

THE POST-SOVIET CONDITION:  
CULTURAL RECONFIGURATIONS OF RUSSIAN IDENTITY

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This dissertation is an examination of the problematic of Russian identity as manifest in the prose literature and cinema during the last two decades of the twentieth century. The reassertion of Russian “national identity” in the post-Soviet Russian Federation masks a crisis, the historical roots of which extend back to the development of Imperial Russia. The analysis employs the tools of Lacanian psychoanalysis to diagnose this crisis and to analyze the almost unsurmountable difficulties involved in the struggle either to recover or to create anew a usable Russian identity for the twenty-first century.

The first chapter reviews the theoretical literature on nationalism as well as studies of the problematic conception of Russian nationhood. It also grounds the use of Lacanian theory for cultural analysis and illustrates, through a case study of Ivan Dykhovichnyi’s 1992 film *Moscow Parade*, the utility of a carefully deployed psychoanalytic interpretation of a cultural text from the period under consideration.

The following four chapters contain analyses of four identifiable trends in late- and post-Soviet Russian literature and cinema. The heirs to the Village Prose movement, in their engagement with the postmodern environment of this period, reveal in their works an attempt to recover a “lost” identity that is trapped within the self-reflecting structure of an Imaginary Russia. Advocates of the postmodern in Russian culture deconstruct a Symbolic network of cultural texts in which the dissonant discourses of nation and empire generate an identity that seeks substance in the ephemeral. As the sots-art movement spread from graphic arts to literature and film, it illustrated the ultimate logic of a cultural identity based on the endless

generation of ideological signifiers. Finally, the young writer Viktor Pelevin and filmmakers such as Karen Shakhnazarov illustrate the lure and the dangers of a culture that seizes upon fantasy as a way out of the cultural conundrum.

The same analytical tools are deployed in the concluding chapter to argue that the period under consideration has come to an end and that Russian culture has entered a new period.

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No debt can match the one I owe my parents, Joan and Gerald F. McCausland. Where all evidence should have led them to despair of their son ever amounting to anything, their support of me has been unfailing and unconditional. Their faith in me truly passes all understanding, and I dedicate this work to them.

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## **Chapter 1. Russia's Ineffable Identity**

### **1.1. Introduction**

On 25 December 1991 Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev resigned as President of the USSR and in so doing completed a process that is almost invariably referred to as the “collapse” of the Soviet Union. Out of this collapse emerged the fifteen Newly Independent States (NIS). These new states were vastly different in size, culture, industrial development, and degree of social homogeneity. Above and beyond these differences was another, somewhat less tangible difference that set one of these new states apart from the other fourteen. In the case of the latter, the ruling elites and the broad mass of their people seemed to be, at least for a short time, of one mind as they seized the opportunity to rid themselves of the rule and legacy of an authoritarian, stifling, and, in the end, completely bankrupt regime.

Only the RSFSR, soon to be renamed the Russian Federation, was in the ambiguous position of being both newly independent from and a successor state to the ruined Soviet empire. Yet, it was extremely important for both the Yeltsin government and the wider international community to affirm the notion that Russia, too, had emerged from political bondage and that a free and democratic Russia would now take its place alongside the countries of the world. Unlike most of those other countries, however, the Russian Federation remained a state that comprised more than 100 ethnic groups. In this respect, it truly was the successor state to the Soviet empire. It had not only inherited one of the empire's most vexing problems, but it had what at first glance seemed to be a brand new one of its own. If the Russian Federation continued to be a multi-ethnic entity in much the same way that the earlier empire had been, then what exactly does “Russia” comprise?

This was not a new question, but it now presented itself in quite a new way and with some urgency. Certainly, many of the NIS resembled Russia in that they also had ethnic minorities within their borders and their dominant nationalities were often augmented by a diasporic community abroad. Nevertheless, both the titular nationalities and the ethnic minorities could define themselves against their perceived oppressors: Latvians were united in their resistance to the Russians, who they felt had been for years moving in and gradually taking over their cities, particularly Riga. Likewise, Abkhazians came together in a struggle to define themselves as *not Georgians*. This option was foreclosed to Russians who could not as easily disown the union that many of them still habitually identified as their native country (Service 510). Many continued to take great pride in the achievements of the Soviet Union and in its status as a superpower. Nostalgia for the stability of the Soviet past, which had already begun to develop even in the last years of perestroika, became the dominant mood of a growing segment of the population as the hardships of economic reform grew worse. As memories of his August heroism grew dimmer, President Yeltsin found it increasingly urgent to find other sources of legitimacy for his administration and its reform policies. Appeals to patriotic feelings would be one of the most important tactics for most government leaders, but televised appeals by the President to the citizens to buy *Russian* potatoes rather than McDonald's french fries not only fell on deaf ears but sounded comically anachronistic.<sup>1</sup> It was clear that the loyalty of the Soviet population had been to the *state* rather than to any kind of specifically Russian community and that many were not having an easy time transferring that loyalty to a completely

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<sup>1</sup> Appeals to purchase Soviet products would have sounded just as ridiculous before 1991. The reflexive adjective in Russian for such formulations was and remains *otechestvennyi*, a difficult term to translate derived from a root denoting father (or something closer to the Latin *patria*) but meaning in this context simply "of domestic production." It suggests patriotism, but it is anonymous and of no use in appeals to a specifically national loyalty. We will return several times to this gendered and richly connotative signifier.

new political entity. The Russian people were divided against or, more accurately, within themselves.

When confronting this identity crisis, it is common to draw attention to the well-known terminological complication of the Russian language, which has two words to denote a Russian: *russkii* refers to a member of the Russian ethnic group as well as to something that is *culturally* Russian; *rossiianin* denotes a citizen of the Russian state as well as something that is an attribute of the state (anthem, economy, law code, and the like). Yeltsin took pains to use these terms not only correctly but also often. Their clearly distinct definitions belie the fact that in actual use their spheres of meaning frequently encroach one upon the other. For example, Russia's first legal code, dating to the eleventh century, has always been known as the *Russkaia pravda* (with the ethnic attributive) despite the fact that it is "an achievement emblematic of the emergence of a State" (Franklin, "Russia in time" 22). What is not immediately clear is the fact that not even these two terms completely cover the semantic ground of Russianness. In the face of the need to articulate a *raison d'être* for the new Russian Federation, both terms fail. Clearly, the multi-ethnic population cannot be legitimately described as *russkii*, but the term *rossiiskii* in its prerevolutionary usage was a term applicable only to the Russian empire. The latter term is particularly unfit to constitute a new Russian nation.

Thus, Russian identity is by its very nature an identity in crisis. It is a split identity, split between past and present, between state and people, between home and abroad. The new political reality of the 1990s made some kind of resolution of the conundrum newly urgent. It was and continues to be a problem not only for politicians, but even more so for scholars, talk-show hosts, journalists, show-business celebrities, along with legions of amateur philosophers holding forth in private kitchens and public places throughout Russia. If the urgency of the question is new, interest in the substance, soul, mission, and mystery of Russia is an old and

familiar feature of its culture. This dissertation will examine the ways in which writers, filmmakers, and other cultural producers have been posing and suggesting possible answers to the question of post-Soviet Russian identity in their works. The analysis will concentrate on narrative works of high culture, although visual and mass culture will be considered where necessary for an understanding of the larger context or the sources of general trends.

Specifically, the dissertation will examine works of prose literature and cinema.<sup>2</sup> There will be relatively little attention paid, however, to works that *directly* address questions of nationalism or national identity. The message of such works is usually stated clearly enough to be understood without interpretation, even when the artistic quality of the work is high, and the various positions and arguments have been analyzed by others.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, it makes little sense to analyze or describe Russian national identity when the very existence of a Russian nation cannot be convincingly demonstrated even by its most ardent defenders. The works analyzed here will be those that address the *problematic* of Russian identity, sometimes directly but more often in rather oblique ways. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to circumscribe that problematic along with the approach that will be taken in the analysis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Russians continue to regard their cinema as a form of high culture. Although the notion is being increasingly challenged by recent trends in the industry, there is still strong resistance to regard movies merely as a form of mass entertainment.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the topic is unimportant or uninteresting. A recent monograph by Kathleen Parthé, *Russia's Dangerous Writers*, examines the debates about Russianness in literature throughout the twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup> The question of Russian identity, indeed of the very definition of "Russian," has frustrated Slavists for many years. Terms such as Soviet-Russian, emigré-Russian, *russkii*, and *rossiiskii* make various claims on the semantic field of Russianness and make the articulation of Russian identity particularly difficult. The writing of this chapter would not have been possible without the generosity of Nancy Condee, who shared with me her yet unpublished work on empire and nation. The structure and content of this chapter traces, to a great extent, my struggle to understand the significance of her work, which is both interdisciplinary and rigorous.

## 1.2. Does Russia Exist?

Many people both inside and outside of Russia seemed to believe that the end of the USSR would allow Russia to resume its authentic existence within the borders of a state that would be of and for the Russians. This view suggests that the existence and location of Russia is rather unproblematic. The fact that the Russian Federation continues to manifest the geographic contours (not to mention the behaviors) of an imperial state already suggests that such a simplistic understanding of Russia's mission is untenable. For those observers who consider the emergence of democratic political regimes to constitute the significance of the post-Soviet transition, the fact that Russia had little experience with democratic institutions prior to 1991 ought to give the most irrepressible optimists pause. If the Russian state has during its history been first a feudal, quasi-religious amalgam of small principalities; then the dominated subject of an Asian empire; and finally the master of a Eurasian one, one might ask whether Russia exists at all as the potential agent of a democratic state.

A much more sweeping form of that question has been answered by one scholar in the negative. Ronald Suny has studied the last years of the Russian empire and investigated the reasons for its fatal political weakness in 1917. He argues that the rise of nationalism as the primary legitimation of state power in the nineteenth century presented Russia with a challenge that it could not meet. It could not repeat the fusion of nation and state that had been achieved in maritime empires such as Britain and France. Suny's mode at times seems close to tragedy as he describes the almost insurmountable obstacles to a land-based empire's smooth or at least relatively unbloody transition to a more modern nation-state. While historians have often been merciless in their judgments of autocrats who too readily resorted to violent repressive measures to maintain the realm, Suny points out that, unlike an overseas empire, such as England or

France, Russia could not allow for liberal reforms at home in the metropole while maintaining control in the colonies.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest Russian rulers, beginning with the dynasty of Riurik, took their authority to rule from the fact that they were *not* Russians—they came specifically to rule. Later, the Romanov rulers would claim the will of God as their only legitimation to rule. This attitude continued even when the spread of democracy in Europe was making such arrogance a dangerous liability. The very distinction between metropole and periphery was problematic in Russia due to the long-standing practice of co-opting local elites into the Russian nobility. By the time the nineteenth-century attempts at Russification began in earnest, the imperial administration already owed so much of its own achievements to the adoption of Western technology and foreign know-how that the wholesale adoption of Slavophile positions, such as the glorification of the peasant commune, would be bound to delegitimize the dynasty. More powerful institutions and ideas such as the Orthodox Church and pan-Slavism had already adopted an imperial vision and were unusable for the inculcation of a sense of Russian nationhood. Thus, there were no institutions in the Russian Empire that would have allowed its ruling elites to enjoy a substantive sense of their own Russianness in support of but distinct from their imperial identity. Although forced Russification took on increasing urgency under Alexander III and Nicholas II, it was too late. Suny concludes:

Tsarism never created a nation within the whole empire or even a sense of nation among the core Russian population, even though what looked to others like imperialism was for the country's rulers

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<sup>5</sup> Suny devotes most of his attention to the reigns of the last three Russian rulers rather than to the earlier period of “Official Nationality” under Nicholas I. Ilya Prizel has demonstrated that a more complex analysis of Russian society in the nineteenth century makes it possible to trace the developments of several generations of Russian thinkers from the beginnings of the Slavophile–Westernizer debates up to the Bolshevik Revolution and beyond. His conclusion, however, does not differ from Suny’s: the Russian Empire developed a strong state, but was too late in developing a nation.

“part of a later state-building and nation-building projects.” Tsarist Russia managed only too well in building a state and creating an empire; it failed, however, to construct a multiethnic “Russian nation” within that empire. The history of tsarism is that of an empire that at times engaged in nation-making, but state practice was always in tension with the structures and discourses of empire (56).

Geoffrey Hosking tells a similar story with a slightly more generous tone. He sees the history of Russia as the parallel development of two projects: nation-building and empire-building. While they both progressed over time, they were more often than not in direct conflict and, thus, the building of a Russian nation was stifled and remains incomplete today. Institutions built by the ruling elite left the broad masses completely unassimilated. Hosking rejects the claim that the blame for this can be put upon Peter I. He reminds us that Russia became an empire with the conquest of Kazan by Ivan IV in 1552. It was under Ivan IV that the first fateful split in the body of the Russian people took place. Ivan divided his realm up into two dominions, a central core that he ruled personally and with notorious cruelty, and the wider periphery. Many of those in the ruling class who suffered under the Tsar’s brutality and in the devastation of wars fled in a great wave of refugees from the center to the far Russian steppe, where they formed free Cossack communities on the rim of the empire.

The second split was not one of population movement, but one of religious and political identity. Through the sixteenth century the notion of Holy Russia [*sviataia Rus'*] began to develop. This was never more than a potential germ for Russian national identity; Holy Russia was a concept that existed in opposition to the Russian imperial state and the godless actions of a despotic ruler.<sup>6</sup> Holy Russia was a call for the sovereign to repent and to rule in harmony with the teachings of God. It was identified in contradistinction to the institutional Orthodox Church.

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<sup>6</sup> This concept is often confused, as the crucial distinction between Holy Russia and the Russian Empire (or, indeed, any state entity) is easily effaced. The most useful discussion of the concept of Holy Russia remains the study by Cherniavsky.

It was the church that became the catalyst for the next great split in the body of Russia. Nikon's reforms led to the Great Schism, in the aftermath of which another great wave of refugees, this time the so-called Old Believers, fled from the center to the periphery of the empire. Then, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Peter the Great brought the most radical break with the past and perhaps the deepest split in the social body of Russia. His turn to Europe and his imposition of European culture and administration on the nobility changed the character and consciousness of the social elites. They were thoroughly Europeanized, were trained for government service, had weak local ties to the land, and were calibrated through the Table of Ranks. Hosking claims that they had a sense of "imperial" consciousness, which led the members of Russian high society to feel greater affinity to the ruling classes of other European empires than to the peasantry of their own. The Russian peasant and his landlord truly belonged to two completely separate societies with almost no shared culture. The Orthodox Church, which claimed to mediate between the two worlds, was unable to do so. The parish priest, as a paid agent of the state, was not a member of the ruling class. Inasmuch as church organization even at the lowest local level was organized by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, however, the priest was also prevented from becoming integrated with or accepted by the local peasantry (Hosking 27–29).

Hosking tries to distinguish the two processes of nation-building and empire-building, both of which he claims have played a role in Russia's peculiar history. In the course of his argument, he narrates a succession of events that traumatically rend the social body, leaving it fractured into two large pieces. Once each in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, Russian society is subject either to a large-scale physical migration of refugees from the center to the periphery of the realm or to a migration on a smaller scale but of larger consequence: the nobility becomes rootless, at least socially and politically dislodged from its ties to family and land. They migrate physically all around the Empire and abroad, but their



moral and spiritual migration is more profound, giving the ruling elite both a secular culture that owes little to Russian traditions along with a completely new outlook on their position and role in society. To these three fractures we can add at least one more physical split in the social body of Russia, this time from the twentieth century. The rise of the GULag and its growth to monstrous proportions in the 1930s probably rivals in brutality the violence perpetrated by Ivan IV or Peter I, and the camps did indeed develop a culture and social organization markedly different from that in society at large. Nevertheless, the longevity of this split and its implications for nation-building take second place in significance to the massive exodus of the Whites that began immediately after the Bolshevik takeover and continued during and after the Civil War. These emigrés attempted, to the best of their abilities, to take Russia with them. “Russia abroad” became something of a mythology as the decades passed, but the trauma of their separation from their native land led to an extended and intense flowering of Russian culture in emigration. Their attempts, finally, to come to terms with their displacement and to find a new place for themselves and their homeland in the larger scheme of the world led in the mid- to late 1920s to the rise of Eurasianism, a peculiar brand of nationalism that would enjoy an unexpected rebirth in post-Soviet Russia. It is no small irony that the world-wide Russian diaspora, which grew in size throughout the twentieth century, probably came closer to forming a coherent, cohesive, and viable sense of Russian national identity than did the inhabitants of Russia itself, at least as long as representatives of the first wave remained alive. They were in fact compelled to do so, for their need to conjure up the existence of a Russian nation was just as urgent as was the need for the last Tsars to inculcate Russianness in their subjects. The reasons were similar in both cases: a national identity would give them the hope of survival in a historical, geographical, and social context that doomed them to disappear or disintegrate. However, this made it no less artificial. Emigre Russian identity was but a partial identity, like one germ cell that needs to fuse with its counterpart before it can grow and thrive.

We thus see that Russia has been characterized through more than four centuries by great rifts in its body. Russia has been broken up repeatedly into two large segments that then continue to exist side by side with almost little exchange between them. Parallel to this phenomenon, but at the same time distinct from it, was another kind of split that also became characteristic for Russia over time. Russian culture, philosophy, politics, and even spirituality have been characterized by a kind of split in consciousness, a contradiction or a “disconnect” in its very core that in most societies would quickly lead to crisis and some sort of resolution. A very early example of this was the developing sense of the “Russian Land” [*russkaia zemlia*] in Kievan Rus'. The term designated both the population centers controlled directly by the dynasty as well as an idealized notion of a unified community. As the dynasty grew larger and the various princes began to compete with each other for prestige and access to trade, it became increasingly difficult for the designation “Russian Land” to contain both concepts simultaneously (Widdis 34–35). By the thirteenth century, there was already a sense of decline in the larger pandynastic community and the “Russian Land” became an increasingly abstract notion.<sup>7</sup> A more striking example is found in the phenomenon of *dvoeverie*, the dual-belief that characterized the world view of the non-urban population in Russia from the conversion of Grand Prince Vladimir in 988 through at least the end of the nineteenth century. There is nothing particularly exceptional or specifically Russian in the phenomenon—the cross-contamination of Christian and pagan belief systems was common as dynastic states converted to the new religion by state decree. But such dual systems are inherently unstable: if Christianity

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<sup>7</sup> Emma Widdis describes this abstract notion as “a metapolitical notion of what should be, an explicitly ideal geography of nationhood. This was the time when the ideal of ‘All Rus’ (vsia Rus') was invented: ‘All Rus’ meaning all the lands that the users of the term wished...” (35). The emphasis on what *should be* is tantalizingly reminiscent (proleptically, of course) of the Stalinist demand that the artist achieve a “truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development.” Both cases, it can be argued, are simply variants of the Russian understanding of *pravda*.

establishes itself as the state religion, the pagan elements will over time either be assimilated to form an indistinguishable, harmonious element of local church culture or be suppressed by the enforcement of Orthodox doctrine. The pervasiveness, vitality, and stability over time of the dual belief structure in Russia is quite remarkable.

This kind of split consciousness allowed mutually exclusive conceptions of national, ethnic, and political identity to coexist seemingly free of conflict. It is perhaps not all that remarkable that a German princess, Sophia von Anhalt-Zerbst, became an Empress “in many ways more Russian than the Russians” (Cross 79). Catherine II loved the trappings of Russian folk culture. She clothed herself in Russian dress and encouraged her court to do likewise. She styled herself a fierce defender of Russian Orthodoxy, but was also the agent of Russia’s new openness to French culture and European enlightenment. Her Instruction, or *Nakaz*, declared that Russia “was a European state, its subjects ‘citizens,’ and its proper laws those of the rational, natural order rather than the traditional historical one,” despite the fact that the primary purpose of the document was to provide a defense of absolutism (Billington 220). Nevertheless, Catherine’s contradictory adoption of European enlightenment and zeal for the trappings of Russian culture masked yet deeper contradictions. By this time, Russian territorial expansion had pressed far to the east and south toward Central Asia and the Caucasus. The *modus operandi* of imperial expansion, co-opting the local elites and, in certain cases, encouraging assimilation to the Russian ruling class, was leading to an increasing diversification of the “Russian” nobility. The educated civil servant class, already uprooted and eclectic in its cultural identifications, became even more cosmopolitan, while the broad masses of the nomadic and sedentary peoples of the peripheries remained as isolated and culturally homogeneous as the Russian peasantry in its village communes.

An important aspect of the ideology of this age, in Russia as in the rest of Europe, was the civilizing mission of the advanced imperial powers. But the practical effect of this civilizing mission was the growing “multicultural” contours of the Russian empire. St. Petersburg had become a very international and intercultural city. This was a manifestation of what Catherine seemed to want to deny: the nobility could no longer be thought of as simply Russian, at least not in an ethnic sense, after so many years of co-opting non-Russian elites into itself. Ethnic or cultural distinctions could only make sense for the lower strata of the people, for whom the questions of imperial vs. ethnic identity could only be posed from a standpoint outside of the metropole.

### **1.3. A Madman (Mis)Speaks**

The Empire held together for almost another century before the contradictions noted above were addressed. When Petr Chaadaev published his “First Philosophical Letter” in 1837, Russian identity was not a subject that he addressed directly. Chaadaev’s interest was the meaning of history. He had spent much time abroad, where he became familiar with the teachings of Schelling. This encouraged him to think about Russia’s place in history and its prospects for a significant role in the future. Russia’s place, as Chaadaev comes to realize, has been on the periphery.

