающую из многозначности одного слова или сочетания слов.

Мы полагаем возможным осуществить “прочтение” многих концептуалистских визуально-вербальных артефактов в общем амфиболическом ракурсе ноэматического дискурса жестких двусмысленностей: “Хороший ты человек, Степа, сказал Кеша с кислым выражением на лице” (А. Зверев, молодежный писатель). Можно понять, что “Степа” не очень-то хорош, а скорее даже во-многом по факту плох.

“Люблю [...] Я пышное природы увядание [...]” “Кислое выражение” на лице может сопровождать амфиболическое прочтение этих всем известных пушкинских строк. Потому, возможно, что любовь эта амфиболична, по контрасту вязко неприятна говорящему, она ему “постыла” (важное слово из пушкинского словаря).

Амфиболия, как и антакласис относятся к важнейшим тропическим элементам бытования иронии-как-фигуры-текста. Необходимо также помнить и о конструкциях понятийного субстрата “антифразиса”, что, думается, может быть очень полезным в настоящем размышлении концептуалистского двусмысленного осмеяния, сотворенного посредством экфразиса.<sup>26</sup> Укажем также на то, что о понятии “амфиболия” в языковых дисциплинах существует поистине бесконечное множество научных эскерсисов.<sup>27</sup>

Представляется, что двусмысленность амфиболического и антакласического планов по сути лежит в основе всей работы русского концептуализма. Установка на прихотливо игривую и абсурдно-игровую двусмысленность, упор на полиформную многомерность, полагающую закадровую улыбку по факту заложена в большинстве работ представителей концептуалистского круга. Также думается, что едва ли не все важнейшие узлы концептуалистского экфразиса, чуть ли не все важнейшие составляющие его внутренней механики как бы “заточены” на план

пародийно-ироничного, установлены на цель суггестивно-стебового<sup>28</sup> осмеяния различных пластов художественной и политической культуры, соположенной по времени.

### 5.0. *Куколка и бабочка метафорического экфразиса*

В заключение наших размышлений, связанных с особой природой экфразиса в московском экспериментальном художественном движении, стоит добавить еще один семиотический обертон. В русле осмысления концептуалистского экфразиса и его семиотики Юрий Шатин замечает, что, “являясь иконическим знаком, концептуалистское произведение имплицитно содержит в себе особую способность превращаться в символический знак и вступать посредством межсемиотического перевода в логические отношения со своим антиподом – художественной литературой.”<sup>29</sup> Здесь же Шатин указывает на то, что отношения концептуалистской метафоры и собственно экфразиса “можно уподобить отношениям куколки и бабочки”. Концептуалистская метафора, как некая синэстетическая квинтэссенция художественного языка, в общем противостоит безликости эмпирически данной аморфной реальности всеобщего “коммунального бытия”. Эта метафоричность противоборствует автоматизму жизненного бытового идиотизма, проникающего в щели нашей повседневной унылой (жизне)деятельности. Не случайно, такой параллельный (как сюрреалистам так и концептуалистам) автор-персонаж как Жан Жене проникновенно замечал: “Большая часть жизни проходит в дурацком отупении, в убогом идиотизме: открываешь дверь, зажигаешь сигарету... В жизни человека бывает лишь несколько проблесков. Все остальное – серая мгла.” Важно также, что именно в подобного рода упрямо-пресистентном концептуалистском противостоянии всей серобезликой инертности жизни русского затяжного социализма отчасти и заключается внутренний пафос ранних художественных проектов Кабакова и Монастырского и, отчасти, Павла Пепперштейна.

Небезынтересно также отметить, согласно Шатину, экфразис как бы принципиально, по словам исследователя, “не изобразителен, но референциален, поскольку сокращает дистанцию между различными семиотическими сущностями и включает в изображенный мир картины эксплицированную точку зрения *созерцающего субъекта*.” Здесь мы можем также отметить, что именно этот созерцающий субъект в лице того, кто описывает или воспринимает художественную акцию или инсталляцию, играет особо значительную роль во всей широкой проблематике, поднятой московским концептуализмом, фундаруя в своей многоплановой деятельности изначальную центростремительную установку на предельную текстуальность и описательную экфрастичность. Именно такого рода герменевтическую практику, как нам представляется, и

культивировали все вышеупомянутые представители русского героического концептуализма, чья карнавализирующая деятельность волею судеб все еще длится пред нашими глазами.

