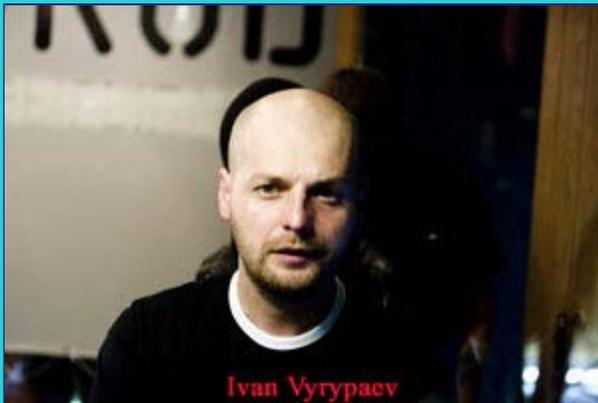


## Issue 26 (2009)

Ivan Vyrypaev: *Oxygen (Kislород, 2009)*

reviewed by Serguei Oushakine © 2009



In one of his texts written in October 2001, Ivan Vyrypaev promised: "A time will come when people will realize that the most important thing in any text is letters arranged in a proper way. It will come, this time. It will return; it already was here. The time will come when plots will die out, and narrators' voices will fade away. And only letters will captivate the reader. For the reader reads with a single purpose: to recognize familiar signs. This time will come" (Vyrypaev, 37). It certainly did in Vyrypaev's *Kislород*, a seventy-five-minute long visual "album" that includes ten musical "tracks" (*kompozitsii*) and two bonuses.

Written originally as a play in 2002, *Kislород* has become a symbol and symptom of a generation of Russian playwrights associated with the New Drama movement. Privileging a documentary approach, new drama texts are often rooted in interviews with real people (using the so-called verbatim method), and New Drama acting is often envisioned as a way of commenting on the plot rather as a way of impersonating it.[1] First performed in Teatr.doc, *Kislород* launched Vyrypaev's career as an actor and playwright artist, and later as a filmmaker (his first film *Euphoria* was included in the program of the 2006 Venice film festival).

The cinematic version of the play was driven by a desire to move beyond a small circle of fans of the verbatim method (Zolotnikov). The requirements of the new medium and anticipated expectations of new audience clearly influenced the original text: the amount of obscene language was toned down, some original lines and themes were (unfortunately) cut out. In turn, the minimalist acting of the two narrators was interspersed with animation, documentary clips, and scenes shot in Damascus, Hong Kong, Rome, Paris, London, Havana, Moscow, and Serpukhov. And yet, despite all these changes and additions, the textual nature of the film



remains prominent: the opening titles of *Kislod* present it as “a text of Ivan Vyrypaev.” What kind of text is it?



Visually, the film has a double structure. Its backbone is a series of monologues, in which two young actors, Aleksei Filimonov and Karolina Gruszka, narrate their parts in front of a microphone in a recording studio. Static and sometimes monochromatic, these monologues are interesting not visually but aurally. Structured as songs, the “lyrics” of these texts are composed of strongly rhythmic units, which are articulated with high speed and are accompanied by electronic music (the names of composers pop up on the screen at the beginning of each track). While not rhymed, the lyrics are metered, and the repetition of phrases and word combinations makes only

more apparent that the sonic structure of this *recitativo accompagnato* is the main artistic device that brings visual fragments of the tracks together.

This *recitativo* is not rap per se: there is a clear disconnect between the story being told and the narrator who tells the story. The experience described in the songs is distanced and objectified. No emotional attitude is revealed by the narrators. Any possibility for identification with protagonists is cancelled: the verses offer no heroes to be identified with. With some exception, the text is presented, not embodied by the narrators. To emphasize the disconnection, shots in the studio are interspersed with scenes in which unrecognizable Filimonov and Gruszka either act out bits of the story narrated in the sound track, or romantically chase each other in time and space, or silently stare at each other, separated by people and events. Hardly original in their iconography, these parallel scenes are useful not so much for the development of the narrative but rather for positioning it within the visual language of music videos.