That follows from the fact that we have never advanced along with other people; we are not related to any of the great human families; we belong neither to the West nor to the East, and we possess the traditions of neither. Placed, as it were, outside of the times, we have not been affected by the universal education of mankind.  
(*Philosophical Works* 20)

[Дело в том, что мы никогда не шли вместе с другими народами. Мы не принадлежим ни к одному из известных семейств человеческого рода, ни к Западу, ни к Востоку, и не имеем традиций ни того, ни другого. Мы стоим как бы вне

времени, всемирное воспитание человеческого рода на нас не распространилось. (*Polnoe sobranie* 1: 323)]

This is not an insignificant complaint. For a student of Schelling, Russia's failure to bring its unique and irreplaceable contribution to the progress of world culture is tragic and presumably bodes ill for the future. The progressive development of the human race has not influenced Russia at all because the Russians are a people standing outside of time:

This is a natural consequence of a culture based wholly upon importation and imitation. With us there is no inner development, no natural progression; new ideas sweep away the old, because they do not proceed from those old ones but come to us from out of the blue (22).

[Это естественное последствие культуры, всецело заимствованной и подражательной. У нас совсем нет внутреннего развития, естественного прогресса; прежние идеи выметаются новыми, потому, что последние не происходят из первых, а появляются у нас неизвестно откуда (1: 326).]

Here Chaadaev denounces Russia for its inability to generate anything of its own in culture. Everything in Russia is taken from others. If Russia cannot make its own unique contribution to general human culture, it will lose the chance to realize its destiny in the perfection of the human race. In the context of a universalizing philosophy of history, each nation has its own unique contribution to make, but it must make its contribution on time, in concert with all the others. There will be no opportunity to catch up.

In a sense, it can be said that we are an exceptional people. We are one of those peoples which do not seem to form an integral part of humanity, but which exist only to teach some great lesson for the world (22, translation modified).

[Про нас можно сказать, что мы составляем как бы исключение среди народов. Мы принадлежим к тем из них, которые как бы не входят составной частью в род человеческий, а существуют лишь для того, чтобы преподать великий урок миру (1: 326).]

However, after deploring the fact that Russia stands outside of time, Chaadaev now takes on a completely different attitude. If Russia cannot make its own unique contribution to human history alongside the nations of Western Europe, perhaps this is because Russia has another calling. Chaadaev ends his letter on an optimistic and somewhat grandiloquent note. Russia has a great purpose that requires it to stand aside during the general progression of history. While this exalts Russia's importance *for* world history, it also alters Russia's relational standpoint to the other major cultures of the world, which means by and large the cultures of Western Europe. The fulfillment of Russia's destiny will come when it helps Europe achieve its destiny, a destiny in which Russia will not share for it does "not seem to form an integral part of humanity." If in Schelling's conception of human history each nation is the subject and center of its own unique development, which will reach its fulfillment in the perfection of universal human culture, Russia's subject position as an agent of history is subordinated to the dominant of Western Europe, the needs of which will determine the role that Russia must play. Russia therefore, in the version given by Chaadaev, is an object to be determined by the agency of the West, which now becomes the center of gravity for what will still be universal human culture for all nations save one.

Chaadaev would not repeat these arguments again; the public outcry and state sanctions were too harsh.<sup>8</sup> However, his First Philosophical Letter is credited by most scholars for being the catalyst for the Slavophile–Westernizer controversy (Billington 315). This controversy is usually studied as perhaps the pivotal debate regarding the future course that Russia ought to take. The decentered position suggested by Chaadaev himself is not taken up by either side.

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<sup>8</sup> On the level of the social collective, Chaadaev's letter takes on the structural characteristics of what is known as the "Freudian slip." It was spoken once, uttered a truth that no one, apparently including Chaadaev, actually intended to articulate, became a claim that its author himself attempted to explain away with reference to madness, and was rarely, if ever, recalled by the participants in the debate that it inaugurated.

The Westernizers advocate a deliberate program of reforming Russia on Western models and taking Western examples. The Slavophiles, on the other hand, reject the West as a model and seek a new center for Russian identity in specific aspects of Russian national culture. However, it is important to remember that the imperative to identify unique qualities of one's own national culture was nothing other than another one of those ideas that Russia had received from German idealism. In an operation that can be described as a kind of repression, the Slavophiles adopt the concepts and axioms of the West but immediately "forget" them in order to argue against the adoption of concepts and axioms from that same West. Once the Slavophile discourse is set in motion, the operation does not need to be repeated.<sup>9</sup> In much the same way as the unconscious remnants of parental prohibitions sediment in the unconscious to form what Freud called the super-ego, German idealism forms the unconscious base text for the entire debate.

Before we pursue this line of interpretation any further, it would be good to pause and consider what would have been necessary for Russia to have developed the sense of nation that Suny, Hosking, and others claim Russia never attained. The political and intellectual ferment in the second half of the nineteenth century strove in part to achieve just such a sense of national self-awareness. These discussions, however, started up in Russia about a century after the rise of ideologies of nationalism in the rest of Europe. This is not necessarily fatal, however, for according to theorists of nationalism such as Ernst Gellner, the rise of nationalism does not depend on the ideology itself. Rather the ideology arises when it is needed, which according to Gellner, is the time of transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. According to

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<sup>9</sup> As Boris Groys will make clear when he takes up the issue, this "repression" of the debt to the West takes place in Slavophile discourse, but not in the thinking of individual Slavophile theorists. In his detailed and definitive study of the history of Slavophilism, Andrzej Walicki traces the influences of Western philosophy, particularly of German Idealism, on individual thinkers from the pre-Slavophiles (Shcherbatov, Karamzin, Odoevsky) through Chaadaev, Kireevsky, Khomyakov, Aksakov, and beyond. Although the terms Westernizer and Slavophile were never adequate to the complexity of the confrontation, they did allow the Slavophiles to disavow the fact that Western thinkers were in a very real way their precursors.

Gellner's schema, opportunities for the subject peoples of the Russian Empire would appear as the spread of industrialization made universal education and the development of horizontal ties throughout society an imperative. This would make national self-assertion and later self-determination a realistic proposition. For Russians, however, it is unclear how Gellner's scheme could provide opportunities for national cohesion to take shape. Industrialization, to the extent that it was fitfully developing, was an urban phenomenon. Large cities such as St. Petersburg and Moscow were already administrative centers where a civil service was firmly ensconced and by this time completely alienated from the enormous mass of the peasantry on the other side of the great social divide. Both peasantry and civil service, if able to conceive of the question "who are your oppressors?" might very well be forced to answer "our fellow Russians." In the wake of Official Nationality and in the face of the Russification programs of Alexander III, a Russian nationalist agitator would have a difficult time presenting a nationalist agenda as a liberatory program.

Similar conclusions are likely if we consider, for example, the notion of imagined communities as developed by Benedict Anderson. From one point of view, Anderson's description of how capitalism and print culture form horizontal ties of public interest between members of groups that would never directly interact would lead us to expect great results from Russian journalism. Russia's so-called thick journals provided a home to a lively industry in literary and cultural criticism from figures such as Vissarion Belinskii, Nikolai Dobroliubov, Aleksandr Herzen, Apollon Grigor'ev, and the like. However, in the context of almost universal illiteracy among the peasantry, the practical ability of these intellectual debates to forge broad communities around any point of identification, including the nation, was practically null. Despite the great attention, care, and energy devoted to Russian literature, the Russian language, the Russian Orthodox Church, the special qualities of Russian spirituality—the Slavophiles



beloved notion of *sobornost'* [spiritual community/communion]—none of these potential nodal points were able to surmount the fractured and fractious communities of the Russian Empire to construct a single common community that might be a Russian nation. As for the debates set off by Chaadaev, Boris Groys has traced the further development of Slavophile thought by showing how it absorbed the propositions of German idealism, which enabled it to be constructed as a kind of radical “other” to the West. If the West represents rational deductive reasoning, then Russia is conceived as a prerational realm, a space in which the intellectual speculations of the West can be made manifest in the immediacy of the material world. This leads to some of the most characteristic monuments of Russian literary culture, verses such as the following, which are regarded by many as deeply spiritual, but might just as legitimately be dismissed as a pathetic refusal of rational thought:

Russia is not to be understood with the mind alone,  
She cannot be measured with a common ruler:  
She possesses a special character —  
One can only believe in Russia.

[Умом Россию не понять,  
Аршином общим не измерить:  
У ней особенная стать —  
В Россию можно только верить (Tjutchev 1: 212).]

We might look at the constructivist theories of nationalism from a slightly different angle. Although the approaches of such thinkers as Gellner or Anderson may differ sharply in their specifics, they are in agreement that the national bond is one of *culture* rather than of biology or politics. A nation cannot come into being without a shared culture that fosters the kinds of horizontal ties that transcend clan, caste, and class. For Anderson’s purposes, as we have seen, the culture relevant for nationalism is the print culture inherent in a specific stage of capitalist development. Gellner’s understanding of culture is more elaborate and is helpful in that it takes account of both high culture as well as local or folk culture. Nationalism arises and

can flourish in the context of the social transformations characteristic of industrialization. It is characterized by the following specific features:

[T]he units which this kind of patriotism, namely nationalism, favours with its loyalty, are culturally homogeneous, based on a culture striving to be a high (literate) culture; they are large enough to sustain the hope of supporting the educational system which can keep a literate culture going; they are poorly endowed with rigid internal sub-groupings; their populations are anonymous, fluid and mobile, and they are unmediated; the individual belongs to them directly, in virtue of his cultural style, and not in virtue of membership of nested sub-groups (138).

Nationalism becomes a force for social transformation and, eventually, for the formation of nation-states when a shared culture is perceived to be distinct from that of the political rulers. A nation comes into being around that particular shared culture, which is then elevated to the status of a high culture and often requires the apparatus of a nation-state for its support. There is a confusion of terminology in Gellner's argument that makes his theory difficult to grasp. A crucial role in modern industrial society is played by near-universal literacy and by a common educational system that supports this literacy. Gellner employs the term *high culture* as another name for this institution of literacy through education (89). However, *high culture* is also employed as another name for "great tradition" and thus designates something quite different: "a style of conduct and communication endorsed by the speaker as superior, as setting a norm which should be, but alas often is not, satisfied in real life, and the rules of which are usually codified by a set of respected, norm-giving specialists within the society" (92). Gellner attempts to maintain a rigorous distinction between these two notions of high culture, but this is difficult to do consistently if only because an educational system and the culture of literacy that it facilitates cannot exist in isolation from a normative high culture that is, first and foremost, a *written* culture that requires in its turn a high degree of literacy for its consumption.

Gellner's classification of cultures and the relations of political rulers to ruled cannot simply be mapped onto the split social body and split consciousness of Russia that has been outlined above. It does, however, give us another way to think about the implications of these divisions for the development of Russian identity. As we have seen, the political ruling class identified itself as Russian and its territory as Russian land almost from the beginning but, at the same time, it insisted on its own genetic descent from non-Russians as a means of legitimating its right to rule over the mass of the people. This satisfied one of the prerequisites for the rise of nationalism in the eighteenth century: a territory ruled by a political elite distinct from the masses in their ethnic or cultural identity is now considered to be a source of illegitimacy. However, the intellectuals who were so crucial for nationalist movements in Europe were on the cultural side of the political elite; they were in fact *part of* the political elite in spite of their sense of alienation from the often despotic nature of absolutism. Russian literature, the most important expression of high culture since the mid-eighteenth century, was the possession of the literate nobility. Although artistic literature written in the indigenous language is often understood as the expression of national self-consciousness, the broad masses of the peasantry had no access to this literature. Their folk culture was regarded by enlightened society as a curiosity that might be mimicked but never truly internalized. Orthodox Christianity had provided the very definition of Russianness for centuries (Franklin, "Identity and religion" 97). After Peter's reforms, however, the Orthodox Church became an agent of state administration and the culture of that particular institution was no longer *directly* relevant either to the nobility or to the peasantry.

Over the last two centuries, those who have positioned themselves as either guardians of Russian literature or proponents of Russian distinctiveness have demonstrated an awareness of this lack of a common culture. One of the most obvious manifestations of this awareness was

the “going to the people” movement of the 1870s in which hundreds of university students rejected their western lifestyles and went to live in village communes alongside the peasants, from whom they would learn while they in turn tried to build a more just society.<sup>10</sup> An example both more subtle and more instructive is the development of the Pushkin cult. Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) has for many years been routinely invoked in worshipful tones as the inventor of Russian poetry and of the modern Russian language despite massive empirical evidence (and common sense) to the contrary. This is not the place to review the history of the Pushkin myth or its significance for contemporary culture.<sup>11</sup> But it is noteworthy that one of the most ubiquitous elements in the retellings of Pushkin’s biography is the curious detail of his peasant nanny, from whom he gained an intimate knowledge of Russian folklore while still a child. This “folk” element was then joined to the court culture into which the young poet was educated at the Lyceum. His first major work, *Ruslan and Liudmila*, exhibited features that would characterize almost his entire *oeuvre*. In the description of one standard reference, the mock epic contains “stylistic features of diverse European and Russian origins, such as medieval fabliaux, the *Orlando Furioso*, the Russian *bylina*, or modern efforts to imitate folklore such as Zhukovskii’s ‘Twelve sleeping maidens.’” Contemporary readers were “disturbed by the eroticism and other ‘low’ features” and “perplexed by the eclectic nature of the work and the heterogeneity of its language, which ranged from Church Slavic to vernacular Russian” (Mersereau 140–41). This peculiar kind of synthesis continued to characterize much of Pushkin’s later work, which made it easy for later admirers to imagine him as *the* national poet

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<sup>10</sup> Many but not all of these students were from the nobility. Although a simplistic dichotomy between nobility and peasantry had by this time become anachronistic, it was nevertheless still true that these students were as thoroughly alienated from peasant culture as had been the members of Catherine’s court a century earlier.

<sup>11</sup> For a brief review, see the article by Sandler, “‘Pushkin’ and Identity,” as well as her book on the Pushkin myth.

of Russia. His poetry in particular was able to contain within itself elements characteristic of the most disparate parts of the Russian population, both its cultured society and its illiterate peasant mass. Although Pushkin was certainly not the only writer to incorporate popular elements into verse or artistic prose, he was the figure that proved most usable when it became necessary to identify a cultural figure who could be “our everything.”

During the Pushkin Jubilee Year of 1937 the poet was endowed with an aura that had more to do with the current moment than with the quality of his writings. Attention is often drawn to the fact that a poet identified with the impulse to artistic freedom and political liberty was feted during the darkest days of the Great Terror (see, for example Sandler, “‘Pushkin’ and Identity” 207). It is just as important to remember that this was after the accomplishment of collectivizing agriculture. Through one of the most massive applications of state violence in modern history, the Soviet government under Stalin had finally managed to overcome the division between enlightened society and the peasantry. Most members of the former had been driven into emigration, prison camps, or their graves and the social structures of the latter were so utterly destroyed that the word “peasant” would henceforth have meaning more as a cultural and historical rather than a sociological term.

Thus, Pushkin was the most appropriate symbol for a state that had accomplished the first major step on the way to the creation of a new super-ethnic ethnos—the Soviet people. This transformation would be completed only in the crucible of the Great Patriotic War. Although history would ultimately prove this new collective identity to be largely illusory, a basic cultural axiom of the *zhdanovshchina*<sup>12</sup> was the notion that the peoples of the Soviet Union, whatever they might retain in local cultural traditions and languages, had been forged together into a

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<sup>12</sup> From the name Andrei Zhdanov, one of Stalin’s top lieutenants in the Politburo and the official in charge of cultural policy. The term refers to the period of extreme State control of cultural life from 1946 until the death of Stalin in 1953.

unified and unitary Soviet people [*narod*].<sup>13</sup> Thus it happened that a unified cultural field, including all major segments of society, became a conceivable possibility at the very historical moment when the question of the Russian nation had been decisively taken off the cultural agenda. The distinct Great-Russian chauvinism that characterized the last years of Stalin's rule was as ambiguous as the increasingly strident campaign of Russification that characterized the policies of the last two Russian Tsars. The deliberate and emphatic privileging of Russian language and Russian culture came at the time when any Soviet "national" identity had to be a specifically multi-ethnic one and any Russian nationalism would inevitably inspire non-Russians to mimic this less welcome aspect of the metropole's much vaunted civilizing influence. The one accomplishment of this Russo-centric cultural edifice, organized around an increasingly static notion of Socialist Realism, was to efface yet more completely the split consciousness at the core of Russian (now Russo-Soviet) identity. The relation of this split consciousness to that detected and described by Chaadaev was now completely obscured, relegated to a kind of collective unconscious that could not be openly discussed and, thus, could hardly be articulated in thought.

#### **1.4. Postmodernism and Russian Identity**

The advent of glasnost in the mid-1980s led to a liberalization of discourse in literature and in the press. Writers in both media began to express a wide variety of viewpoints, many of which were unambiguously and aggressively nationalistic in tone. The rise of organizations such as

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<sup>13</sup> This ideological structure is given perfect form in Mikhail Chiaureli's 1949 film *The Fall of Berlin* [*Padenie Berlina*] in which three comrades-in-arms—one Russian, one Ukrainian, and one Asian—defend the Motherland from the German invaders. They take the fight to the enemy's symbolic home base, the *Reichstag*, where the two "little brothers" fall in battle. But their final sacrifice allows their inspiring Russian leader, Alesha, to complete their joint task, which transforms and elevates their individual deaths into episodes of a grand unified epic of Soviet heroism.

*Pamiat'* [Memory] and of Vladimir Zhirinovskii's Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) gave the impression, particularly to foreign observers, that Russia was alive and well and that Russian nationalism was a force with which the entire world would soon have to reckon. However, it was not difficult to discern a deep-seated insecurity in the stridency of the LPD's rhetoric, and the surprising alliance of right-wing nationalists with the Communists, which became more explicitly articulated after the dissolution of the CPSU in 1991, revealed a profound confusion about the entity for which this new nationalism purported to advocate. The writers and filmmakers who became most visibly identified with a newly strong sense of Russian identity, whether expressed as nationalism, patriotism, chauvinism, or racism, generally revealed that their ties were to a sense of a past imperial mythology, rather than to a new national consciousness. The title of Stanislav Govorukhin's film, *The Russia We Have Lost* [*Rossii, kotoruiu my poteriali*] (1992) became the mantra for a widespread sense of nostalgia for a Russia that is imagined to have existed as an organic whole before it was betrayed by the Bolsheviks.<sup>14</sup> Govorukhin's nostalgia resonated with and reinforced a Russian nationalist discourse that identified the Soviet regime as not only politically repressive, but culturally anti-Russian. The central administration had facilitated the establishment of separate "national"—i.e., republican—academies, film studios, and writers unions in each of the other fourteen Soviet republics, but no specifically "Russian" institutions of this sort. The All-Union umbrella structures that served nominally for the entire state had alone sufficed for the Russian republic. In the context of the collapse of central authority, this manifestation of Russian political dominance was easy to reinterpret as symptomatic of Russia's cultural disadvantage.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase became the rubric for a long-running theme in *Ogonek*, a popular weekly magazine that had been closely identified with the liberal wing of society during perestroika.

<sup>15</sup> The historical sources for this situation have been explored by Terry Martin, who coined the phrase "affirmative action empire" to describe the goals, constraints, and policies that characterized the early Soviet position on nationality questions.

In the context of the political changes taking place in the late 1980s, one vaguely defined set of cultural producers stands out as representing something qualitatively new. Early in perestroika, they are characterized by a number of different labels: conceptualism, *sots-art*, *chernukha* aesthetics, and “other prose” were some of the designations used to classify a cohort of writers, filmmakers, and artists who were impossible to describe using any of the traditional labels such as realism, romanticism, or psychologism. Sergei Chuprinin’s term “other prose” [*drugaiia proza*] captures the helplessness with which critics confronted the new wave in culture. They had no coherent political stance, they continued no identifiable tradition in Russian literature. They were of various ages and backgrounds. Their prose seemed intent on provoking the reader, often with vulgar profane language and explicit sexual themes and physiological naturalism. These authors had no desire to educate or edify their readers; they did not want to teach anyone how to live. Breaking with the collective line of Socialist Realism, this alternative or “other” prose did not attempt to create a common language to which all parts of society could relate. A fractured and fragmented prose style transmitted a confused irrational message to a reading public that was challenged to give up the demand for any shared sense of identity or values.

This challenge to the cultural establishment soon became designated first as Soviet and later as Russian postmodernism. Although the designation was new, its practitioners and its works were not all new and not all located in Moscow. Some of the pioneering names were Venedikt Erofeev, Vladimir Sorokin, Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, Viktor Erofeev, Tatiana Tolstaya, Evgenii Popov, and Evgenii Kharitonov as well as Eduard Limonov, then living in emigration. Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moscow to the End of the Line* [*Moskva—Petushki*] was written in the late 1960s and was the earliest retrospectively recognized masterpiece of postmodernist prose. Some works had already appeared in the West or were well



known in *samizdat* manuscript form. This would include works such as Vladimir Sorokin's *The Queue* [*Ochered'*] and Viktor Erofeev's *Russian Beauty* [*Russkaia krasavitsa*]. Some writers had already managed to publish their works before perestroika, but later became associated with the postmodernists.