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#### ПРИМЕЧАНИЯ

- <sup>1</sup> В плане первоначального обзора международного концептуализма см. для примера такие издания: Osborne (2002); Godfrey (1998); Morgan (1996; 1992); Levy, Perreault (1975). См. также и целый ряд других работ.
- <sup>2</sup> В отношении русского концептуализма см. в первую очередь такие вводящие в курс дела работы как: Деготь, Захаров (2005); Altcarpenberg (2004); Tamguchi (1995); и, также, Бобринская (1994), как и ряд других интересных работ.
- <sup>3</sup> См. Шатин (2004: 217-226).
- <sup>4</sup> О различных (под)видах русского концептуализма см. работу Янечка: Janecsek (2006: 469-485).
- <sup>5</sup> См. 'Федр' (Платон 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> См. Felix (2000).
- <sup>7</sup> См. слова Апостола Павла: "Вера же есть осуществление ожидаемого и уверенность в невидимом. В ней свидетельствованы древние" (Послание к Евреям, Глава 11).
- <sup>8</sup> "The main distinguishing feature between conceptual art and other kinds of art is to be found in the way in which the former sets up an expectation of sensory fulfillment that it knowingly goes on to frustrate". См. Goldie, Schellekens (2007: xv).
- <sup>9</sup> См. Тупицын (1997).
- <sup>10</sup> См. Тупицын (1997: 324).
- <sup>11</sup> См. Иоффе (2005).
- <sup>12</sup> Все вербальные составляющие "отчетов" деятельности группы доступны в издании: Монастырский (1998; электронная публикация: <http://www.letov.ru/conceptualism/>). См. также недавние издания работ и деятельности Монастырского за прошедшие полтора десятилетия: Монастырский (2009а/б). В новых документальных публикациях группы, замечательным образом вышедших в московском издательстве Германа Титова содержится великое множество крайне интересных материалов, иллюстрирующих сохраняющуюся невероятную актуальность всей проблематики экфразиса для Андрея Монастырского и его концептуалистской группы.
- <sup>13</sup> См. Тупицын (1997: 226).
- <sup>14</sup> Там же.
- <sup>15</sup> Там же.
- <sup>16</sup> Там же.

- 17 Там же.
- 18 См. там же.
- 19 Там же.
- 20 См. наши интервью с ними в московском журнале *Топос*.
- 21 См. Тынянов (1977а; 1977б), см. также Шатин (2009).
- 22 Из весьма обширной литературы на тему теории иронического дискурса мы рекомендуем в высшей степени информативную и богатую литературными референциями монографию британского историка культуры Дилвина Нокса (Кнох 1989). Особенно важна в нашем контексте глава вторая: “Ironia and types of opposition” (с. 10-38), где автором прослеживается оригинационное начало концепта из антиномийного наличия противоположных составляющих в едином семасиологическом поле высказывания. В указанной монографии содержится (на с. 178-212) превосходная и исчерпывающая библиография, так или иначе связанная с осмыслением понятия иронии в историческом ключе. Кроме того, упомянем две работы немецкого исследователя Э. Белера (Behler 1972; 1997). Небесполезна (для английского материала) также и книга А.К. Меллео (Melleo 1980). Помимо этого, разумеется, следует помнить о давней фундаментальной работе (во многом и послужившей базисом для книги Нокса) Б. Аллеманна (Allemann 1969). О связи иронии с иконическим рядом знакопорождения см. Сигал (1997).
- 23 См. для контраста: Карасик (2000). О связи иронического и амфиболического дискурсов (текстуальной двусмысленности) на примере поэзии Милтона см. Bush (2003: 105-114).
- 24 См. “Амфиболия (греч. ἀμφιβολία, *двусмысленность, неясность*) – непонятность, возникающая в результате ряда причин некоего особого стилистического порядка”. См. Квятковский (1966).
- 25 Гаспаров (2001: 38).
- 26 Поэтому, дадим важное в данном контексте определение уже встречавшегося у нас выше *антифразиса*, в качестве возможного supplementum’a для вышеописанных фигур поэтической риторики (см. уже цитировавшийся весьма ценный словарь Квятковского: “Антифразис” (греч. ἀντίφρασις – дословно “употребление слова в противоположном значении”) есть стилистическая фигура, употребление данного слова или выражения в противоположном смысле, обычно ироническом. В басне И. Крылова – обращение к ослу:

Откуда, умная, бредешь ты голова?

или:

Ай, Моська, знать, она сильна,  
Что лает на слона.



В 'Медном всаднике' при описании наводнения в Петербурге А. Пушкин иронизирует над бездарным стихотворцем Хвостовым:

С дворов  
Свозили лодки.  
Граф Хвостов  
Поэт, любимый небесами,  
Уж пел бессмертными стихами  
Несчастье невских берегов.

Эта стилистическая фигура носит еще название *астеизм*." См. Квятковский (1966).

О других примерах амфиболического дискурса и сходных типов поэтической речи (на примере Пастернака) см. статью Максима И. Шапира (2004).

27 Упомянем, например, Ballabriga, Vigneau-Rouayrenc (1992, 2: 77-92). См., кроме того, Hamm (2001, 34: 29-41, 131). О специфике логической амфиболии и Канта см. Pereboom (1991, 73 [1]: 50-70). О смежном с этим понятии ментальной и лингвистической "двузначности" (ambiguity) имеется также весьма много важных в нашем контексте работ. См., например, Fuchs (1985). А также: Burton-Roberts (1994, 92 [2]: 179-213). И, далее: van Eijck, Jaspars (1997: 115-120). Весьма интересны работы видного теоретика литературы, нарратолога Томаса Дочерти: Docherty (2002, 8: 7-15). Ср. также: Fernando (2001, 10 [1]: 63-86). Укажем, также, на любопытное в нашем разрезе эссе Мориса Бланшо, написанное в самом конце семидесятых годов: Blanchot (1997: 218-224).

28 О русском стебе см. специальный блок работ настоящего выпуска.  
29 См. Шатин (2004).

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