While failing to impose any identificatory dynamics on its audience, *Kislod's* verses do provide a language that could be used to describe a situation that lacks heroes. Thematically, *Kislod* is indeed a new Russian version of Decalogue: ten verses are ten commentaries on Ten Commandments. Or to be more precise: *Kislod* offers a negative deconstruction of the commandments by turning familiar letters of their propositions into their opposites. “You shall not murder” (track 1) becomes a song about murder. “You shall not covet your neighbor's wife” (track 2) turns into a song about adultery.

What saves these predictable structural permutations of norms and digressions from sliding into a banal story about the banality of evil is a persistent attempt to show—visually and textually—that these digressions are caused first and foremost by the desire to follow the commandments—for instance, not to compromise love, or belief, or justice. The depiction of this conflict between incompatible commandments, however, does not produce a positive resolution or a clear answer. The conflict itself

is perceived as a form of the existential quest and a type of its solution.

In an interview in 2006 Vyrypaev explained that despite all the postmodernist tendencies and trends, we are still battling with the dilemma produced by the Renaissance: namely, the conflict “between the hero and something that is destined to stay incomprehensible, be it nature or God. [...] This conflict did not go away. The time we live in today tries to level man down but he is fully aware of this; hence his desire to challenge this world” (Vyrypaev in interview with Potapov). In the film, Vyrypaev remains just as elusive about the source of this “something” that continues to generate perpetual conflicts, while remaining incomprehensible (and even unnamed). Track 9,



"Essence of Things" (*Dlia glavnogo*), which acts as the film's coda, is symptomatic in this respect. The song lists a long catalogue of things and events (from making wars to collecting stamps) that are done by people “in the name of the most important” (*dlia glavnogo*). Yet, the name of “the most important” would not be revealed in the song. Separated by a long musical pause and a jocular “commercial break” (an animation clip), it would be whispered in a dialogue between the two narrators: She: “Conscience;”—He: “Same for me.” This moralist pathos, though, would be immediately undermined by a visual irony: like a skipping DVD, the exchange (Conscience/Same for me) would be repeated six times, turning “conscience” into yet another cliché, a recognizable and repeatable sign.

It is against this background of the incomprehensible and unnamable that oxygen, transparent and ungraspable, emerges as the key metaphor for those fundamental structures that support one's life without necessarily becoming visible, the structures whose importance is revealed only when they have been removed or when they collapse. “I only ask that the oxygen flow not be cut; that's what matters,” says the male narrator in the final scene of the film, while sinking to the bottom of a deep swimming pool...



Vyrypaev's *Kislod* brought together several important tendencies that have been developing in Russian performing art in the last five years or so. The primacy of estranged monologues, the lack of interaction, the emphasized “internal speech” pioneered in the plays and performances of Evgenii Grishkovets, is combined here with a deliberate attempt to rely on the language “of the street,” to convey its vocabulary, morphology, and syntax through the medium of the cinematic or dramatic text. Perhaps, unlike any other recent Russian film, *Kislod* succeeded in creating a contemporary visual version of

*skaz*, an oral tale about somebody else's life, in which the technique and process of telling is by far more interesting than the tale itself.

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Notes

1] Symptomatically, the slogan of [Teatr.doc](#), a main institution of the new drama movement, is “Theater that has no place for play” (*teatr, v kotorom ne igraiut*).

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*Kislorod*, Russia, 2009

Color, 75 min.

Scriptwriter and Director Ivan Vyrypaev

Director of Photography Andrei Naidenov

Production Design Margarita Ablaeva

Musical Producer Aleksandr Lushin

Sound Producer Andrei Samsonov

Sound Roman Khokhlov

Editing Pavel Khaniutin

Cast: Aleksei Filimonov, Karolina Gruszka

Producers Vadim Goriainov, Leonid Lebedev, Valerii Todorovskii

Production “Krasnaia Strela” (Red Arrow), “Ded Moroz”, with support from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation

Distribution “Volga”

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**reviewed by Serguei Oushakine © 2009**