*Samizdat* was not a realistic option for filmmakers, but as the Union of Cinematographers had been among the first of the professional unions to reform and liberalize in 1986, innovative and iconoclastic feature films and documentaries were appearing in significant quantity by 1988. Some early provocations in feature films were Sergei Solov'ev's *Assa* (1988), Karen Shakhnazarov's *City Zero* [*Gorod zero*] (1988), Sergei Ovcharov's *It* [*Ono*] (1989), Kira Muratova's *Asthenic Syndrome* [*Astenicheskii sindrom*] (1990), and Ovcharov's *Drummiad* [*Barabaniada*] (1992). Muratova's film is probably the most intense example of *chernukha*, a kind of claustrophobia-inducing naturalism accentuating the psychological oppressiveness of Soviet material and social reality.<sup>16</sup>

Postmodernism is of course a transnational phenomenon, at least throughout the countries of Western Europe, the Americas, and many parts of Asia. The postmodern condition has been described by any number of theorists and whether it is conceived as the breakdown of grand narratives (Lyotard), the cultural logic of transnational capitalism (Jameson), or an endless proliferation of simulacra (Baudrillard), it is a condition in which hierarchies are violated and dismantled, borders are crossed and criss-crossed, and regimes of political power and knowledge are destabilized. It is significant that when postmodernism becomes relevant in Russia, it is

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<sup>16</sup>For more extensive descriptions of *chernukha* in Muratova, see Lawton 204–05. Deming Brown provided an extended description of *chernukha* in his survey of late Soviet literature (147–58) even though he seems surprisingly to have been unfamiliar with the term itself. For Russian cinema in general, see the article by Seth Graham.

always in its specificity as *Russian* postmodernism.<sup>17</sup> It is demarcated in its uniqueness, emphasized for its cultural significance, and consumed in the context of a value system that has never readily accommodated a plurality of values. Indeed, as we will soon see, those opposed to postmodernism in Russia often attack it above all for its supposed refusal of a clearly articulated system of values.

Russia does share with the West one major feature of postmodernism: there is a weakening of the barrier separating cultural producers (authors, directors, artists), cultural consumers (readers, viewers), and those who mediate between them (critics, scholars). This development was perhaps more natural in Russia than elsewhere due to its long tradition of socially engaged criticism, cultural manifestos, and Party decrees on the arts. Thus, one of the early “theoretical” texts on Soviet postmodernism was a 1989 essay by prose writer Viktor Erofeev, who was simultaneously a researcher at the Institute of World Literature. His “Soviet Literature: In Memoriam” was in its structure and tone reminiscent of an earlier text, the essay “What is Socialist Realism?” by Abram Tertz [Andrei Siniavskii]. Like his predecessor, Erofeev analyzes the role literature has played in the Soviet context and calls for a new literature that “will be no more and no less than literature” (154). Two years later, in “The Fall of Humanism #2” [“Krushenie gumanizma nomer 2”], Erofeev addressed the charge that postmodernists have no value system, insisting that what the new post-Soviet generation offers is a more realistic evaluation of human nature, free of the false optimism of Soviet-style humanism. While Erofeev’s essays were much discussed in Moscow cultural circles, scholars devoted greater attention to the essays of Mikhail Epstein, who had also been active in literary life in Russia before establishing himself as a university professor in the United States. In an ambitious essay

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<sup>17</sup> It suffices only to look at the titles of the books and articles cited below and throughout the next four chapters. Postmodernism outside of Russia is of interest at best only to the degree to which it can serve as a springboard into a discussion of *otechestvennyi* postmodernism.

entitled “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism,” Epstein references Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, the “production of reality” through images that appear more real than reality, a phenomenon that is made possible by the advances of modern technology and has become dominant through the pervasiveness of mass media. Adopting the term “hyperreality” to designate the effect of simulacra, Epstein advances the thesis that this phenomenon has been characteristic throughout the entire history of Russia, where “ideas have always tended to substitute for reality” (191). Hyperreality has characterized Russia from the imposition of Christianity on a pagan culture through the planning of a European city on a swamp to the façade of Soviet economic planning. He cites several nineteenth-century writers—Herzen, Aksakov, Dostoevskii—but does not mention by name the writer he is repeating almost verbatim, the writer who recognized “a culture based wholly upon importation and imitation... [where] new ideas sweep away the old, because they do not proceed from those old ones but come to us from out of the blue” (Chaadaev, *Philosophical Works* 22). Perhaps Epstein’s blind spot results from the fact that Chaadaev has become a sort of vanishing mediator. The so-called hyperreality of Vladimir’s conversion, of Catherine’s “Potemkin villages,” and even of the founding of St. Petersburg itself is of a different order than the “concepts” developed in the course of the Westernizer–Slavophile debate, utopian socialism, mystical idealism, and dialectical materialism clothed in the garb of Socialist Realism. Epstein is at his most convincing when he concentrates on this last period. He makes a strong case for seeing Socialist Realism in its high-Stalinist form as a kind of first-stage postmodernism, in which hyperreality is the dominant in an aesthetic system also characterized by the erasure of style, the evolution of doctrine into pastiche, the homogenization of elite and mass culture, and the subsumption of all historical discourses in a constructed posthistorical space (206–07). The strength of his argument makes it difficult for him to describe what differentiates second-stage postmodernism, i.e., conceptualism itself, from Socialist Realism. It seems almost as if Russian postmodernism merely equals Socialist Realism

plus ironic self-consciousness.

Here it is helpful to juxtapose Epstein's position with that of Boris Groys, a native of Leningrad who had emigrated to West Germany during the Brezhnev years. Groys became one of the most widely discussed explicators and apologists for Russian postmodernism with the appearance of his book on Stalinist culture, first in German and then in English translation.<sup>18</sup> In *The Total Art of Stalinism* he makes the iconoclastic claim that the totalitarian regime was itself an aesthetic project, a work of "total art" that was the culmination of the logic of the Russian avant-garde. Contrary to the received wisdom that State censorship and ideological control of the arts led to the demise of Russian modernism, Groys claims that Stalinism was the fulfillment of the modernist impulse to sweep away the relics of the past and to create a new reality. The Russian avant-garde had been convinced of the calling of art to transform the material world, and they supported the October Revolution because they saw the Bolsheviks as their best chance to put this calling into practice. In its Constructivist and Productionist incarnations, the avant-garde would wage war against more moderate artistic trends in debates that were characterized by a spirit of increasing intolerance. This desire to annihilate one's opponents was adopted and perfected by the proletarian organizations that gained a hegemonic position in the late 1920s, by which time the inability of the avant-garde to transform the world was becoming increasingly clear. Thus, as Groys emphasizes, the Russian avant-garde was destroyed not by Socialist Realism, but by its own internal contradictions and by battle lines that it had itself helped to draw. The Party decree of 1932 abolishing all artistic organizations was initially seen as relief from persecution by the proletarian organizations, but the developing doctrine of Socialist Realism, coming when the five-year plans were indeed transforming material reality, became a

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<sup>18</sup> The original Russian text was published in Moscow in 1993 under the somewhat strange title "Stil' Stalin" [literally, "Stalin Style"].

theory that did not simply yoke artistic production to political priorities, but refigured political policies as grand aesthetic projects:

[T]he Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project. Thus if Stalin is viewed as the artist-tyrant who succeeded the philosopher-tyrant typical of the age of contemplative, mimetic thought, Stalinist poetics is the immediate heir to constructivist poetics (36).

He goes on to suggest that the genuine differences in content between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism were the result of a “radicalization of the avant-garde itself” (37). By characterizing Stalinist art as Frankenstein’s monster of Russian modernism, Groys is able, unlike Epstein, to read Russian postmodernism in a manner consistent with western theories of a postmodernist reaction against high modernism. Where Epstein spoke of hyperreality, Groys invokes a notion of the “post-utopian.” In his explication of post-utopian art, he invokes the authority of such standard thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Jacques Lacan. The last of these names is perhaps most important, for when he gets to a detailed description of the structure and operations characteristic of post-utopian art, his explanatory apparatus and terminology become unabashedly psychoanalytical:

It proved impossible to break free of Stalin without reiterating him at least aesthetically. Consequently, modern Russian art has approached Stalin as an aesthetic phenomenon in order to repeat him and thus liberate itself from him. By constructing both text and context, practicing both construction and deconstruction, simultaneously projecting utopia and transforming it into antiutopia, it is attempting to enter the mythological family so that it may relate to Stalin not with *ressentiment* but with a feeling of superiority: every family has its black sheep.

Revealed in this frivolous, irreverent play is the colossal potential of desire and the unconscious that was inherent in the Russian avant-garde but was insufficiently recognized because it was encoded in a rationalistic, geometric, technical, constructive form (119).

Although he is best known for his writings on contemporary art, Groys has also written on the problematic of what he explicitly calls Russian national identity and here as well he has recourse not only to the terminology but to a broad elaboration of Freudian theory. In his article “The Search for Russian National Identity” [“Poisk russkoi natsional'noi identichnosti”], he highlights the crucial role played by Chaadaev in the debates on Russian identity and he attempts to prove that the Russian response to the universalizing ambitions of German Idealism was to oppose not an alternate idealism but a materialism that would be a function of idealism while simultaneously located outside of it. He concludes:

... at least since Chaadaev, Russian thought has had to face the question of its national identity, independence, and originality while, at the same time, not being able to present anything truly exotic and heterogeneous in comparison with Western culture. It thus answered the question by interpreting Russia as a space for the realization or materialization of Western discourses about the Other.<sup>19</sup>

[... по меньшей мере, начиная с Чаадаева, русская мысль, поставленная перед вопросом о своей национальной идентичности, самостоятельности и оригинальности, и в то же время не будучи в состоянии предъявить ничего действительно экзотичного и гетерогенного по сравнению с западной культурой, постоянно отвечала на этот вопрос тем, что интерпретировала Россию как место реализации, или материализации, западных дискурсов об Ином (59).]

A short time later, Groys clarifies this somewhat difficult formulation by using the metaphor of the Freudian unconscious. He proposes that what took place after Chaadaev’s intervention was Russia’s acceptance of its place as the “unconscious of the West.” If Western thought was characterized by rationality, Russia became the place of irrationality. This transformed the Russian intelligentsia into a collective split subject, the site of constant battle between its Western consciousness and its Russian unconscious. The problem that Groys

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<sup>19</sup> Published translations have been used whenever possible; unattributed translations into English are my own.

outlines in this formulation is the fact that Russia once again becomes the “product” of Western rationalism. In order to conceptualize the ultimate triumph of the Russian unconscious over Western consciousness, the Russian intelligentsia (particularly the Slavophiles, but not only they) must therefore repress the knowledge of their dependence on Western rationality as primary. As the West itself develops theories of the unconscious, a space that resists rationality, Russia takes this notion as a source of hope and begins to fill this space with concepts such as *sobornost'* that would provide for Russia’s ultimate triumph as the Other of Western universalism. This Freudian characterization of the relationship between Russia and the West also accounts for the libidinal charge that the relationship has taken on by the time of Solov'ev and that continues into the twentieth century, as the masculine European principle (spirit) and the feminine Russian principle (flesh) are juxtaposed by a series of cultural thinkers, including Vasilii Rozanov and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii (Grois, “Rossiia kak podsoznanie zapada” 257).

### **1.5. Psychoanalysis and Culture**

Grois uses psychoanalysis essentially as a metaphor or heuristic device—he does not go quite so far as psychoanalyzing the Russian philosophy of history, which is actually surprising as he begins his article by noting that Russia has been traditionally quite averse to any use of Freudian theory. He muses that if the patient called Russia refuses to be analyzed, then the analysis promises to be particularly interesting since, as is well known, the refusal to acknowledge the dependence on the unconscious is the very object of psychoanalysis (Grois, “Rossiia kak podsoznanie zapada” 245). While Grois treads carefully here, the American slavist Daniel Rancour-Laferriere has made psychoanalyzing Russia and the Russians the trademark of his scholarship. His most recent book, *Russian Nationalism from an Interdisciplinary Perspective: Imagining Russia*, is directly relevant to the topic under discussion. He declares his approach to

be informed by theoretical and clinical writings of Freud, Melanie Klein, and Donald Winnicott. He acknowledges the hazards inherent in any application of psychoanalysis to a collectivity, but he spends little time agonizing over this. More surprising in such a painstakingly researched work (the book contains over 1000 footnotes), he has apparently made absolutely no use of the classical Freudian text on this subject, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in which the founder of psychoanalysis gives a clear justification for undertaking such an endeavor and provides an illustration of the absolutely crucial role of identification as a process inherent in any functioning collectivity. For Freud, group formation is closely tied to the development and maintenance of the ego. An individual will either identify with a leader (Freud's example is the Catholic Church) or idealize the leader in order to identify with his fellows (the example of the army). For Rancour-Laferriere the crucial relationship is not to a leader but to Russia itself, to which Russians relate as children to their mother. The relationship is characterized as one of a troubled and incomplete separation, for Russians have a feeling not only of being ill treated by their mother, but of literally being a part of her. There is no identity for an individual Russian outside the body of mother-Russia [in Russian: *rodina-mat'*—motherland or, literally, “birthland”], who is imagined to be suffering and fragmented. He notes and agrees with the claim of Groys that Western rationality is not adequate to describing the relationship that Russians have to their “nation”: “Russian identity is essentially ineffable” (95). As the complement to this troubled relationship to Russia, Rancour-Laferriere describes the relationship of many Russians to outsiders, towards whom Russians have traditionally been quite open and accepting but who in many concrete situations are often (and today increasingly) perceived as a threat. This is the manifestation of the narcissistic problem at the core of Russian identity. The loss of the Soviet empire has been a severe blow to Russians' sense of their national (i.e.,



imperial) dignity; their self image is now dominated by shame.<sup>20</sup>

These two threads—self and other—are brought together by Rancour-Laferriere with a direct application of Klein’s analysis of the mother–child relationship. Klein’s concept of the “bad mother” (incarnated for Rancour-Laferriere in the cultural practice of swaddling infants) is easily internalized in the ego but also transferred to a threatening outside object, a stranger, or a foreigner. Thus, ethnic hatred gives the extreme nationalist an external object to hate so as not to hate the self, while the internalized bad mother (and its companion, the bad ego) generates the moral masochism that Rancour-Laferriere, despite his gestures toward a constructivist notion of identity, seems to designate as the *essence*, at least at this historical juncture, of Russian “national identity” (if not Russian “national character”).

As far as psychoanalytic theory is concerned, Rancour-Laferriere’s analysis is consistent and his argument is strong. Nevertheless, whatever validity it may have, it ultimately makes collective identity a direct function of individual ego-formation. It also maintains in full the strong biologism inherent in Freud’s theories, toward which psychoanalytic theory has become increasingly skeptical today. If Groys (and one basic claim of this dissertation) is correct in identifying Chaadaev’s “First Philosophical Letter” as a significant reorientation of Russian subjectivity, as a repositioning of Russia as subject, then it ought to be possible to give an analysis of this new subjectivity and of its manifestations in Russian culture that is grounded in a theory that is methodologically adequate to the material under consideration. A direct application of Freudian theory to cultural texts maintains its integrity only to the extent that it analyses actual individuals who possess (or, more accurately, are possessed by) an unconscious.

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<sup>20</sup> Rancour-Laferriere actually avoids use of the word “nation” in this book about nationalism. He briefly alludes to Gellner and other scholars of nationalism, but his methodology allows him to substitute “the collective” or “the mother’s body” for the troublesome concept of nation. “National” and “imperial” dignity are, at any rate, not differentiated in his text.

One can make at least some attempt to analyze Lev Tolstoy using his literary texts and other biographical materials as evidence. Nevertheless, despite the received wisdom that lauds Tolstoy as one of the great masters of psychological prose, one cannot psychoanalyze Anna Karenina as a character for the simple reason that a literary character cannot have an unconscious.

Can cultural texts have an unconscious? It is common in contemporary cultural studies to find references to a “collective unconscious,” a “political unconscious,” or to “cultural neuroses.” Can such phrases be justified or grounded with any rigor? Jacques Lacan’s “return to Freud,” taking as it does a detour through several major figures of European structuralism, offers one of the most complex but also most flexible ways in which to give a grounding to the psychoanalytic exploration of cultural processes in human society. Lacan’s most famous dictum, “the unconscious is structured like a language” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 149), provides the initial and most basic bridge connecting psychoanalysis to any processes in human culture to the extent that human culture is intimately bound up in language. In one of his best known writings, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan elaborates the way in which the primary processes of dreamwork (condensation and displacement) are analogous to the two fundamental operations of figurative language, that of metaphor and metonymy. This language of the unconscious has nothing to do with thinking, it is not random or specific to the individual. It is the Discourse of the Other, and it follows rules of regularity that flow from its structure.<sup>21</sup> It is in his or her relation to this discourse that the individual, according to Lacan, becomes a subject. By analogy, one could assert that a collectivity could achieve subjectivity through the same mechanism inasmuch as language, if indeed it is a structure following regular rules, would operate in the same way for a collectivity, or even for a nation, as it would for an individual.

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<sup>21</sup> Lacan’s elaborations of this regularity is described in texts just now becoming available in English. Bruce Fink has summarized the argument in Appendix 1 of *The Lacanian Subject*.

There is surely danger and a great likelihood of error in such a simple analogy. For even if language follows regular laws, individual speech does not and the role of individual speech for Lacan is no less important than the laws of the language code. A collectivity with a shared culture and a potential group identity is by its very definition a group of speaking subjects sharing a common linguistic code. Thus, the collective is midway between the individual and the impersonal other discourse. It shares features with both. Any Lacanian analysis of cultural processes must be clear on what the object of the interrogation is exactly. It is possible, for example, to study the reception of literature or mass media from a Lacanian standpoint. This is the task that Mark Bracher undertakes in his book *Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change*. In this book, Bracher wishes to analyze the ways in which cultural discourses of various kinds affect those who consume them and, furthermore, what ways cultural criticism can intervene in those processes. Thus, he concentrates his theoretical elaboration on Lacan's late concept of the four discourses<sup>22</sup> and on the ways discourse affects people on an emotional level. In essence, Bracher elaborates an explicitly psychoanalytic reader-response theory, with the ultimate goal being the discovery of possibilities for the liberation and alteration of subjectification in societies. A slightly less activist but still socially relevant use of Lacan's theory is outlined by Yannis Stavrakakis in his discussion of *Lacan and the Political*. Stavrakakis provides a summary of Lacan's basic ideas regarding not only subjectivity but also objectivity. He attempts to show how a recognition of lack as the constitutive condition not only for subjectification but also of the objective material world provides a way out of the cynicism that sees in the present situation only a false choice between an irresistible market capitalism and a politically irresponsible and thoroughly discredited utopianism. Stavrakakis wonders whether it might not be possible somehow to institutionalize the relationship of the subject to the lack in the social body.

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<sup>22</sup> This is often interpreted as Lacan's response to May 1968, the closest he came to explicit political engagement.

Both Bracher and Stavrakakis are operating on the side of the individual within the larger collective. They are engaged in a project that would ultimately effect a real change in the subjectivity of people, a change in their relation to culture and society. Although the Lacanian theoretical framework makes for interesting arguments, their projects are in essence attempts to breathe new life into old agendas. Like other engaged intellectuals, however, they seem to overestimate their own ability to intervene in the regime of the Big Other. To put it differently, one can change the relationship of one subject to his or her fantasy, then of two subjects, then of hundreds of subjects, but it is unclear that spreading the gospel of psychoanalytic self-knowledge can ever do anything to restructure a nation's relationship to its fundamental fantasy, to the way it constructs itself around concepts such as beauty, suffering, redemption, or *sobornost'*.

Analysis on the side of the individual's process of subjectivization has as its goal a change in that process. There is, however, no reason to think that a Lacanian analysis on the side of the collective's cultural production need to be seen as in any way resigned to the inevitability of our *subjection* through subjectification. Indeed, in the introduction to his book *Fetish*, Henry Krips states explicitly that one of the questions he will investigate is the question of the degree to which cultural artifacts might take on a constitutive role in psychically structuring their audiences (3). While he is interested in linking the psychic and the cultural, his analysis in the book maintains a good distance from any suggestion that he or anyone could effectively intervene in the operation of this mechanism.

This is also the method most often employed by the best-known (indeed, the major popularizer) of Lacan today, the Slovenian philosopher and one-time politician Slavoj Žižek. In a series of books, Žižek has placed Lacan in a philosophical tradition that runs from Hegel through Marx and has thus achieved a synthesis that allows him to analyze both high and mass culture in a way that seems genuinely exciting. The humor in evidence in his work is balanced

by the seriousness of the subject matter—he discusses genocide in Yugoslavia as well as fascination with Michael Jackson and subjects both topics to the same analytical matrix. While his work gestures towards the possibility of moving beyond the collective fantasies that, according to him, play such a deceptive and destructive role in postmodern culture, his answer seems to be perpetually deferred as he expands both the horizon and the theoretical apparatus of his books.

This dissertation takes Žižek’s Lacanian explication of the breakup of Yugoslavia as one of the inspirations for attempting a similar reading of the conundrum of post-Soviet Russian identity, but it will not be possible simply to re-enact the Žižekian analysis.<sup>23</sup> On first examination, it would seem that the multi-ethnic USSR had all the requisite elements necessary to guarantee it the same violent and bloody fate as Yugoslavia. However, the devastation wrought upon the small Caucasian territory of Chechnya is actually remarkable in that the uncontrolled violence that has erupted there is the exception rather than the rule. This dissertation will reach beyond Žižek’s reading of the source of ethnic conflict in the Imaginary to inquire why and how the Russian Federation, unlike Yugoslavia, has by and large avoided a bloody descent into utter chaos.

In the examination of any specific cultural text, I will inevitably make use of only part of Lacan’s extensive and complex theory. For the diverse set of novels, stories, and films examined in this analysis, various explanatory tools will be used in order to open up each work as fully as possible. While such a pick-and-choose approach may strike some as arbitrary and lacking in integrity, it is consistent both with the principle of psychoanalysis (the analysand “does” the analysis through his or her work of free association) and with the desire on my part to allow the text to speak without the imposition of a theory that must be consistently “applied” to every

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<sup>23</sup> Its fullest explication is in the last chapter of *Tarrying with the Negative*, which is also his first major engagement with Hegel.

cultural text without distinction. The study of these texts will in every case have to do with Lacan's so-called three orders—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.<sup>24</sup> As Fredric Jameson discovered in one of the very first attempts to theorize the use of Lacan for cultural analysis, it is identification in the Imaginary and subjectivization in the Symbolic that are most often repeated in texts. It is also one of the remarkable properties of cultural texts that they are able to bring into palpable presence the third, supposedly unrepresentable, of Lacan's orders, that of the Real.

With a theory as diffuse, difficult, and contradictory as that of Lacan, there are two dangers that must be avoided and for which the interpreter must take responsibility. On the one hand, the theoretical apparatus must be explained in a way so that it will be clear that it is being used in a way that is rigorous and free of mystification. On the other, there is little use to engage in a complex reading of a text unless it enables us to see something in the text that would otherwise remain hidden. A Lacanian reading should open up a text to reveal content that is neither obvious to the naive reader nor so contrived as to seem simply false. I will conclude this chapter with an attempt to demonstrate the way in which this task can be accomplished and the degree to which it enables a text to speak its truth with regard to the Russian question.

### **1.6. The Void**

Ivan Dykhovichnyi's 1992 film, *Moscow Parade* [*Prorva*] was a Russian–French co-production with the German actress Ute Lemper in the starring role of Anna, the wife of a high-ranking officer of the NKVD. The film begins with a textual introduction, in French, that explains that the action takes place just after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. Stalin rules supreme

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<sup>24</sup> These terms will be used here in both their Lacanian and conventional meanings. When used to refer to the Lacanian orders, I will write the terms with an initial capital letter, thus following the practice adopted (albeit with remarkable inconsistency) by most scholars.

in the USSR with the help of the NKVD, which is described as “a privileged caste, an elite that holds all power, which meets no resistance. Except from women and horses.” This text sets up a contradiction and a mystery at the very start of the film, preparing the viewer for what will be presented as a puzzle.<sup>25</sup> At the time of its release, the film was seen as a welcome relief from the *chernukha* that had been typical of films depicting the Stalin era. *Moscow Parade* was a return to the “grand style” and the film is rich in imagery reflecting and depicting the luxurious lifestyle of the elite.

It was clear to everyone who wrote on this film that its analysis of Stalinist society was closely connected to its portrayal of gender roles and sexual relations. This was confirmed through numerous interviews given by the director, Ivan Dykhovichnyi, who espoused the view that the Stalinist regime had rendered the members of society genderless, with masculinity in particular becoming denatured (Fomina 18). Interpretations of the portrayal of sexuality in the film were diverse and often incompatible. A surprisingly essentialist reading of sexual behavior and gender roles in the film by A. Nemtsov, a psychologist, who explained the meaning of the film by highlighting the masochism inherent in female sexuality, the totalitarian will to dominate that is characteristic of male sexuality, and the way in which masculine rationality imposes lies and falsehood on the truth that he links to female simplicity and connection to nature.

Nevertheless, he claims that despite the masochism and passivity inherent in their nature, the women in this film also manifest a distinct will to power and to dominate their men (14–15).

Susan Larsen, while agreeing with this observation, goes on to demonstrate that female sexuality as depicted in this film is a corrosive force that leads both to totalitarianism as a social and

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<sup>25</sup> My analysis is based on the version of the film released to the international market in 1992. The film has now been released in Moscow on DVD by Premiere Digital (February 2005). The opening credits, which were in French in the 1992 print, are now in Russian, and the textual prologue is missing entirely. According to at least one report (Larsen 117 n. 20), this text was also missing in the original print screened domestically in 1992.

psychological phenomenon and to male impotence. It is, in other words, the expressions of a specifically male fantasy (653).

The question of the role of sexuality can be widened to consider the role of desire as a structuring moment in the film as a whole. One of the most striking aspects of the film is its exaggerated aestheticization of the Moscow of the time and of the conditions in which the elite lived their lives. Neia Zorkaia calls attention to this aspect of the film and goes on to remark that many of the realia depicted in the film (the fountain, the state anthem, the sculptures) reveal a lack of attention to chronology as they come from different historical phases of the Stalin period (5–6). This overabundance of images, contributing to the aesthetic of the “grand style,” finds a counterpart in a similar overabundance of signs, the presence of which is accentuated by a curious property of the signifiers. As if to demonstrate the nature of the Saussurean dyad, the signifiers in this film manifest a strange ability either to swallow up the individuality of their referents or, alternately, to become detached from them. Many of the important characters in the plot of the film are designated primarily by their professions (the writer, the lawyer, the ballerina) or by some characteristic that locates them within the plot (the stool pigeon, the pregnant woman). The prosthetic penis with which the NKVD attempts to masquerade a mare for a stallion is merely a grotesque materialization of the interchangeability of all attributes and their signifiers. Thus, on both the plane of the Imaginary and of the Symbolic, the film is characterized by an aesthetic of excessive abundance.

The function of excess in the Imaginary is a visual confirmation of the grandeur of the State and visual proof of the achievements of Soviet socialism, of which the grand parade is a celebration.<sup>26</sup> Although the function of excess in the Symbolic for the film as a whole is more difficult to determine, its operation is not difficult to observe. Anna’s insatiable sexual desire is

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<sup>26</sup> See Jameson 97–98 on the link of Imaginary thought patterns to ideas of ethics and morals.



one of the central problems of the film. Her fixation on the railway porter, Gosha (Evgenii Sidikhin), has been interpreted as her nymphomaniacal desire to be “taken” by his “raw power” (Nemtsov 14). However, Anna’s estimation of his physical strength is much less important than Gosha’s own self-awareness of his place in Soviet society. Although the word “proletarian” is not used, his arrogant bearing and authoritarian behavior in the rail station clearly bear witness to his self-conscious identity as master within the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is after making love with this representative of the working class that Anna reveals her biography to him, as well as to us. She is the sole survivor in her family, an aristocratic land-owning family that was wiped out by the Bolsheviks. By marrying an NKVD officer, she has secured her own material well-being but has also yoked herself to a representative of an entire generation of proletarians who, by giving themselves into the service of the repressive machinery of Stalinism, betrayed their class and participated in their own denigration. Their castration is much more than the symbolic castration that confers identity on the subject along with its subjection to the rule of the signifier. It becomes clear in the course of her increasingly desperate monologue that Anna seeks from Gosha not only the sexual satisfaction that her husband cannot provide but, more importantly, her own identity within the new order. Her confessions and her constant invocation of his name beg for a response from him, a recognition of her need. His silent refusal leaves her destitute and she continues to pursue him, oblivious to how dangerous this pursuit could become.<sup>27</sup>

The chase is interrupted by an interlude in which she spend an entire night walking around the city with Mitia (Dmitrii Dykhovichnyi), the young man who is usually called simply

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<sup>27</sup> The film itself encourages a certain confusion about Anna’s identity; whereas almost every other character is identified by their profession, Anna has no profession. Nevertheless, several scenes in which she sings seem to invite a deliberate confusion between the character and actress Ute Lemper, who herself is as much a stage performer as a film actress. The marketing blurb for the American video release describes the character as a “sultry cabaret singer.”

a “writer.” The writer is one of the most weakly drawn characters in the film, marked by an exaggerated passivity that makes him into a near parody of the kenotic Christ figure beloved of Russian culture, an innocent victim willingly allowing himself to be led to slaughter.<sup>28</sup> His character manifests a number of stereotypical conceptions of writers: a lack of concern for day-to-day cares and worries, a preoccupation with abstract notions and eternal questions, a preference for admiring feminine beauty from afar rather than pursuing women as objects of desire. The fawning attitude of his friends and the campaign by the official writer’s organization to destroy him underscore his importance as a focal point for myths about the power of persecuted literature in Russia’s darkest times. The viewer is never treated to a sample of his writing—we do not even know what genre his writing takes. He is a character with no personality of his own but with a role thoroughly overdetermined by the fates of countless Soviet writers before, during, and after the 1930s. His suicide is framed in such a way as to make his death tragically inevitable.

The central importance of the writer in the film’s plot has deflected attention from another figure that is drawn with much greater color and detail. No one who has written on this film to date seems to have drawn sufficient attention to the fact that the lawyer (Vladimir Simonov) is portrayed from his very first appearance as no less a master of storytelling than the writer. He speaks incessantly both of himself and of his latest client, and designates himself as the “poet of a murderess.” He has taken on the task of defending a female serial killer, Gorbachevskaja (Ekaterina Ryzhikova), who is accused of murdering four men after luring each

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<sup>28</sup> *Kenosis* is a Greek term deriving from the New Testament description of Christ as having “emptied himself” to take on human form. A kenotic approach to Christianity focuses on the way in which God humbles and limits himself in the humanity of Jesus, which serves as a model to be emulated. Georgii Fedotov articulated the role that the practitioners of this discipline played in both the religious and political development of Russia. For an introduction to kenotic thought and practices, see the preface to his compilation of saints’ lives. See Condee (“No Glory, No Majesty, No Honour”) for a description of the importance of the kenotic Christ figure for the Russian cultural tradition.

of them into a sexual tryst. The lawyer declares that he himself has fallen for this *femme fatale*, who possesses a specific kind of attractive power that he can only describe as “Soviet.” He takes clear pleasure out of creating a picture of his client for his friends and acquaintances, describing her as his “only true substance.” Dykhovichnyi makes it quite clear that the lawyer has styled himself as a kind of Soviet Pygmalion, for whom Gorbachevskaia is not only a literal *femme fatale*, but also his own personal Galatea. While she languishes in jail, he gives her personality contour and shape through his elaborate descriptions. He enables her to be pardoned for her crimes by impregnating her, thus giving her liberty by inflicting a literal change of state upon her body. His power to form and to control her seems so complete that he joyfully takes the reckless step of accepting her reward-cum-invitation to be her guest for dinner “at the very same hour, to the very same house, to eat the very same dishes” as her four unfortunate victims. While Anna spends the evening wandering Moscow with her writer, we see the only extended interaction between Gorbachevskaia and her rescuer. She is revealed to be in fact little more than unformed substance. Her lack of education (ignorance of Pushkin) and her dislike of Muscovites (“they’re so stuck-up and educated, I’d gladly take a razor blade to the whole pack of them”) reveal her to be nothing more than a country girl gone bad. She is even comical in her desire to be equated with Cleopatra and begs the lawyer to write an epic poem about her. As she suggests that they retire to bed, the lawyer’s self-confidence begins to weaken just a bit. As she gazes upon his naked body and prepares to climb on top of him, he asks in a halting voice, “and I shall now be your fifth?” to which she giggles quietly and replies, “seventh.”

The look of terror on the lawyer’s face upon hearing this reply has no logical motivation. The fact that Gorbachevskaia has murdered more men than was known does not make her character any more or less malevolent. The revelation has more to do with the lawyer than with his erstwhile client. In a single moment, he realizes that the text he has so carefully woven is

truly nothing more than fiction and that the larger-than-life object he has created is out of his control. In a dreadful moment of recognition, he finds that his “only true substance” is a reality



Figure 1

completely unknown to him. His horror springs from the recognition made clear by Lacanian psychoanalysis that what we perceive as “reality” has much less to do with the actual material world than with the structure given to that material world by the Symbolic order. By presuming to be able to create that Symbolic order and, thus, to give

real shape and form to “substance,” the lawyer dared to supplant the Big Other, the Symbolic order itself. His loss of control over the Symbolic leaves him completely defenseless against the danger to his very life that emanates from the “substance” behind the veil of the Symbolic.

This is given expression in the film by a series of near-death accidents that pursue the lawyer as he flees in terror from Gorbachevskaja’s lair: the razor in the hand of the sleeping woman, the brick that almost falls upon his head, the bandit who threatens him with yet another blade, and finally the NKVD officer who almost runs him down with an automobile while the towers and palaces of the Kremlin seem to look down from the background of the frame (Figure 1). His only escape is total surrender. Declaring to his friends that he “took fright” [*ispugalsia*], he flees the city of Moscow and heads for the town of his birth.

The appearance of the Kremlin in the background of this final shot in the sequence is certainly not coincidental, but neither is it unique. The Kremlin has been omnipresent as a set piece in almost every outdoor scene in the film to this point. As the action has circulated around the central squares of the Soviet capital city, the architecture has been an important constituent part of the film’s aesthetic of the grand style. But as the lawyer is suddenly assailed by mortal danger from all sides, the Kremlin becomes more than simply backdrop or atmosphere. It is not

merely an allusion to the malevolent threat emanating from the state apparatus, as we have been shown direct manifestations of that threat throughout the film. It has much more to do with the viewer than with the character of the lawyer, for it is a manifestation of what Lacan refers to as the gaze. While accounts of the gaze often refer to Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage or to his complex theorizing in *Seminar XI*, the clearest description of the gaze appears in Lacan's first seminar of 1953–54:

The gaze is not located just at the level of the eyes. The eyes may very well not appear, they may be masked. The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us. It is an  $x$ , the object when faced with which the subject becomes object (Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique* 220).

If the horror confronting the lawyer in the film is the collapse of his Symbolic mastery, then the gaze is an  $x$  for the viewer no less than for the characters in the diegetic reality of the film.

*Moscow Parade* was shot and released on either side of the dissolution of the USSR. Its historical subject matter is the first high point in the Stalinist reappropriation of Russia's imperial identity. Rather than offering a vision of Russian identity that would transcend the Soviet experience, the film makes manifest the extent to which any inquiry into Russian identity cannot but return to the imperial center, which continues to captivate (as a Lacanian mirror image) the viewer within a dialectic between imperial past and Russian present.

This captivation is further explored through the juxtaposition of the lawyer's and the writer's most important scenes. Those who would try to change reality as it is presented in the Symbolic are confronted with the power not of Soviet reality but of the Soviet Real. This is what Mitia demonstrates in his quest to find a synonym for the word *prorva*, a word that would be the right word, the exact word to describe the topic of his latest work. That topic is "that which really exists in Russia. The thing that everyone fears but isn't there. It has no essence, it

isn't a person or a concept. It is nothingness, but nothingness that sucks everything in and destroys, like the *prorva*." [то, что на самом деле в России. Того, чего боятся все и его нет. Это условно, это не человек и не понятие. Просто ничто, но ничто, которое втягивает и уничтожает, как прорва.] Mitia's death repeats in its physical form what the lawyer experienced in his consciousness. A too close approach to the void at the center of what the lawyer had called a "Soviet attractive power" entails a collapse of the necessary support for the "reality" necessary for the individual to survive. Mitia's fall through the space of his window expresses the helplessness of the subject under whose feet the fabric of reality has been torn asunder. Mitia's attempt to find the exact right word to describe "that which really exists in Russia" is a denial of the slippage inherent in every signifier. It also sums up the hubris of a "national" literature that has accepted the task to be the spiritual guide for the nation. The writer who attempts to locate, define, and describe the substance of the nation perishes in the attempt to describe the void.

A void is also manifest in the single most conspicuous absence in the film. In a film dealing with the life of the Soviet elite in the late 1930s, it is remarkable that the Soviet dictator, Josef Stalin, is neither seen nor even mentioned. He is present at best in the guise of surrogates.<sup>29</sup> This is perhaps why the textual introduction was necessary only in prints of the film destined for the non-Russian market: the filmmakers could be confident that Russian viewers would recognize the presence of Stalin in his very absence. The appearance of the Kremlin in various shots are not manifestations of the absent leader, but rather interrogations of both the characters and the viewers alike—interrogations emanating from some unknown agent

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<sup>29</sup> Many a viewer, including at one time this author, has been fooled by the moustached figure in white who appears at the Kremlin banquet. He is at best a surrogate Stalin; his first appearance came earlier during the inspection of the stallion Rabfak, in which he appeared to acquiesce in the substitution of mare for stallion. The Leader himself is neither physically present nor omnipresent in the film's "atmosphere."

x. What is the support for your identity when the symbolic structure collapses around you? Where do you turn, when the center disappears?

If the Real is that which cannot be symbolised, if it thus demarcates the limit of symbolisation, what could it mean for the Real to be a void? While symbolisation is never complete and always leaves what Žižek often refers to as a left-over “hard kernel” resisting symbolisation, one could imagine a case in which the failure of symbolisation is indefinitely deferred. *Moscow Parade* does not directly address the fact that the Symbolic order to which its subjects must submit is that of a *totalitarian* regime. While it gestures toward the repressive nature of the regime at various points, neither the generalized atmosphere of fear nor the person of the Leader is ever directly presented on screen. This distinction, while perhaps of no relevance for psychoanalytic theory, is of greater significance for this film than it might first appear. The operation of Stalinism as the Big Other is measured by the degree to which it can pull off the appearance of a *total symbolisation*. Groys’s insistence on Stalinist art as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* dovetails perfectly with this aesthetic portrayal of a regime, the aesthetic power of which is so absolute that anything that might be beyond its beautiful appearance can only appear as a complete and total vacuum.

It remains only to wonder that the words used by the writer in the film describe a phenomenon that was described earlier in a completely different context but in remarkably similar terms. Ilya Kabakov, in an essay titled “On Emptiness,” also describes the void not simply as an empty space, but as “a particular void-like state of being, staggeringly catalyzed, but opposed to genuine existence, genuine life, serving as the absolute antipode of any living existence.” He goes on to describe this in more detail:

By such ineradicable activeness, force, and constancy, emptiness “lives,” transforming being into its antithesis, destroying construction, mystifying reality, turning all into dust and emptiness. This emptiness, I repeat, is the transferring of active

being into active nonbeing, and, most importantly, this emptiness lives and exists not by its own power, but by that life which surrounds it, which it transforms, pulverizes, collapses into itself. Emptiness adheres to, merges with, sucks being. Its mighty, adhesive, nauseating antienergy is taken from the transfer into itself, which, like vampirism, it gleams and extracts from the existence surrounding it. (92)

Kabakov, a conceptual artist close in orientation to the postmodernists described above, alludes to what is perhaps the central dilemma of post-Soviet Russian culture. Russian identity is not a simple project of construction or of reconstruction, of invention or of recuperation. Attempts to recover a lost Russian nation find not imagined communities, but an imaginary one that never existed. Attempts to construct a new post-Soviet Russian nation founder on the internal contradictions of the very concept as the imperial legacy continues to encroach upon the Russian future. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently, post-Soviet Russian culture increasingly conceives of Russian identity *as a void*, making the notion of emptiness part of its own self-definition. An examination of those various ways will be the subject of the following chapters.



## Chapter 2. Imaginary Russia

### 2.1. In Search of the Good Russia

During the six years of Gorbachev's perestroika, the attention of most cultural observers, both in the critical press and in the academy, was fixed on several related but distinct developments. With the relaxation and ultimate demise of state censorship of the arts and literature, works of literature that had been disseminated only through the extralegal mechanisms of *samizdat* and *tamizdat* were assimilated into the body of official culture over a relatively short period. Works by dissident and repressed writers "returned" from private archives or from abroad. Films came off the shelf and onto the screen, and nonconformist art could be produced and displayed openly. Russia experienced a flood of novels and films that had been produced by people who had already died or were no longer actively producing. Alongside these "returned" works were those of underground artists and writers, who had mostly never left the Soviet Union, but who had continued to work collectively or individually during the years of Stagnation and had created a distinct underground cultural sensibility. In this way, great writers from the past such as Andrei Platonov and Mikhail Bulgakov, filmmakers such as Aleksandr Askol'dov and Kira Muratova, underground writers such as Viktor Erofeev and Vladimir Sorokin, conceptual artists such as Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov and Il'ia Kabakov, and well-known emigres such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn became contemporaries in a cultural cacophony that was exhilarating and disorienting. In the context of the decaying totalitarian regime, all of the individual currents in this variegated cultural scene were consumed as elements of post-, anti-, or at the very least non-Soviet cultural orientation, regardless of the orientation of their political or ideological content.

Among the joyous celebration of the returned greats of Russian literature and the noisy debates around the new and unpleasant offerings of the young postmodernists, comparatively little attention was directed to the continuing activity of writers who had written and published within the confines of official culture throughout the Brezhnev years. In a context in which Soviet-era repression was often interpreted as a sign of artistic quality, it seemed obvious that writers who had so easily navigated the obstacles of state censorship were not worth reading or discussing at all. Several writers identified with the Village Prose movement during the 1970s and early 1980s proved to be an exception to this rule. It is significant for our purposes because Village Prose writers even during the Brezhnev years began to raise issues that would become acute as post-Soviet Russia began to look for a post-imperial identity; Village Prose writers looked to history and to the Russian countryside in an attempt to recover a Russian essence that seemed to have been lost by rapid urbanization and a forgetting of historical roots.

Culture actually seemed to be running ahead of politics in 1985, a year in which several significant works were published and later reinterpreted as forerunners or omens of coming social changes. The two works that would later be most often cited as harbingers of perestroika were *A Sad Detective Story* [*Pechal'nyi detektiv*] by Viktor Astaf'ev and *The Fire* [*Pozhar*] by Valentin Rasputin.<sup>30</sup> Both of these works represented new developments for their authors: although the two works continued to develop themes present in the earlier, more canonical works of Village Prose, the general tone of these later works grew increasingly pessimistic, aggressive, and angry.

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<sup>30</sup> A full discussion of these two works and their larger significance would have to include an evaluation of the phenomenon of “village prose” [*derevenskaia proza*] in Soviet-Russian literary history. The single most informative treatment of the phenomenon is the monograph by Kathleen Parthé. She discusses the movement with reference to what she calls its “core characteristics”: “childhood, attention to language, generational and cyclical time, memory, and loss” (5). For the purposes of the present discussion, Parthé’s list of characteristics happens to run in order of increasing importance.

Both Astafev and Rasputin put a great deal of their own personal concerns and ordeals into their fictional narratives. The hero of *A Sad Detective Story* is a retired law-enforcement officer, Soshnin, who has now become a full-time writer. He laments throughout the fact that Russian society has lost its spiritual values, a sentiment that in itself was already a commonplace of Village Prose. Specifically, crime is seen not as a social phenomenon to be battled, but as a disease of Russia's soul. This disease has manifested itself on another, more personal level in the breakup of Soshnin's family life. He believes that the main cause of the general social decay is the lost connection between present and past, and between ancestors and descendants. These well-worn sentiments were laced with a new sharp edge in the guise of frequent attacks on intellectuals and alcoholics (in addition to and distinct from the social phenomenon of alcoholism), an unpleasant tone of self-righteousness, and a pervasive suggestion of anti-Semitism.

The sharp bitterness is even more obviously and clumsily pronounced in Rasputin's *The Fire*. This book was apparently conceived as a kind of sequel to his 1979 masterpiece of Village Prose, *Farewell to Matera*.<sup>31</sup> Whereas *Matera* depicted the tragic but nonetheless dignified last rites and rituals of an old and organic society doomed to oblivion by industrial progress, *The Fire* suggests the subsequent fate of individual inhabitants who have been uprooted and settled in a rural Soviet town. The disruption of ancient social bonds has led to gradual moral corruption among the mass of the people. It is this general social decay that makes possible mob rule by a gang of thugs: the thugs have not seized power, but have rather taken it by default. As with Astafev's novel, social ills such as petty thievery, parasitism, and poor labor discipline are seen

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<sup>31</sup> This best known work by Rasputin tells of the final days of an island that is to be completely submerged by the construction of a hydroelectric plant. The fictional but all too true-to-life depiction of the way in which Soviet industrialization destroyed both human communities and natural habitats contributed to Rasputin's growing role as a public advocate for protection of Russia's natural environment, particularly its rivers.

as resulting from the moral decay and corruption of the individual members of a human collective. Rasputin's anger toward the evildoers, sometimes bordering on outright hatred, comes through in the authorial meditations that punctuate the struggle against the (un)natural disaster of the fire.<sup>32</sup>

One of the great controversies surrounding the afterlife of the Soviet-Russian Village Prose movement is the question of what role it played in the rise of recent anti-Semitism and virulent nationalist movements. The issue will return in this discussion of post-Soviet Russian identity construction, but the particular political effect of this cultural trend will not concern us here. More relevant at this juncture is a curious moment that occurs in both of the works under discussion: each of these angry and pessimistic works ends with an unexpected and strange moment of almost mystical optimism. When Astaf'ev's Soshnin finds his immediate family restored to wholeness, he apparently sees in this a possibility of renewal, which in turn leads to the restoration of his ability to create as a writer (Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* 105–06). Similarly, Rasputin's Ivan Petrovich decides to retire and move to join his son and daughter-in-law, who have apparently settled in an idyllic village in the Far East, in which the old ties have not been broken. In both cases, there is a suggestion that it might be possible to restore the Russian social body to health. But in the context of the attacks on contemporary society that characterize the rest of these works, such optimism seems rather unconvincing.

In order to understand more fully the significance of these two works of “post-Village Prose,” it will be instructive to look at one of the earliest examples and, perhaps, a founding text of the movement: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's early story “Matrena's House” [“Matrenin dvor”].

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<sup>32</sup> A lone positive hero's struggle against the forces of nature was a staple of Soviet Socialist-Realist novels during both the 1930s and the post-war period (see Clark, particularly Chapters 3 and 9). By strongly suggesting that this fire is the result of human malice or catastrophic negligence in a community deformed by state social engineering, the novella both reinterprets and parodies one of Soviet literature's most productive tropes.

This famous story ends with the identification of Matrena as the righteous person without whom no village, city, or country can stand. This is also a surprising turn in the narrative, for there had been no foreshadowing of such an ending. Matrena is characterized throughout the story as an eccentric old woman who dies tragically through the fault both of her own nature and her relatives' greed. The ending of the story is a pointer to her values which stand in contrast to both the official ideology and the social mores of the time. She brings no material benefit to those around her, nor is she a productive member of society in any material sense that Soviet ideology would value. Only after her death, as he listens to the derogatory remarks of the sister-in-law, does Ignatykh come to a realization of Matrena's true worth:

All of her opinions about Matrena were unfavorable: she was a slob, she didn't keep up the household or treat her things with care. She didn't even raise a piglet on her property; for some reason she didn't like to feed it. And she was a fool; she would help out strangers for nothing....

And although the sister-in-law acknowledged Matrena's simplicity and sincerity, she spoke even of that with disparaging regret.

[Все отзывы ее о Матрене были неодобрительны: и нечистоплотная она была; и за обзаводом не гналась; и не бережная; и даже поросенка не держала, выкармливать почему-то не любила; и глупая, помогала чужим людям бесплатно . . . .

И даже о сердечности и простоте Матрены, которые золовка за ней признавала, она говорила с презрительным сожалением. (258)]

The narrator takes over for the rest of this final page of the story:

And only now, listening to the carping of her sister-in-law, did there rise up before me the image of the Matrena I did not understand even while living side by side with her. Indeed! After all, every peasant hut has a piglet! But hers did not. What could be simpler than to fatten up a hungry piglet that recognizes nothing in this world except food. Boil some food three times a day for it, live for its sake, and then slaughter it for the lard.

But she did not have one...

She didn't care for the household...

She didn't care for her clothes...

Misunderstood and abandoned even by her own husband, having buried her six children, not very talkative, a mystery to her sisters and sisters-in-law, ridiculous, foolishly working for others without remuneration—she did not save up things for her death. A dirty-white goat, a lame cat, rubber plants...

We lived right there next to her and did not understand that she is that righteous one without whom, as the proverb goes, no village can stand.

Nor city.

Nor any part of this land of ours.

[И только тут — из этих неодобрительных отзывов золовки — выплыл передо мною образ Матерны, какой я не понимал ее, даже живя с нею бок о бок.

В самом деле! — ведь поросенок-то в каждой избе! А у нее не было. Что может быть легче — выкармливать жадного поросенка, ничего в мире не признающего, кроме еды!

Трижды в день варить ему, жить для него — и потом зарезать и иметь сало.

А она не имела . . .

Не гналась за обзаводом . . .

Не гналась за нарядами.

Не понятая и брошенная даже мужем своим, схоронившая шесть детей, но не нрав свой общительный, чужая сестрам, золовкам, смешная, по-глупому работающая на других бесплатно, — она не скопила имущества к смерти. Грязно-белая коза, колченогая кошка, фикусы . . .

Все мы жили рядом с ней и не поняли, что есть она тот самый праведник, без которого, по пословице, не стоит село.

Ни город.

Ни вся земля наша. (258–59)]

Matrena embodies the ethic of the kenotic strain of Orthodox Christianity, the practitioners of which were known for their humility and poverty (see Fedotov xiv–xv). She stands against the ideology of socialism, which mandated that the means of production be kept out of private hands. Matrena is a radical non-possessor; poverty is her mode of existence. Solzhenitsyn's development as a writer would follow a very different path from the more canonical village prose writers, and Matrena represents a character type that we do not see in the

later novellas of Rasputin and Astafev. Solzhenitsyn does, however, share with the village prose writers a profound anxiety over the fate of these righteous ones. The singular number in the closing sentence of the story suggests that Matrena is the last of her kind.

Much of Solzhenitsyn's later *oeuvre* is concerned with the fate of the community after the last righteous Matrena has passed. Although much of his writing after his forced exile in 1974 has been devoted to rebuilding a new Russia, a sense of loss has remained a recurring theme in his writing. After the Soviet collapse, his writings and speeches begin addressing themes of emptiness and loss in a much more pointed way. In one surprising attack on postmodernism in Russia, Solzhenitsyn accuses the new avant-garde of committing the same crimes as the earlier modernists: they are both essentially destructive, tearing down centuries-old traditions for the sake of some great leap forward.<sup>33</sup> Their method was and is an empty pursuit of novel forms for its own ends. Their revolution gave the avant-garde its true calling, which was to "uproot life itself." The postmodernists of Solzhenitsyn's own time compare poorly even with the futurists, for while postmodernists maintain the destructive impulse, the dynamism and single-mindedness has been replaced with a childish self-indulgence. His rant against their "emptiness of heart" takes them to task for indulging in the very emptiness that his prose embodied in the 1960s, although his emptiness purported to have a real, if ineffable content.

One year later, Solzhenitsyn attempted a historiographic treatment of "The Russian Question" ["Русский вопрос в конце столетия"]. According to this argument, Russia has wasted its time trying to win an empire, for the empire merely drains away energy that should have been used for Russia's own advantage. It also caused the social splits that characterize

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<sup>33</sup> The argument summarized here is made in the 1993 polemic "The Relentless Cult of Novelty and How It Wrecked the Century." A fascinating debate developed between Solzhenitsyn and the fiction writer Tatiana Tolstaya, who was then living in emigration. The discussion was all the more interesting due to the fact that Tolstaya's literary and journalistic writings also allude very strongly to the emptiness of Russian identity, albeit from the other side of a yawning artistic divide.

Russia to this day. Thus, Russia and her people have been slowly destroyed throughout Russian history, not merely by the Soviet experience. Gorbachev's perestroika reform becomes the "end" of the Russian people. Who are the Russians now? Russians are, on the one hand, the scapegoats who are being made to bear the guilt for bringing oppression upon the former Soviet nationalities, and, on the other hand, the new diaspora, the 25 million ethnic Russians dispersed over the length and breadth of Eurasia. Russians are those who may no longer exhibit any form of patriotism because it will immediately be equated with fascism. At every instance we find Solzhenitsyn defining Russians by virtue of the features they have lost, or by the wrongs done to them through which they have lost what little identity and essence they had. In short, we find in this essay the same structure that we found in "Matrena's House." Russians become visible only in the act of disappearing.

Solzhenitsyn's curious conviction that there is a thousand-year-old "Russia" that can and ought to be kept distinct from the historical Russian empire is an attractive and useful way of thinking for those who seek to recover a lost Russian identity to replace the discredited Soviet imperial construct. He is a significant and distinctive example of a discourse that continues to seek the real Russia hidden by inhuman urbanization, cultural perversion, ecological and social mismanagement, and the loss of familial roots and ties. These patterns of thinking continue to operate in post-Soviet Russia as cultural producers try to make sense of, explain, and cure a damaged society.

## **2.2. Corrupted Russia.**

The nostalgic impulse in post-Soviet culture can be traced through many kinds of cultural artifacts even before the formal collapse of the Soviet regime. Two made-for-television documentaries by Stanislav Govorukhin found significant resonance among viewers and



demonstrated how deep was the longing for the imagined wholeness of the past. His 1990 film *It Is Impossible To Live Like This* [*Tak zhit' nel'zia*] clearly intended to nail shut the coffin of the Soviet corpse and it succeeded in this endeavor as much as any single work of culture during these final months of Soviet power. At first glance, Govorukhin seems to be performing two more exercises in the perestroika project of filling in the “blanks of our history.” But his narrative strategy is quite different. He begins with the present and asks “what have we become?” His first topic is, thus, the rampant criminality of Russian society in the early 1990s. Corruption, violent crime, and juvenile delinquency constitute Govorukhin’s starting point. His story is the moral degradation of an entire people.

The second film, *The Russia We Have Lost* [*Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali*] (1992) did not have nearly the social resonance of the first film, perhaps because it was difficult for any cultural event to draw attention from the economic and political changes underway at the time. Furthermore, the later film is more “educational” on its surface, while the first engaged in more sensationalistic effects. In this way, the impulse of the first film becomes more comprehensible only after the second film had been made, and it makes sense to read the two documentaries in reverse chronological order so as to get at Govorukhin’s somewhat obscure message.

*The Russia We Have Lost* begins with the lament that Russia has no history. Not in the literal sense, but in the sense that Russians no longer know where they have come from. The old chestnut of Russia as a mysterious, unknown country has become an actual fact simply because Russians themselves do not know their own story. Govorukhin has no intention of retelling the story of Russia from Riurik to the present day. For this particular history teacher, only one period matters: the last years of Imperial Russia, the eve of the October Revolution. It is not difficult to ascertain why this period in particular interests the filmmaker. As we have seen, it was around the turn of the century that the government attempted, too little and too late, to instill

a sense of Russian “nationhood” in the population of the Empire. Govorukhin siezes on this moment in the history of the Empire and blames the Revolution for cutting short what should have been a successful (and peaceful?) evolution from Russian *Empire* to Russian *nation-state*.

The narrative is a series of mini-lessons centering on the critical points and personalities of this period: Stolypin, the European War, the end of the Romanovs, Lenin, the Bolshivik terror and its consequences. The most striking moment of authorial interpretation is the portrayal of Late Imperial Russia as some kind of lost golden age. The year 1913 is distinguished as a year in which Russia fed half of Europe, had a booming industry, built the most effective and powerful army on the continent, was reforming its social structures, boasted almost universal literacy, and supported a Tsar whose only possible fault was that he “loved his family too much.” For viewers familiar with the events that would follow, these magical depictions have all the verisimilitude of the Garden of Eden, and their narrative function is the same. Imperial Russia is the necessary mythical basis with which Russia begins the story of its own identity.<sup>34</sup>

The moralizing core of the film is the discussion of the Red Terror. The Soviet regime created a new anthropological type of human being. The Party officially tolerated and even promoted immorality over bourgeois morality, and the lowest strata of society thus supported the new social order and became a “dark force” in the service of the Bolsheviks. The Terror was a

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<sup>34</sup> In a remarkably insightful observation, Natal'ia Sirivlia has outlined the way in which Govorukhin's narrative follows in its broad contours and tiniest minutiae the aesthetics borne of the ideology he will so bitterly curse: “The curious thing is the following: in what fine detail and with what precision the utopian form of prerevolutionary Russia represented in the film repeats the contours of social utopia of the purest Soviet, Stalinist type” [“Здесь любопытно другое: с какой точностью до деталей утопический образ дореволюционной России, созданный в фильме, повторяет очертания социальной утопии чисто советского, сталинского типа”] (Sirivlia, “Tri pesni o Rodine” 30). Indeed, no mention is made of Russia's philosophers, the Russian Orthodox Church, Silver Age Culture, or any of the other aspects of early 20th century Russian culture that would be among the first victims of the Soviet *revanche*. Govorukhin seems to take pains to prove that Russian industry, military power, and working-class welfare had already outdone the Bolsheviks in fulfillment of their own program.

systematic plan to eliminate the most conscious and active parts of Russian society, those parts that might possibly offer resistance to the regime. The terror hit the clergy and the intelligentsia particularly hard. Lenin's declared policy was to kill as many of them as possible. "The worst governed the best... minus replaced plus," intones the filmmaker cum narrator, describing what he called the "degeneration of the people."

At this point the film cuts back to the present. The Russian people have become nothing but Lumpen, because this is all that has survived. Today's Russians are that dark destructive power created by Lenin, a power that once again only awaits a Leader ruthless enough to mobilize it. The closing scenes, emphasizing the physical squalor and economic decay resulting from contemporary reforms, purportedly show us the "spiritual death" of Russia. The true Leninist legacy is Russia's willingness to destroy its own people through an endless procession of social experiments.

Govorukhin's final exhortation at the end of the film is surprising in its banality. He pleads with his fellow Russians to join in the struggle to fight crime and stop the systematic pauperization of the country. For someone like Govorukhin, whose concern for moral and spiritual issues is well known, this call for mere crimefighting and social welfare is almost like a declaration of surrender. After this film, no one can return to a project of filling in blanks in history, hoping to recover some golden past. There is nothing to recover. Russia is lost; the perfective aspect of the verb *poteriali* [lost] here is final.<sup>35</sup> The criminality depicted in the opening scenes of the earlier film is the conclusion reached by the end of the later one, and some of the more topical themes of *Impossible to Live* serve to illustrate the degree to which the Russian people have spiritually destroyed themselves.

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<sup>35</sup> This was of course also what struck a chord in the popular imagination. For months after this film's appearance, the popular magazine *Ogonek* began a series of historical profiles, each one the cover story of its particular issue and appearing under the rubric "The Russia We Have Lost."

The lumpenization of the Russian people is the greatest evil and presents the state with its most daunting task. The amusing footage of law enforcement by Chicago police portray the racial problems of American society as an issue far less serious than the physical and moral decay of the Russian people. The last few sequences of the film seem to be an artificial add-on that is not fully integrated into the larger documentary, but they provide an interesting counterweight to Govorukhin's general pessimism. The unification of Germany provides an image of a nation renewing its sense of national identity and national pride. More important, however, is the short and ambiguous discussion of the ethnic violence in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. It is clear that the other constituent "nations" of the Soviet Union have not become so denatured as the Russians, and Govorukhin strongly suggests that it is the meddling of the Union's Russian-dominated military that exacerbates the bloodshed. Govorukhin's own political position on the future of the former subjects of the empire is not clear.

Finally, it must be noted that the very short third part of *Impossible To Live* is devoted to an explication of the full meaning of the film's title. The Russian title is ambiguous and can be translated into English in at least two different ways. *You/One Musn't Live Like This* can be understood either as a lament on the sorry state of society, or as an imperative addressed to the viewers as implied interlocutors. It is best understood as expressing both meanings, but Govorukhin is at great pains to make clear the allusion to Chaadaev, the nineteenth-century Russian "madman" whose First Philosophical Letter has already been examined in the previous chapter. Russia's mission and purpose is to serve as a warning to the rest of the world: let us be the example to the world of how *not to live*. *Do not live as we do*.

### 2.3. Identifying Russia

All the texts and films we have examined thus far attempt in one way or another to rescue from oblivion a Russia, the existence of which the reader or viewer is apparently asked to take on faith. There is no doubt that many in Russia would continue, in the spirit of Tiutchev, “simply to believe.” But this does not suffice for an articulation of just what Russia is today. Russian’s seem to have no problem speaking of themselves as “Russian” and of articulating notions of “we” and “our” as opposed to the foreign and the “not ours.” How can we describe and articulate the process of identification as we move from the individual to the collective? How do we delineate the collective?

Sigmund Freud attempted to articulate the problem in an abstract form in his discussion of the psychology of groups. Freud moved quickly and seamlessly from his initial discoveries of the human unconscious to phenomena such as ego formation and identification. Freud taught that identification takes place through a process by which libidinal objects (parents in the first place, then other authority figures, and, finally, objects of sexual interest) are internalized or introjected, ultimately becoming part of the sedimentation that forms the contours in the individual ego. At a later stage in his work, Freud went on to describe how this process of identification led to the emergence of the *ego-ideal*, a kind of higher authority that detaches itself from the ego and becomes an agency that the ego tries to live up to. In his book on *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud shows how his observations on individual psychic processes can help to explain the behavior and cohesion of people within social bonds:

First, identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object; secondly, in a regressive way it becomes a substitute for a libidinal object-tie, as it were by means of introjection of the object into the ego; and thirdly, it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of the sexual instinct. The more important this common

quality is, the more successful may this partial identification become, and it may thus represent the beginning of a new tie (50).

The processes of identification lead to ties that bind the members of social groups to each other and to ties that bind these members to an individual leader. The two bonds must both be operative in order to forge group identity. His discussion of how individual symptoms can be “shared” among neurotic patients provides the final element that allows Freud to describe how a group can form a distinctive character around the ego-ideal provided by an inspirational leader.

Unlike Freud, Jacques Lacan makes explicit the distinction between the ego and the subject, a distinction that was implicit but not clearly formulated in Freud’s writings. The mirror stage is the moment in which the ego takes on a form reflected back to it in the mirror image. This image is both constitutive of identity but also profoundly alienating, for it is always “out there,” and it produces a psychic structure in which aggression must be an essential part, for the subject will necessarily be structured as a rival to itself (“Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis” 95). Although identity will later be abstracted on the Symbolic plane, this Imaginary quality of identification will always continue to operate. Imaginary identification constructs the ego, but only symbolic identification constructs the subject. Lacan believed that identification can never end with the successful assumption of a stable identity. The attempt always fails and the best one can achieve is a series of identifications rather than an achieved identity. This seems to hold for group identities as well as individual identity: “Since the objects of identification in adult life include political ideologies and other socially constructed objects, the process of identification is revealed as constitutive of socio-political life. It is not identity which is constitutive but identification as such; instead of identity politics we should speak of identification politics” (Stavrakakis 30).

In the Imaginary, the primary relationship is the imaginary relationship to the mother. Symbolic identification begins with the “intervention” of the Name-of-the-Father, the primary

signifier. This signifier destroys the relationship between the mother and child. "... there has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order, the intervention of the order of speech, that is, of the father. Not the natural father, but what is called the father. The order that prevents the collision and explosion of the situation as a whole is founded on the existence of this name of the father" (Lacan, *Seminar III* 96). As Stavrakakis notes, "... the role of the signifier instituting the symbolic order for the subject, the role of the Name-of-the-Father, is both prohibitive, since it demands something from the subject, but also productive, since it makes possible the emergence of the subject of the signifier in its relation to the order of symbolic reality" (32). The link of the primary signifier, the catalyst for symbolic identification and the incarnation of the subject, to the paternal function has far-reaching implications for the ways in which a collective identity might be worked through in the culture of a state, an ethnic group, or a political movement.<sup>36</sup> The movement from the concrete image to symbolic abstraction will be crucial in determining the nature of a social group's national, historical, cultural, or political identity.

The structure of the specular other operates in the social body in essentially the same way as it does at the level of the individual psyche. In the context of a process that involves both aggression and libidinal attachment, the collective social body must find either a scapegoat (i.e., antisemitism in Nazi Germany) against which to rally opposition or an ideal to internalize or with which to identify. It is good to take the German example as a warning to proceed with caution. Hal Foster, theorist of postmodern culture, considers the Lacanian "I" of the mirror stage to be historically bound to the fascist subject. This is almost certainly valid up to a point.

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<sup>36</sup> A full discussion of these topics would require an analysis of Lacan's specific and ideosyncratic conception of the Oedipus complex and the meaning of the phallus. The question as to whether Lacanian theory *interprets and explains*, is *caught up in*, or perhaps even *is produced by* patriarchy is one that ought to be confronted more often than it is. To assert the validity of the first claim (as the present work will do) is not to deny the likelihood that the second and third claims acknowledge forces that continue to operate not only in society at large but in Lacan-oriented social theory as well.

It does not, however, lead to the suggestion that all conservatives in Russia manifest a fascist personality or ideology.

An interesting variant on the concept of collective scapegoat is Slavoj Žižek's concept of the other as ideological support for the "national fantasy."<sup>37</sup> This is part of Žižek's conception of ideology in which there is a structural necessity for some outsider or "other" to be constructed as an enemy, a wrecker, an explanation, suture, or "cover-up" for those moments where ideology fails and its character of falsehood is exposed. We have already seen how some writers of a nationalist orientation have identified foreign culture as a poison that corrupts the Russian social body. In the 1990s, a large number of films deal very specifically with Russia's difficult relationship to cultural others within the borders of the Russian and Soviet empires. The last chapter dealt with the obstacles these *rossiiane*, the non-Russian subjects/citizens of the state, present to any attempt to create a post-Soviet Russian nation-state. Contrary to what might be expected according to psychoanalytically informed political theories, the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia do not always play the role of scapegoat or collective enemy in the way that, for example, Jews served as a fantasy support for Nazi ideology (as claimed by Žižek in his famous discussion in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*). Several films made in Russia during the second half of the 1990s reveal that ethnic and religious minorities can just as easily take on the role of libidinal object.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This is most famously worked out in the first chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, but more specifically in the concluding chapter to *Tarrying With the Negative*.

<sup>38</sup> This does not in any way imply the ridiculous counterclaim that representatives of the ethnic groups from the southern frontiers of the Russian Federation, bearers of the old Soviet epithet *natsmeny*, have not continued to bear the brunt of often virulent ethnic hatred. War in Chechnya; aggressive military intervention in the internal conflicts of several of the New Independent States in the Caucasus and Central Asia; and pervasive discrimination and harrassment by civil authorities in Russian cities, particularly in Moscow, have been a feature of Russian conduct throughout the 1990s. I claim only that these ethnic groups, including even the Chechens, have not (yet!) become *the focus* through which an ideological narrative of nationalist



## 2.4. Bad Russia

Vladimir Khotinenko's 1995 film *The Muslim* [*Musul'manin*] was widely interpreted by the critics as a film about tolerance, specifically about religious tolerance. It was felt perhaps by some to be forcing a non-Russian idea down the throats of Russian viewers.<sup>39</sup> The film, however, is much more than a plea for tolerance. It represents the failed encounter with the mirror image, only here on the level of an entire community. It tells the story of a Russian POW who returns to his home town from many years in captivity in Afghanistan, during which he adopted the Islamic faith. The return of "our own" who is no longer "our own" represents a

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exculpation can be spun—i.e., "if not for the Chechens, our own national crises of economic stagnation, drug abuse, corruption, urban crime, loss of spirituality, x, y, and z as well, would never have arisen."

Aleksandr Nevzorov's notorious 1997 film *Purgatory* [*Chistilishche*], provides an exception to prove the rule. Nevzorov's version of Russia's first massive military incursion into Grozny cannot sustain itself merely on the purported outrages of the indigenous population. The story told in *Purgatory* of heroic Russian soldiers under attack is a veritable chamber of horrors constructed out of the paranoid fears of a collective unconscious. As clearly as in any Freudian dream analysis, the disintegrating parts of the old Soviet–Russian empire return to haunt and to taunt a traumatized Russia that has lost not only its territorial integrity but perhaps, more importantly, its will to survive. As in a dream, the identities of the various enemies are indistinct; their languages, behaviors, and methods of killing are juxtaposed in a confusing chaos. Only their malevolence is beyond doubt. Despite Nevzorov's insistent claims that his film reflects only that to which he was an eyewitness, and despite the fact that outsiders (mercenaries and members of international Muslim movements) have almost certainly been participants in the Chechen conflict, this fantastic constellation of Lithuanian sniperettes (who unerringly hit Russia's weakest spot), African (-Americans? mercenaries? Muslim fanatics?) barbarians with a sadistic proclivity to beheadings, partisans more interested in crucifying Russian soldiers than in defending their land, is clearly more a product of the author's mind than a document of historical record. Strangely, all of these antagonists find opportunity to taunt and ridicule the Russians for the incompetence and cruelty of the military command in Moscow—a significant function of all these monstrous figures is, remarkably, to lip-sync Nevzorov's authorial voice.

<sup>39</sup> The early reviews of this film were mostly negative and understood it not merely as a plea for tolerance but as an attempt to compare Christianity with Islam from an anti-Russian standpoint, or, more radically, as a crudely ideological film.

challenge to the village inhabitants. They react to his conversion at first with confusion but then with growing hostility. His rejection of their cultural values challenges the viewer to define the specific elements of Russian culture in question.

The returned soldier, Nikolai Ivanov, has taken a new Muslim name in captivity, but is invariably called “Kolia” in the film. Despite his Afghan prayer shawl and hat, his physical appearance, in particular his face, bears no marks of his change in religious identity (Figure 2). His Russianness is stressed visually at many points early in the film. We see several full frontal shots of his face framed much as an icon might frame the face of a Christian saint. A photograph of his face is also seen in a newspaper clipping kept by a mysterious stranger who is following



Figure 2

him around the village, apparently preparing to kill him. As he interacts with his family and neighbors, we are constantly reminded that he once was a member of this society, embedded in its web of familial and social relations. However, he remains strangely silent, speaking only with his mother (and Allah) for nearly the first twenty minutes of the film. His relationship with his mother is the one

familial bond that seems relatively intact. His relationship with his brother, Fedia, is characterized by hostility almost from the outset. Their sibling rivalry is but an extreme form of the hostility that many members of the community feel toward Kolia as they see that he no longer shares their life and values. It is significant that Fedia alone has the ability to elicit an aggressive and eventually violent reaction from Kolia himself.

The film rejects the notion that the hope for Russian redemption springs from the village. This village is portrayed as a nest of decay and corruption within a beautiful Russian

countryside. The conflicts between Kolia and the villagers serve to highlight the ways in which the village has become a ruin. Kolia's refusal to consume alcohol makes clear the degree to which alcoholism is rampant. His lack of interest in material possessions draws attention to the central role that money and economics play in the life of the village. His resistance to an old girlfriend's sexual advances highlight the widespread collapse of traditional morality. The sources of the town's corruption are several; there is no one single culprit. Western culture and western market economics play their part, as do stereotypical Russian vices. When Kolia refuses to help his family steal lumber from a state enterprise, his mother takes offence and reminds him that it is the Soviet state that led them to the poverty from which they now cannot escape.

The people have no spiritual resources with which to oppose the corruption around them. In particular, Kolia's fidelity to Islamic law and practice lay bare the faint influence that Orthodox Christianity has on the lives of the people. The village priest is a curious figure, visually identified more with the open landscape than with any church building or religious celebrations. His fidelity to his religious practices is part of his character and he is quite alone in his adherence to the laws of the Church. He has no more influence on the village than the speech-impaired shepherd, who is visually identified with the lake and the pagan legends surrounding it.

In the context of the film's thematics, this Russian identity is most clearly seen in Christian culture, given physical substance in the insitution of the Russian Orthodox Church. The community's hostility to Kolia is born of its resistance to acknowledging the fact that its decaying village had long ago ceased to embody Orthodox Christian society with any intergrity.

The direct hostile confrontations between Islam and Christianity do not involve the village priest at all. They involve Kolia's conflict with his brother and his final meeting with the mysterious stranger. One of the several violent conflicts between the two brothers begins with

Fedia's attempt at reconciliation. Kolia's refusal to kiss an Orthodox icon leads to another rupture and fistfight. Fedia is unable to accept Kolia's adherence to a religious law that forbids ritual veneration of the familiar cultural images of Orthodoxy. He is unable to accept adherence to an abstract law, due at least in part to the fact that the abstract law of Christianity has long since ceased to operate in this village community. The conflict between the two brothers continues and can only continue to repeat the structure of aggressivity in specular identification described by Lacan in his early writing on identification, which I will discuss in more detail below.

The mysterious stranger turns out to be the political commissar of the military unit in which Kolia served. Believing Kolia guilty of betrayal, the former commissar has come to execute the criminal. The commissar, however, agent of a political regime that has disappeared, must also find a new identity and, like Kolia, has found it in religion. His acceptance of Christianity, based on a reading of the New Testament, seems at first to be more promising than Fedia's veneration of an icon. The two men have in some sense travelled parallel paths. However, the stranger also insists that Kolia make the sign of the cross, an outwardly visible gesture that is not only a sign but also an image important to an Orthodox Christian. The inability of imaginary identification to transcend the boundary between the concrete image and the abstract sign leads inevitably and inescapably to Kolia's death.<sup>40</sup>

Khotinenko's film represented the Russian encounter with the Muslim other as mediated through the Russian soldier Ivanov. One year later, Sergei Bodrov's 1996 film *Prisoner of the Mountains* [*Kavkazskii plennik*] represented a direct encounter. Unlike Khotinenko's story,

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<sup>40</sup> His final word, "Mama," uttered here as a repetition of his first word in the film, illustrates how firmly the imaginary continues to rule even within Kolia's own psyche. His daily prayers—a linguistic system and, thus, essentially symbolic—remain completely separate from daily life. The symbolic functions for Kolia primarily as a refuge from the banality of Russian village life or, at best, as a way to transcend it. The notion that anyone in the village could perhaps understand the essence of his prayer life apparently never enters his mind.

Sergei Bodrov makes use of one of the most productive motifs of 19th-century Russian literature. The ethnic groups of the Caucasus in particular have always served as one of Russia's most important "others."

The encounter between Russia and the Caucasus has been almost always antagonistic, but more a case of fascination than genuine enmity.<sup>41</sup> It has been noted that the Caucasus theme in literature has long been associated with the notion of captivity, and this notion can be understood both literally and figuratively. Alongside the historical incidents of hostage-taking from the eighteenth century to the present, one can trace the way in which the Russian imagination has been "captivated" by the Caucasus theme. Literary portrayals begin with Aleksandr Pushkin's 1822 poem "Prisoner of the Caucasus" ["Kavkazskii plennik"] and continue with Mikhail Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* [*Geroi nashego vremeni*] and Lev Tolstoy's "Prisoner of the Caucasus" ["Kavkazskii plennik"]. The basic narrative involves a Russian male from the nobility taken prisoner by some rebellious Caucasus tribe (the Chechens have figured prominently since the beginning), who becomes romantically involved with a local girl. The girl is willing to risk her place in her own society to help the Russian, who for his part returns to Russia in the end having experienced some kind of inward change, a more profound sense of his own identity. The romantic liason is portrayed in such a way that ethnic loyalties are questioned and always in danger of redefinition. The encounter takes on the character of an essential rite of passage for members of the ruling elite of the Russian empire.

Although historical surveys of Russian literature give the impression that the Caucasus thematic line was self-sufficient in the hands of Russia's great writers, Thomas Barrett has shown the extent to which the Caucasus theme was nourished both by historical events and by

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<sup>41</sup> Susan Layton's recent book on the subject examines the complex political, military, and cultural aspects of this relationship during the time in which Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoi created their literary treatments of it.

the popular imagination. Abductions for ransom had been a feature of Russia's long engagement in the Caucasus from the mid-eighteenth century. The kidnapping and eventual russification of the son of Imam Shamil illustrated as well as any literary work how complex the cultural relations between Russia and the Caucasus had already become. Even more significant was the capture of Shamil himself in 1859. This not only marked a major milestone in the military struggle for control of the region. Shamil was brought to Russia, taken on tour, and literally put on display in many Russian cities, where this highest-ranking "Caucasian prisoner" was seen by increasingly admiring crowds (Barrett 84). He became a kind of popular folk hero in the very heart of the empire against which he fought so long. Russian historians and storytellers showed a remarkable ability to absorb the narrative of freedom fighters on the periphery of the realm into the grand narrative of Russian civilization. At the price of obliterating the voice of the Caucasian other, Russia added the culture, traditions, and even the very history of these mountain-dwelling tribes to its own complex sense of self-identity.

The role played by Islam in the resistance to Russian domination made it easy to see in the conflict a great clash of world views. The stubborn and proud resistance of the Caucasus inflicted terrible casualties on the poorly equipped Russian military. The seemingly unbridgeable enmity between the two great religions and the high cost of the war led many both then and now to wonder why Russia was so interested in conquering the Caucasus in the first place. Russia's rulers and military generals consistently and completely underestimated the skill of the mountain warriors and the strength of their spirit. Through arrogance and concern for short-term political gain, Russia wandered into conflicts that could be won only at a staggering cost. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 illustrated the longevity of this pattern of behavior. Once again, guerilla warfare tactics combined with the unbreakable spirit of *jihad* confronted Soviet Russia with what should have been recognized from the very start as a familiar

and deadly configuration. Thus, long before Vladimir Putin's enlistment as ally in the US-led "war on terrorism," the quagmire of Afghanistan had confirmed Russia's conception of a violent, implacable, and increasingly militarized Islam spanning two continents from Chechnya and Daghestan to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Russian literature's romantic fascination with the Caucasus in the nineteenth century thus returned in a reconfigured form in post-Soviet culture. Geopolitical events and the political effects of rising Islamic fundamentalism brought Central Asia, despite its very different history, into a single conceptual framework with the more familiar Caucasus narratives as Russia struggled to come to grips with the challenges of ethnic conflicts both new and old. The increasing importance of ethnic and religious conflict in recent cinema, in particular, has made itself felt not simply in the appearance of politicized films reflecting a crudely nationalistic position, but in several significant works containing a meditation on Russia's continuing "coming to terms" with an ethnic other that is neither fully internal nor fully external.

Although shooting for Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Mountains* began several months before the first post-Soviet Russian invasion of Chechnya, by the time the film was released its reception was defined by the new military context. Critics saw the film as playing to western audiences and ignoring the specific circumstances of Russia's new relationship to its rebellious republic.<sup>42</sup> This film also addresses the question of Russia's identity *vis-à-vis* its Muslim neighbors. The context is guerilla warfare; the image of the other is not merely alienating but

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<sup>42</sup> By 1996, the term "political correctness," calqued directly from American English and carrying with it the American neo-conservative spin, had become firmly established in Russian intellectual discourse, where it was even more poorly defined than on North American university campuses. Almost every critic who reviewed Bodrov's film disingenuously complimented the director on his thoroughgoing PC-ness, thus preparing the way for a summary dismissal of the work as a liberal-democratic ornament for the international film-festival circuit that ignored "our Russian specifics." In Russia, no less than in the United States, *politkorrektnost'* had become a perfect example and illustration of both the Lacanian empty signifier and a rhetorically effective *point de capiton*.

explicitly alien. Nevertheless, a fascination with the foreign society is present in this film as well. The mountain people are incomprehensible to the Russians in a very literal sense. Their religion, their language, their traditions, and their rituals are completely inaccessible. While the incomprehensible other is a threat, it cannot be made simply into a faceless enemy. The foreign culture provides an illusion of full identity, an other that lacks nothing. While this to some degree enacts once again the alienating mechanism of imaginary identification, there is something more present here. The mountain society is characterized by the operation of an iron law and system of authority.

At no point in the film do we see the indigenous inhabitants of the region engaging in random violence. Although the presence of the two Russian prisoners makes the community anxious, their captor, Abdul Murat, refuses to have them killed. The community is portrayed as a remarkably harmonious one, ruled by religious ritual and traditional loyalties. Traditional authority within the community is respected and seems to be part of the organic functioning of the social body. Music and dance are seen as an inherent part of daily life, adding to the sense of wholeness. This is a community that on the surface seems to manifest no lack, no conflict, no internal strife. All evil has been brought in from the outside. All violence springs from the Russians.

The inner workings of this harmonious society are in fact incomprehensible to the Russians. Their own initial interactions in the hours and days following their capture present a striking contrast. Far from supporting each other, the two Russians seem engaged in an eternal antagonism. The abuse of the younger soldier by the older one, continuing the rules of interaction endemic to the Russian conscript army, make no sense in the new context. Where mutual support would seem required, the two Russians can only antagonize one another. Indeed, the fact that they have been chained together seems at first to be the most oppressive aspect of



their captivity. In all of these specific details, the relationship between Sasha and Vania bear all the marks of a sibling rivalry. In his paper “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis,” Lacan describes the ways in which aggressivity flows directly from the structure of imaginary identification as negotiated in the mirror stage. The alienation inherent in the mirror structure leads to the subject being a rival to itself. The subject rails at his own ego, hating that which is most similar to himself. Sasha and Vania each hate that part of himself that he sees in the other. But more than this, they are clearly in a kind of desperate competition. For what could they be competing while in captivity?

In fact, the two Russians do form a bond as their captivity progresses, although the nature of the bond is always in a state of flux, as the old antagonism remains just underneath the surface. The unity and harmony of the indigenous community is likewise revealed to be problematic as authority is indeed questioned and subject to violent resistance. The surface appearances in both of the cases here mask structural aspects of the two societies, and it is these structural aspects that we must understand if we wish to understand the significance of their interrelationship in the film.

The traditional order of the indigenous culture is the order of patriarchy. Abdul Murat is portrayed quite sympathetically in the film. He is a figure of authority and strength, but his strength comes from a community that recognizes his rights as man and patriarch. Even when the community opposes him and questions the wisdom of his plans regarding the two Russians, no one questions his right to act as he feels he must. In short, he enjoys the benefit of the reigning order, which even in this ancient configuration is designated by the concept of “laws” [*zakony*]. When his two Russians are taken from him, even this seeming infringement of his rights as patriarch is ultimately attributed to the operations of “laws.”

Abdul Murat is indeed not the all-powerful figure he appears to be at the outset. His power is not due to any quality he possesses, but to his position in the established Symbolic order of this particular society. One of Lacan's most basic teachings is that symbolic identification is made possible through the intervention of what he calls the Name of the Father, something that is manifest to a remarkably literal degree in Bodrov's film. It is Abdul Murat's symbolic position in the community that gives him his authority and that allows him to maintain that authority even when he must surrender control of a situation in the face of brute force. The integrity of this order is made even more clear in the first panoramic scene of the *aul*, in which the intoning "Allah Akbar" reinforces through this master signifier the Big Other of this community.

When we look at the Russian prisoners in this context, what is striking is that they are both fatherless. Zhilin's father is dead; Sasha was raised in a children's home and does not know his parents. The degree to which Sasha is fatherless is underlined by the fact that we never learn his last name.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, he does not have his father's name. That neither of the two soldiers have fathers is stressed even further by the fact that it is to their mothers that Abdul Murat directs them to write. It is the mother-child relationship on which the two depend for their salvation. For them, their homeland Russia is very much the *Rodina-mat*.<sup>44</sup> It is as a child crying out to its mother that they hope for rescue. There is no talk of their being rescued by their military comrades. Their attempt to escape is talked about more than acted upon and when they finally do make a break for it, it is the failure of their dysfunctional relationship that ultimately brings them to grief.

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<sup>43</sup> The final credits confirm the absence of what we do not encounter in the film: Sasha has no last name.

<sup>44</sup> The "motherland," as opposed to *otechestvo*, "fatherland."

While it is the law of the father that organizes society for the mountain people, both sides take it for granted that the Russians will write to their *mothers* to ask for help in being freed. In this film, the usual gender positions have been reversed. While in the literary treatment of the Caucasus theme, the Russian(s) were always gendered male and the exotic other always female, we see that, in the structure of their identificatory interactions, the mountain people of the Caucasus are on the side of the male, the patriarch, while the Russians are on the side of the female, the mother. This is confirmed by other differences in the story: the Russians are no longer officers of the nobility, but conscripts and/or enlisted men. They are not the privileged and powerful of Russian society, but rather the underprivileged, the little men. What is more, Abdul Murat clearly and explicitly relates to the Russian captives in the same way that he relates to his dependent women: “my wife,” “my daughter,” “my Russians.” The patriarch disposes of his people with consistent and unquestioned authority.

The Russian fascination with the culture of the Caucasus is based on a desire for the kind of stable identity made possible by symbolic identification. Russia looks at the Caucasus from the outside in, unable to understand their culture but desirous of having a culture as stable, as full, as self-sufficient and free of lack.<sup>45</sup> But this is illusory and unattainable.

Lacan saw the mirror stage as a first attempt at suturing together the fragmented body. It is never a final or even very secure feat, for true integration and identification come only with

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<sup>45</sup> Perhaps this was the director’s view as well when he decided to employ Georgian actors to play Muslim partisan fighters. Was Bodrov himself so sure of the opaqueness of Russia’s southern others that he failed to appreciate the degree to which he compromised the verisimilitude and integrity of this portrayal? See, for example, the remarks in “Kavkazskii plennik: Pressa fil'ma” 187. There were actually compelling practical reasons for the polyglot dialogue in the film: many extras were required on location to shoot the crowd scenes and recruiting numerous actors who would speak the same language was not realistic given the ethnic patchwork of the area in and around Daghestan. Nevertheless, casting a Georgian actor to play Abdul Murat does seem to locate the Russian viewer in the same position of ignorant outsider occupied by the two prisoners in the film narrative.

the passage to the abstraction made possible on the Symbolic plane. Imaginary identity is always threatened with dissolution and refragmentation. The soundtrack of the film, consisting mostly of patriotic military songs from a completely different era of Soviet glory, is as appropriate as the American jazz rendition of “Go Down, Moses.” These songs are “aural images” conjured up to the same purpose as conventional visual images; they are the attempt of a vulnerable, threatened ego to maintain its integrity as a conscious, autonomous individual. But the images are without anchor or context and cannot be integrated, just as the Muslim, Nikolai Ivanov, cannot be integrated into a community that demands that he kiss holy images.

## 2.5. Mysterious Russia

This chapter will conclude with a brief look at a film director who seems to have understood the dead-end of imaginary identification through the libidinal relationship to a collective Western other. Despite the fact that Nikita Mikhalkov’s new-Russian blockbuster *The Barber of Siberia* [*Sibirskii tsiriul'nik*] (1998) is full of non-Russian others, both alluring and horrible, the center of gravity in this film is firmly located on the side of the Russian patriarch: the Emperor–Tsar, the despotic film director, the country’s best-known patriot. On the surface, the American thread in the narrative seems designed merely to make this film an international commercial success. Certainly the charming schemer, Jane Culligan, and the diabolical rapist of virgin forests, MacCracken, cannot possibly serve as objects for collective introjection. The young Russian hero Andrei Tolstoi, played by the not terribly young Oleg Men'shikov (Sasha in *Prisoner of the Mountains*), is charming, innocent, loveable, a bit simple-minded but organically incapable of deceit; in short, he is a new positive hero, everything that Russians imagine themselves to be in their best imaginary incarnations. His behavior is, however, ultimately destructive of both himself and those he holds dear.

All the major characters, with the possible exception of old MacCracken, are ambiguous in their characterization. As a group, the young junkers are silly and self-indulgent, but they redeem themselves in the end by showing themselves capable of a sense of honor that characterized more noble times in Russia's history. The beauty and grandeur of the imperial court is so luminous that it seems to bestow a dignity onto the portrayal of the few common people in the film. As for the heroine, Jane is a cold, calculating businesswoman, but she was sexually abused in her youth, making her a sympathetic character to Russian viewers raised on the suffering Sonia Marmeladova. Her suffering saves her from functioning as a fully negative character. This role is reserved for the inventor MacCracken, whose infernal "Barber of Siberia" enacts a different kind of rape of the Russian virgin forest. But even MacCracken does not enable Mikhalkov to set up a simple dichotomy Russia–America : good–bad. The machine could not be brought into existence without the willing cooperation and financial support of members of the Russian nobility, whose pursuit of profit trumps any concern for their country's natural resources.

Mikhalkov wanted desperately for his film to be the catalyst for a new national pride and spiritual renewal in post-soviet Russia. His attempt was almost universally rejected by the critics, against whom he railed in an interview in which he declared to Liubov' Arkus: "And they start talking about my "tourist trinket" and about how Mikhalkov made a film for foreigners. Well, yes. For foreigners. For a hundred million foreigners living in my country, who don't know her culture or her history or, worst of all, who don't have any love for her." ["И начинается разговор о «клюкве», о том, что Михалков снял картину для иностранцев... Да, для иностранцев. Для ста миллионов иностранцев, живущих в моей стране. Не знающих ни культуры ее, ни истории, ни — что самое главное — любви к ней." (Mikhalkov, "Ja sdelal kartinu" 89) Mikhalkov may not have realized how true his words were.

One of the most interesting critical comments came from Diliara Tasbulatova, who asked in exasperation, “Just where in time and space does he exist? From what far-off point does he behold his Russia that we have not so much lost as, it would seem, we never obtained in the first place?” [“В какой точке времени-пространства он пребывает? Из какого далека смотрит на свою Россию, которую мы не то что потеряли, а, похоже, никогда и не обрели?”] (“Критики о фильме: Сибирский tsiriul'nik” 78)

This film would try to create a rebirth of pride in the glory of Russia whereby Russia looks at itself as if from some other place. Russia is not the subject of identification, but rather an object upon which identity is bestowed by some other subjectivity. This is the true structural role of the Americans in the film. The epistolary form of the story (Jane writes to her son about her experiences in Russia twenty years before) is no mere narrative device, but organically necessary to the idea of the film. Perhaps the best formula for Mikhalkov’s move is the famous Tiutchev verse: “Russia is not to be comprehended by reason” [“умом Россию не понять”].



Figure 3

This also explains the role of the Shrovetide carnival scene, the kitchiness of which Mikhalkov was also roundly criticized for. It is necessary that Jane experience this folk festival as an outsider, confused and disoriented but at the same time fascinated by the chaotic scene all around her. The

camerawork in this scene seeks to reproduce this feeling of disorientation by quick cuts and sudden appearances and disappearances of a variety of strange objects and activities (Figure 3). Once again, we find post-Soviet culture reenacting Chaadaev’s First Philosophical Letter.

Russia has been pushed to the periphery of world cultures. The center of culture has been taken by the West; Russia can only borrow culture ready-made from its place at the periphery.

However, Mikhalkov's portrayal is more skillful and more satisfying than Chaadaev's. Denied its own subjectivity, Russia gains a beggar's identity by relishing in the fascination that it exerts upon the only true modern subjectivity—that of the self-confident and supremely centered West.

Mikhalkov's work can be evaluated in less unflattering terms, however. This film illustrates as well as or perhaps better than Freud what he himself described as the difference between the "ideal ego" and the "ego ideal." Mikhalkov intended his film to help Russia get past its glorification of the West, to discard the West as the ideal ego for a new Russian identity. Rather, by making the West into an ego ideal, that agency from which the subject is observed and whose recognition cements the subject's identification, Mikhalkov makes Russia's peripheral subject position central in a satisfying manner.

At first glance, it would seem that the two lines of identification analyzed in this chapter, the Caucasus and the West, are brought together in Aleksei Balabanov's recent film, *War* [*Voina*] (2002). I look more closely at this film in my conclusion, for what at first seems to be simply a more aggressive political orientation turns out, upon closer examination, to be a very different structure of identifications. Along with several other more recent books and films, *War* suggests a profound paradigm shift in Russian culture of the Putin era and, very likely, the dissolution of the "post-Soviet condition." In the next chapter, however, I will examine yet another of Khotinenko's films along with a set of writers who were prepared to stop imagining Russia and start analyzing it.

## Chapter 3. The Post-Soviet Unconscious

### 3.1. Other Prose

One of the most distinctive developments in Russian literature of the perestroika period is also one of the most difficult to designate or define. By the time Gorbachev's policy of glasnost had disabled the state censorship mechanisms, Russian literary culture seemed to be under assault by a cohort of younger writers with a radically new aesthetic program. These writers did not form a distinct literary "school" or coherent movement. Most of them had begun writing during the Brezhnev period of stagnation, and their works, with rare exceptions, circulated only in manuscript form. One of the earliest and most famous pioneers of this new trend was Venedikt Erofeev, the author of *Moscow to the End of the Line* [*Moskva—Petushki*], written around 1969 and considered by many to be the first real work of Russian postmodernism. By the end of the 1980s, the name of Venedikt Erofeev was often associated with names such as Viktor Erofeev, Eduard Limonov, Valeriia Narbikova, Liudmila Petrushevskaia, Evgenii Popov, Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, and Vladimir Sorokin. These writers shared few if any specific traits and their membership in a single category of writers could only be characterized negatively. They had little respect for the norms of literary language—their works were permeated with slang and obscenities, the kind of living language that had traditionally been banned from Russian artistic prose.<sup>46</sup> They seemed uninterested in the traditional mission of Russian literature. Their works did not serve any edifying ends and presented no positive heroes for

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<sup>46</sup> One of the most common Russian terms for this language—*netsenzurnaia leksika*—betrays the attitude to the living Russian language of speaking people. It cannot be "let through" into literature.



emulation. Character portrayal tended toward the grotesque; language seemed to be strained to the breaking point in descriptions of ugliness, squalor, and social decay; and the overarching purpose of many writers seemed to be to shock and horrify their readers. Sexuality was not only openly portrayed, but routinely represented in repulsive physiological descriptions and crude imagery. While these writers enjoyed some brief notoriety as the formerly forbidden fruit first found a mass readership, the reading masses soon became alienated by writers who offered no hope of spiritual or social redemption. Professional critics, for their part, found it easy to dismiss writers who, in defying traditional literary values, left themselves vulnerable to the charge that their works possessed no literary value at all.

This chapter will examine the programmatic statements of several theorists and analyze the works of two major representatives of this cohort in an attempt to describe the operation of this new aesthetic. Although it is widely recognized that these writers are not engaged in overtly political battles, they are deeply concerned with the function of literature in Russia and with their own role as Russian writers. Although they seem to have found a relatively narrow and limited readership in Russia, the significance of these writers cannot be underestimated. While some of their early statements suggested that they were engaged in a project of dismantling Socialist Realism, the most ambitious of them attempted to deconstruct Russian literature itself and to lay bare the operation of the written (and, by extension, the recited) word in Russian culture. Despite their perceived irreverence for literary tradition, their work does not debunk but rather underscores the importance of one of Russia's most dearly-held stereotypes—that of the “most actively reading [*samyi chitaiushchii*] people” on Earth. The larger significance of their discovery is clearly apparent in *Makarov*, another film made by Vladimir Khotinenko shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union and focussing on the fate of a writer in the New Russia.

Throughout the perestroika years, there was considerable disagreement about the appropriate designation for the new kinds of prose appearing on the market. More and more frequently, the term *other prose* [*drugaiia proza*] was used to describe a group of writers who actually had very little in common among themselves. Usually (and confusingly<sup>47</sup>) rendered in English as *alternative prose*, the term *other* suggested the existence of a central, normative *non-other* prose against which the aesthetic system of *other prose* operated. Beyond this negative definition, however, even those who were favorably disposed to the new alternative writers had difficulty specifying the criteria by which a writer would be included in or excluded from the category of *other prose*.

Sergei Chuprinin's long essay in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, entitled simply "Other Prose," was perhaps the most important early attempt to specify (as well as judge) this group of writers. His essay is part of a debate with that majority of Soviet critics who found the content of *other prose* unpalatable and unacceptable.<sup>48</sup> He compiles a representative list of writers whose works clearly belong in this category: both Erofeevs, Petrushevskaiia, Popov, Viacheslav P'etsukh, Narbikova, Sergei Chetvertkov, Larisa Vaneeva, and others. He also excludes from this group writers such as Vladimir Makanin, Chingiz Aitmatov, Valentin Rasputin, and others who clearly distinguish themselves from Soviet mediocrity. He makes clear at several points that he shares the squeamishness of his fellow critics at the content of their works. He attempts to rescue the new writers from condemnation by pointing out that they have taken up battle against an old

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<sup>47</sup> Hair-splitters among Russian critics would make a further distinction between *drugaiia proza* and *alternativnaia proza*, a distinction lost by using this English translation, which seems to have established itself since Robert Porter's book *Russia's Alternative Prose*. I do not undertake a complete terminological archeology in this work not only for reasons of space but also because these distinctions have not (at least until recently) been used by Russian critics with any kind of real rigor or attempt at consistency.

<sup>48</sup> The essay was in fact printed together with a representative of the opposite point of view, an essay by Dmitrii Urnov entitled "Bad Prose."

tradition of moralizing prose that not only led to many of the great works of classical Russian literature but also lent itself to abuse during the Soviet period. Literature had become not only a refuge for dissident thought but also a tool for state propaganda. *Other prose* was the first and most consistent attempt to go to the root of this problem. However, Chuprinin's defense of the new tendency in prose resorts to another tradition in Russian literature for its support. He claims that the younger generation of writers should not be rejected because they manifest a truly Russian fidelity to the tradition of realism: "[T]he new wave came to literature with what new waves usually come: with its own truth, with its own knowledge of the world and of humanity.... But the root, the source of *other prose*, whether we want to admit it or not, is found in reality." [новая волна пришла в литературу с тем, с чем обычно и приходит новая волна: со своей правдой, со своим знанием о мире и о человеке.... А корень-то, исток другой прозы, хотим мы того или нет, — в реальности (Chuprinin 4–5)]. Chuprinin thus justifies the existence of this kind of writing by pointing out that the reality in which Soviet citizens lived their daily lives was in fact just as unappetizing. His essay is written in the spirit of a member of the generation of the Thaw, the period of the 1960s in which independent-minded but still earnest Soviet citizens believed in the possibility of "socialism with a human face" and of a political regime that would live up to the purportedly high ideals of its founders.

Chuprinin's evaluation could only come from outside the circle of *other prose* writers. The writers themselves clearly rejected this belief in the reformability of the system or society. Their own justification for writing, to the extent that they gave one at all, rested on completely different aims and goals. Writer-critics such as Viktor Erofeev, Viacheslav Kuritsyn, and Aleksandr Kabakov began to declare their allegiance to the movement known as postmodernism. According to them, the task of the postmodernist movement in new Russian literature was to break down the dominant discourse of Socialist Realism, which had completely dominated the

literary landscape for so long that it had become part of the Soviet psyche. Only after the postmodernists had succeeded in ridding Russian culture of the last traces of Soviet patterns of thinking could a genuinely new and authentic Russian culture begin to develop in its place.

One of the most famous statements from within this camp is Viktor Erofeev's programmatic essay "Soviet Literature: In Memoriam" ["Pominki po sovetskoi literature"<sup>49</sup>], which first appeared in 1990 and came to be seen as a kind of manifesto for new Russian prose. Erofeev is by any account one of the most significant writers and critics of late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian literature and culture. He was born into a family of diplomats, spent a part of his very privileged childhood in Western Europe, and is intimately familiar with French culture in particular. He has been a literary scholar based at the Institute of World Literatures in Moscow since before he began his activity as a fiction writer. He published almost no works of fiction in the USSR before his admission as a critic to the Writer's Union at the end of the 1970s. He was almost immediately expelled from the Union as punishment for his participation in the *MetrOpol'* affair, which he had largely spearheaded, and was banished from the ranks of approved writers until the advent of perestroika in the late 1980s. He did not, however, lose his affiliation with the Institute of World Literature and continued to write as a critic and scholar. He was finally readmitted to the Writers Union in 1988.

In "Soviet Literature: In Memoriam," Erofeev uses the metaphor of death and decay to portray Soviet literature as the rotting corpse of Socialist Realism. Each of the three movements identified by Erofeev (official prose, Village Prose, and liberal prose) is a manifestation of this decomposition of Socialist Realism as the one true aesthetic system and method for Soviet writers. Erofeev demonstrates convincingly, if somewhat schematically, that Socialist Realism

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<sup>49</sup> A less well-known translation of this essay renders the title more literally: "A Funeral Feast for Soviet Literature." Erofeev's title references the religious tradition of a memorial banquet held 40 days after a person's death.

as a monolithic system had long since ceased to function in the way it did during and immediately after Stalin's long rule. If Erofeev intended "In Memoriam" to serve as a manifesto for his own kind of prose writing, then he brilliantly undermines his own argument in a roundabout way, since there ought to be little need to attack so ferociously an aesthetic system that had already decomposed into a formless shibboleth for hack writers. It is much more productive to view "In Memoriam" as a long prologue to another argument, for Erofeev only mentions directly the new literary current at the end of his essay and in terms that seem far removed from the excremental prose that was appearing at the time:

Today we are witnessing the emergence of an *other*, alternative literature, which is opposed to the *old* literature chiefly by its readiness to engage in dialogue with any culture—even the most remote in time or space—to create a polysemantic, polystylistic structure that would draw direct support from Russian philosophy from Chaadaev to Florenskii, from the existentialism of world art, from the philosophical-anthropological discoveries of the twentieth century that Soviet culture has preferred to ignore. Moreover, it is ready to adapt to the conditions of free self-expression and reject opportunistic political journalism. (154)

[Сейчас возникает *другая*, альтернативная литература, которая противостоит *старой* литературе прежде всего готовностью к диалогу с любой, пусть самой удаленной во времени и пространстве, культурой для создания полисемантической, полистилистической структуры с безусловной опорой на опыт русской философии от Чаадаева до Флоренского, на экзистенциальный опыт мирового искусства, на философско-антропологические открытия XX века, вообще оставшиеся за бортом советской культуры, к адаптации в ситуации свободного самовыражения и отказу от спекулятивной публицистичности. (433)]

The concluding flourish is reminiscent of Abram Tertz's final exhortation in "What is Socialist Realism?" It seems to be a distorted echo of the earlier call for a "phantasmagorical art, with hypotheses instead of a Purpose, an art in which the grotesque will replace realistic

descriptions of ordinary life” (Tertz [pseud for Andrei Siniavskii] 218). This optimistic note does not give any hint of the kind of writing that Erofeev and his cohort was producing at the time and would value highly in others. In 1996, Erofeev edited a collection of Russian short stories entitled *Russia’s Fleurs du mal* and wrote an introduction describing the authors and their works. A Russian-language version of this essay [“Russkie tsvety zla”] was later included in his collected writings on literature and culture. Following Baudelaire’s allusion, he develops the metaphor of national literature as a highly developed plant. He insists that orthodox Soviet literature and the liberal literature that developed during the Thaw of the 1950s and 1960s shared a common root system. This made it inevitable that both of these unnatural growths would wither and die once the artificial environment of Soviet ideology was removed. Inasmuch as both of these plants had shared with 19th-century Russian literature an overdeveloped tendency to didactic moralizing, the new blossoms that grew out of the post-Soviet garbage dump turned out to be “a whole bouquet of *fleurs du mal*” (232). Erofeev’s seeming celebration of these flowers of evil enraged many critics, but it is best read in juxtaposition with another small essay first published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1991. In “The Collapse of Humanism #2” [“Krushenie gumanizma nomer 2”], Erofeev reiterates in another form his justification for rejecting the writers of the sixties generation and their ideals. Those who believed in “socialism with a human face” held up humanism as their banner in opposition to the cruelty and barbarism of the “cult of personality.” Erofeev deconstructs this central value of the Soviet intelligentsia, showing how it was taken up successively by both religious and atheistic thinkers alike. The Bolsheviks initially rejected humanism “in the name of the ultimate reign of humanism” (441). It was a fateful turn when these sworn enemies of humanism became its champions. This enabled the Soviets to portray themselves as idealists to observers in the West, while the intelligentsia was left to fight for its own brand of humanism, which amounted to little more than abstract and unreflective notions of “justice, conscience, and mercy” (441). The Soviet Union could be

considered the most unanimously humanistic society on Earth even as it entered into its period of stagnation and decay. As a result, profound skepticism regarding the goodness and dignity of human beings was inevitable as the collapse of the state brought with it the collapse of a humanistic world view that never had any rational basis. In this way, according to Erofeev, a belief in profound evil became the only available alternative to serve as the distinguishing mark of humanity for post-Soviet culture.

### 3.2. The Desire of the Text

Erofeev's diagnosis is important and I will return to another of his theoretical texts below. Nonetheless, his insistence on evil as the common denominator of post-Soviet culture is not adequate even to the more narrow category of alternative writers. This can easily be seen in the prose of one of the most distinctly alternative of these new writers. Valeriia Narbikova exhibits many of the characteristics of *other prose*. Her prose is irreverent, frank descriptions of sexuality abound; her characters do not serve as moral examples for living; she does not exalt any kind of imaginary Russia. The impulse of her prose seems to be the breaking of social and artistic taboos, but there is little evidence that she intends for her hyper-sexual literary characters to be seen as a manifestation of human evil. As Nadya Peterson has argued, her prose actively defies any attempt at making sense (166). The energy of her prose emanates not from the subject matter of her writing but from the very artistic prose itself. As long as one does not attempt to decipher “the author’s message,” reading Narbikova’s prose can be extremely enjoyable, particularly for a reader who is well-versed in Russia’s literary, cultural, and religious heritage. Despite her irreverence, it is incorrect to see in Narbikova’s works a disregard for the literary tradition. Her prose thrives on this tradition as it weaves its way through endless metaphors, allegories, and alliterations. The text itself seems to take pleasure in its own

acrobatics—to introduce some overt authorial intention or to meditate on the significance of the content would interrupt the play of the text. It does injustice to Nabokova’s texts to emphasize only the detailed depictions of nonnormative sexuality, and I agree with Peterson as she insists that Nabokova’s prose has nothing to do with pornography. However, it is important not to divorce the sexuality of the content completely from the form of the prose. As Peterson herself emphasizes,

The “copulation of clichés” is the general focus of Nabokova’s narrative. If what Nabokov means here [in his definition of pornographic literature --GMcC] is actualizations (performances) of a certain erotic code, however, Nabokova takes the notion literally, and the “alternations, variations, and new combinations” in her work occur on the level of clichés embedded in everyday speech, related to commonplace occurrences, and not limited to sexual situations. (166)

It should also be emphasized, however, that the sexual situations are driven not by realistically-depicted human sexual desire, but by the energy of the text itself. I would argue that Nabokova has succeeded in depicting the *desire of the text* in a striking and vivid way. Sexuality is neither the subject matter nor a gratuitous element in Nabokova’s prose. It is the desire of the narrative text made manifest. While it is not necessary to invoke Lacan in order to understand the operation of desire in Nabokova’s text, it is important to note that the energy of Nabokova’s narrative and its refusal of sustained meaning or message is consistent with Lacan’s conception of the signifying chain, in which each signifier relates not so much to its signified as to another signifier. This endless process of signification out of which narrative is constructed is instantiated by the subject’s desire. I will elucidate this further below.

I now turn to another text in which the narrative energy flows very differently. Evgenii Popov’s *The Soul of a Patriot, or Various Epistles to Ferfichkin* [*Dusha patriota, ili razlichnye poslaniia k Ferfichkinu*] was one of the earliest works of Russian postmodernist prose to gain



broad attention after its publication in the journal *Volga* in 1989. It was generally recognized to be representative of a young tradition in Russian literature that had come to the surface ten years earlier with the abortive attempt to publish *MetrOpol'*, an independent literary almanac, outside of official channels.<sup>50</sup> The “action” of *Soul of a Patriot*, to the extent that there is any action at all, consists in the failed attempt of the narrator to reach the center of “a historic event,” the body of Leonid Brezhnev lying in state before its burial. In this, it has an interesting parallel in Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moscow to the End of the Line*. Just as Popov’s narrator tells in excruciating detail of his struggle to reach his goal, Venechka Erofeev tells of his constant failed attempts to reach the Kremlin, another important center in the Russian cultural and political landscape. While Venechka’s narrative ends at the moment when he unexpectedly reaches the center and is killed, Popov’s writer–narrator never reaches his goal despite the fact that there was never any real hindrance that prevented the attainment of that goal. Assuming that the militia would not let two dissident writers pay their last respects to the fallen leader, the narrator and his friend take a comical journey around the center of Moscow, repeatedly approaching but never broaching the sacred place where the body lay.

Although the plot of *Soul of a Patriot* is usually told as the story of Popov’s and Prigov’s adventures in connection with the death and burial of Brezhnev, the latter’s death is not even mentioned until the approximate half-way point in the text. The text as a whole is dominated by “wandering.” This is the word that the narrator uses to describe his physical movement around the Hall of Columns (the location of the body), but this is also the movement of the text itself from the very first pages.

While it is an epistolary novel, “various epistles to Ferfichkin,” the narrative is singularly disorienting to the reader due to the way in which it obscures its own purpose and the world to

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<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 1. Both Popov and Viktor Erofeev were members of the editorial board of this almanac.

which it refers. It is never made clear why the writer of the letters, a certain Evgenii Anatol'evich Popov, is writing the letters nor what the ostensible topic of the letters is meant to be. Only in the course of the narrative do we understand that the letters are meant to form some kind of large-scale text. The narrator's identity as a writer seems to be his most precious possession. His discourse betrays a growing obsession with his production of text, the quality of his writing, and the benefit that his potential readership might find in it. The writing, however, never quite becomes metatextual. It circles back upon itself not as a result of artistic mastery but, quite the contrary, as a result of the undisciplined mind of the writer. After relating to Ferfichkin how he spent the morning on which he learned of Brezhnev's death, he breaks off and retracts an entire paragraph:

Ugh! ... Why do I tell lies and keep missing the point like this? Why is human memory so feeble? God, in fact this (the fresh information) happened the following day, on Saturday 13 November, and not on Friday the 12th, when I woke up with a hangover. Having decided to write badly, I've made no mean progress in suspiciously short time — altogether 10 days have gone by, and I'm already getting everything mixed up. ... No, I must keep writing, faster, faster, I must toil away stubbornly, I must get everything written down, before I forget anything... Write, write it down, get it confirmed, restore it in memory, memory, memory ... Who, what—memory? Of whom, of what—memory. For whom, for what—memory ... Oh God! ... – (83–84, translation modified)

[Фу!.. Зачем я так вру и так мажу? Зачем так слаба человеческая память? Боже, ведь это (свежая информация) было на следующий день, в субботу 13-го ноября, а не в пятницу 12-го, когда я проснулся с похмелья. Решив писать плохо, я подозрительно быстро достиг в этом немалых успехов — всего 10 дней прошло, а я уже все путаю. ... Нет, скорее, скорее надо писать, нужно упорно трудиться, нужно быстро все записать, пока ничего не забыл... Писать, записать, утвердиться, восстановить в памяти, памяти, памяти... Кто, что — память. Кого, чего — памяти. Кому чего, а мне — памяти... О Боже!.. – (107–08)

Although seldom completely coherent and certainly never reliable, memory is a major concern of the writer. He spends the first half of the text, about two weeks worth of letters, describing various deceased members of his extended family. His rambling prose and disjointed recollections often take on the tone of a conversation with these relatives. “Oh Grandad Pasha, Grandad Pasha! You killed Japanese, Germans, horses, and then you croaked my kitten, you old bastard!” (24, translation modified) [“Эх, деда Паша, деда Паша! Убивал ты японцев, немцев, коней, а теперь вот и котенка моего прихлопнул, старый подлец!” (38)] The narrator spins a biography of Grandad Pasha in which the old man calls to mind characteristic traits and actions linked to stock images of and ideas about Russia’s rulers and leaders: military victories and defeats, the defense of the native soil, the tragedy and waste of the civil war, and arbitrary, sadistic cruelty. As Lipovetsky has pointed out, Popov’s text is a profound meditation on Russian history, but this meditation also questions the nature of history and deconstructs historical narratives (191). The text plays with narrative, punning and ironically juxtaposing various incompatible words, phrases, and ideas. The text undermines all attempts to establish any reliable system to the act of narration or to the history it purports to tell. As the narrator muses upon his own identity as a Russian writer, the text also deconstructs the image of the Russian writer as the conscience of the people, a moral compass that stands in opposition to a corrupt and oppressive state. This mumbling, stumbling buffoon could not stand in opposition to anything.

Although the writer tries to look at his text as an object he has produced, the reader of the text is constantly confronted with a discourse that unfolds in the present moment of reading.

This is often played to humorous effect:

...by the end of the year I must write 68.68 pages. And  
35.

I will write it, since I’ve got 34 already (I’ve just got on to the 35th now), and if there’s 18–19 days left to the end of the year, ... (85, translation modified)

[...к концу года я должен сочинить 68 целых 68 сотых  
страницы. И

35.

сочиню, так как у меня уже имеется (и вот на 35-ю  
перескочил), а ежели осталось до конца года 18 — 19 дней, ...  
(109)]

Irina Skoropanova has described Popov's writing in this novel as exhibiting the "style of a graphomaniac" (229). This is curious, slightly oxymoronic terminology inasmuch as the Russian word *grafomaniia* is most often used to designate not merely obsessive writing but obsessive *bad* writing, a writing that lacks the discipline required for any real literary style. But Skoropanova is referring not only to the narrator's rambling stream of verbal clumsiness, but to Popov-the-author's very skillful construction of a text that takes its raw materials from the linguistic flotsam lying about and links it together to construct a narrative that lays all of its elements bare. In this way, Popov seems to be deconstructing the image of the great Russian writer by turning him into a clown. The writer is not merely brought down to earth from his pedestal, but is made to look petty and ridiculous. Yet if the writer is brought down to earth, the linguistic text itself is expanded and given a kind of power and freedom that it did not have before. The artistry of Popov's writing is its ability to create a new work of fiction by decontextualizing and juxtaposing the clichés of Soviet hack writing, quoting more respectable literary texts, invoking names and catch-phrases from everyday life, and all other kinds of recognizable bits of discourse.

The peculiar nature of this dual discourse, reminiscent of the narrative techniques of Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Zoshchenko, suggests that Popov's text might be classified as a late 20th-century example of Russian *skaz*.<sup>51</sup> Although Popov's narrator is quite explicitly *writing*

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<sup>51</sup> *Skaz* is a particular narrative device employed by several prominent Russian prose writers of the last two centuries. It is characterized by a narrative voice that is explicitly oral,

the narrative, his written texts bear the mark of his attempts to communicate directly with an interlocutor despite the apparent silence of that object of address. The tendency of the protagonist to talk through his letters is a significant part of his “style of a graphomaniac.” It allows him to unmask collective discourse in a sophisticated way. It would not be effective simply to point out the dominating presence of Soviet propoganda; Russian readers do not need to have propoganda pointed out to them. The narrator’s use of Soviet clichés appears completely automatic and invites the reader to reflect on the way Soviet figures of speech permeate every level of the prose. Since the writer does not create the discourse, he is not forced to take a position for or against it, even though he is implicated in it.

Popov’s narrator deconstructs his own discourse by enacting the distinction in Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory between the ego and the subject. Freud’s conception of the ego, as it evolved in his work, describes the individual human personality as a layering of models, first of the parents, then of other models that are mostly but not exclusively authority figures. Freud points out that these models are first encountered as objects of erotic attachment. This is the ego that Freud describes in his work of the 1920s, as he works out his structural topography of the human personality as id, ego, and superego.<sup>52</sup> In this explication, the ego corresponds to that which is experienced by the individual personality as his or her conscious identity. It is clear in Freud’s theory that this conscious identity is an instance separate from the unconscious that speaks in dreams and in the parapraxes of waking life. Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage adds a crucial element to this conception of the ego. The first distinct object, which is to

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marked with the linguistic attributes of a storyteller. This creates a discourse that is markedly different from that of the author and manifests a consciousness quite distinct from the consciousness of the author. It often suggests a different social class, educational level, or view of the world.

<sup>52</sup> The evolution of his theory of the ego can be traced through much of his earlier work, from “Mourning and Melancholia” (1915) through its formal description in *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

say the first other, that a toddler encounters is his or her own mirror reflection. This necessarily implies that an individual's interior world receives its first determination from an external image that "mirrors" it but is always foreign to it. The *I* will always measure itself against an *other* that is alienating:

But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as *I*, his discordance with his own reality. (Lacan, *Écrits* 76)

Lacan will distinguish this ego from what he designates at various times as the subject of the unconscious, the subject of speech, the subject of truth, or, simply, the subject. It is best understood as the subject of language, the subject that comes into being through the operations of metaphor and metonymy (condensation and displacement in Freudian dreamwork) in the Symbolic order. The subject speaks its truth most clearly in the "slips" where the ego loses control and some "other" voice speaks in its place.

The narration in Popov's text and the deconstruction of discourse that takes place in it enact this distinction between ego and subject. The conscious but clumsy attempts to produce a text are a kind of performative act. The narrator attempts to become sufficient to the images that have captured him: the great Russian writer, the speaker of truth, the country's moral guide, the voice of conscience. The more he attempts to be worthy of these identities, which have been bequeathed to him, the more he blunders into embarrassing slips, missteps, and unintentional verbal puns. The alienation springing from the imaginary identifications that have provided the narrator with his conception of self proves to be so debilitating that the writer can produce nothing but a text giving the appearance of gibberish. This gibberish, however, enacts the "truth" of the subject in the chain of signifiers that forms the collective unconscious of a cultural

community. In other words, it is a “laying bare” of the distinction between the speaking subject and the subject of speech. This is the true significance of the coincidence of names between author and narrator. It is more than the traditional distinction in literary theory between author and narrator, or even between author and implied author. Author and narrator are identical and, at the same time, fundamentally other.

The action of the second half of the novel remains something of a mystery. The narrator and his friend, Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov,<sup>53</sup> try but fail to reach the body of Brezhnev in order to pay their last respects to their fallen leader. Their humorous misadventure presents something of a puzzle. It is not difficult to hypothesize as to the reasons for their inability to approach the body of HE WHO ONCE WAS. The name of Brezhnev is never mentioned in the text, almost as if the very name is forbidden. The designation HE WHO ONCE WAS suggests association with another figure whose name could not be pronounced—the name of “him who is, and who was, and who is to come” (Rev 1:4) [Тот, Который есть и был и грядет<sup>54</sup>]. The narrator relates to the dead body as to a sacred, unapproachable object. Regardless of how much they think they want to approach the epicenter of this historical event, they cannot allow themselves to do so, for to reach the center of the event would mean the death of the narrating subject, as Venechka Erofeev learns in his encounter with the Kremlin.

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<sup>53</sup> Prigov is the well known and easily recognized name of one of the most important members of the conceptualist movement of the 1970s. Slightly less recognizable are other prominent members of the Stagnation-era literary and artistic underground such as “A, a great poet of contemporaneity (female gender)” — the poet Bella Akhmadulina; or “my litbro E.” — Viktor Erofeev. Readers who did not live in this environment can only wonder how many other details from the life of (the biographical) Popov remain unrecognized.

<sup>54</sup> The more famous instance in English, God’s introduction to Moses as I AM WHO I AM (Ex 3:14) does not have the same poetic resonance in the same way in Russian [Я есмь Сущий].

### 3.3. The Postmodernism of Viktor Erofeev

As any connoisseur of recent Russian prose can attest, this fascination with dead bodies links Popov with a host of his contemporaries whose texts seem to wallow in filth, decay, and putrescence. In the most varied ways, the new trend in Russian prose of the 1980s involved representations of decomposition, disease, disorder, confusion, and chaos. The analysis of *Soul of a Patriot* suggests that this focus on filth has nothing to do with “gritty reality,” but marks a kind of limit of artistic narrative. Viktor Erofeev has made his literary career out of attempts to explore this limit.

The publication of his literary works were always accompanied by noisy discussions and mass outrage. While it is probably impossible to establish which member of the new wave of prose writers was most offensive to public taste, the adventures of Erofeev’s public persona throughout the perestroika and post-perestroika years suggest that he was one of the most deliberately provocative. His texts are almost all characterized by two themes: extreme brutality and violence, and explicitly physiological descriptions of sexuality that almost always violate societal norms. While a good majority of Russian readers saw this as no more than a perverse desire to shock and sicken them, a careful examination of his writing reveals a corpus of texts that is intensely cerebral and offer much more than the crude black naturalism that is so often foregrounded.

One of Erofeev’s first published stories was “The Parakeet” [“Popugaichik”]. This grisly story of violence and sadism is written in at least four distinct styles, corresponding to distinct periods and discourses in Russian cultural history. The narrator of the epistolary prose is a professional torturer who is writing a letter of explanation to the father of a young boy whom he and his cohorts have tormented, sodomized, dismembered, and finally killed. The violence



known to be endemic to Soviet culture is represented through several different linguistic codes, demonstrating how easily various Russian discourses, including post-Soviet vulgarisms and slang, can structure this same violence just as adeptly.

The narrator makes clear that he has perpetrated these abuses on the boy as a just punishment for a crime. In other words, the boy has been executed. Rather than explain the internal workings of the law or state, the narrator repeats at several points in the story that he could do no other thing and had no choice. It becomes obvious in the course of the monologue that the narrator harbors a pathological hatred for anything that violates the norm, anything that appears foreign, or anyone who is in any way *other*. In what reads almost like a Lacanian account of a psychoanalytic session, the narrator reveals that both tormenter and victim are prisoners of discourses that leave them no freedom and no options.

“And here,” I said then, angry now, “here you are, Yermolayushka, here you have a SYMBOL!” “There’s no *symbol* here!” wailed your son, that silly goose, Yermolai Spiridonovich, “there’s none!” “Now you just go and tell that story to somebody else...” “Why is it,” Yermolai Spiridonovich replies to me, “that you imagine *symbols* appearing everywhere?” I fell silent and stared piercingly at that youngster of yours, Spiridon Yermolaevich, and after wiping my bald spot with a napkin, I answered, “They appear to me, my fine Yermolai Spiridonovich, because world culture, may the Lord forgive me, since its very birth, as the wisest of men assure us, has been stuffed with symbols, and there’s no way for us, no matter how hard we try, to spring ourselves from that cage!” And I struck him, your brown-eyed boy, right in the teeth with all my soul, because I’d grown weary, I took preventive measures, but my fist... well, you, Yermolaich, know. (372)

[Во-во, — сказал я тут, осерчав, — во-во, в этом, Ермолаюшка, и есть СИМВОЛ! — Нету тут никакого символа! возопил сын ваш, гусь лапчатый, Ермолай Спиридонович, — нету! — Ну, это ты кому другому поди рассказывай... — Что это вам, — мне в ответ Ермолай Спиридонович, — всюду как бы символы мерещатся? Помолчал я, взгляделся попристальней в вашего, Спиридон Ермолаевич, юношу и отвечаю, протерев салфеткой плешь: а потому, славный ты мой Ермолай Спиридонович, мерещатся,

что культура мировая, прости, Господи, с самого ее зарождения, по заверению ученейших мужей, символами начинена, и никуда нам из сей клетки, как ни тужься, не выскочить! — И ударил я его, сынка твоего кареглазого, прямо в зубы от всей души, оттого, что тоскливо стало, применил профилактику, а кулак у меня... ну, да вы, Ермолаич, знаете. (415)]

The despotic executioner is anything but an autonomous subject. The mysterious symbols imposed on the individual being constitute a structure that allows even the most desperate attempts at subjectivization to attain nothing more than the illusion of despotic power, an illusion that depends for its support on the suffering of an innocent being.

“Life With an Idiot” [“Zhizn' s idiotom”] provides a somewhat more specific analysis of Russian culture, pointing an accusatory finger at a specific group. This story explicitly indicts the intelligentsia for creating the nightmare within which it lived for so many decades. The narrator, as part of his “punishment” for some unnamed crime, must choose an “idiot” with whom he will live as part of his penance. It is never explained what instance or institution has imposed this punishment, but the narrator’s friends suggest that the nature of his crime is related to his “insufficiency of compassion.” He decides to choose a “holy fool,” that most Russian of idiots. He goes to a mental asylum and fetches Vova, whose physical traits and behavioral ticks explicitly reference the figure of Lenin, who is thus cast as the creation of the intelligentsia. The increasingly shocking and violent homelife of the narrator and his wife provide ample space for metaphorical interpretation. The narrator’s wife, who is soon raped by Vova, would be the metaphorical stand-in for Russia itself. Ultimately, a pathological erotic triangle forms between the narrator/intelligent, Russia/ravished woman, and Vova/Lenin-the-revolutionary. Erofeev lays a strong accent on sexual perversions in the story and explicitly links sexuality to violence. The narrator experiences Vova’s murder of his wife as an orgasm in blood as he pours tomato juice over his naked body and gazes avidly upon the decapitation of his spouse.

“Life With an Idiot” could be read as a simple indictment of the intelligentsia’s active or passive complicity in the barbarism of the Bolshevik revolution were it not for a twist at the end of the story. The narrator returns to the insane asylum only to find that he himself was an inhabitant of the asylum from the very beginning. He had encountered but overlooked himself on his first visit. In an even more forceful way, Erofeev suggests that violence and the consequent guilt are always already preordained, as our place in the structure is already given to us by the course of human culture. “Life With an Idiot” is one of the most clear expressions of a tension that does not seem to find any resolution in Erofeev’s variant of Russian postmodernist prose. The individual is always somehow guilty in Erofeev’s artistic universe, but this guilt cannot be accounted for in an individual who is never given any way of coming to subjectivity.<sup>55</sup>

Rather than catalog variants of this problem in several more stories, a turn to Erofeev’s first novel promises to be more fruitful inasmuch as its bold protagonist aggressively asserts her own freedom and autonomy with every breath. Erofeev started writing *Russian Beauty* shortly after the *Metropol’* affair, which forms a significant part of its background. The novel was first published in French translation in 1990. Publication in Russia soon followed.

The story is narrated by its heroine, the Russian beauty Irina Tarakanova.<sup>56</sup> Her voice is very reminiscent in its tone of Humbert Humbert. Erofeev has admitted his debt to Nabokov in

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<sup>55</sup> The only sustained analysis of this story is in an article by Petra Hesse coincidentally entitled “The Pres-Absence of the Subject.” Hesse seems to agree on the primacy of discourse over subjectivity, but then goes on to claim that state power and violence are located at the place where discourse becomes impossible to detect. I am not able to make out from Hesse’s argument how she understands the exact status of state power. It seems simultaneously to maintain both a regime of terror and to lack any ontological status.

<sup>56</sup> The name recalls that of the so-called Princess Tarakanova, a pretender to the Russian throne during the reign of Catherine II. She is perhaps best remembered thanks to the striking (but historically inaccurate) depiction of her drowning as a prisoner in the the Peter and Paul Fortress during a flood in the painting by Konstantin Flavitskii. The name also recalls the Russian word for cockroach, an association completely lost in translation.

his own development as a writer. Ira is capricious, headstrong, and completely unreliable. We have, however, no other narrator but her. Her voice is so dominant that there is simply no other available perspective than hers. The plot is no less confusing than that of *Soul of a Patriot*. The narrative does not guide us chronologically through the plot. We do learn that the central event of Irina's life is her love affair with Vladimir Sergeevich, a powerful and very public figure. Her secret love affair with Vladimir Sergeevich, the man she calls Leonardik, continues even after the latter's death. In and around the description of this most fateful love affair are a whole host of lovers, suitors, users, flings, and whimsical adventures. Irina's narrative is a jumble of rambling outbursts, meditations, protestations, declarations, and poses. The only element of the story that is chronicled more or less in order is the progress of Irina's pregnancy, for she is carrying the child that Leonardik posthumously conceived with her.

*Russian Beauty* is in a very real sense "all about Viktor," for Irina Tarakanova is in many ways his female alter-ego. The consequences of the *MetrOpol'* affair constitute the historical background of the narrative. The ensuing conflict with the state undergoes complete carnivalization. The farcical references to historical events are sometimes quite clear, as for instance when Irina attracts the wrath of the state by posing for provocative photographs that are then published in the West.<sup>57</sup> Erofeev carries this joke even further:

No Ira, I say to myself, you're giving up too soon; your fate is not being decided in some insignificant office: six of the most fabulous beauties in America are following your story with fascination as, gazing at them, seeing them constantly on TV and in the movies, a million-man army of average Americans is jerking off, and once they gathered together—five white, one chocolate brown—in the fashionable Russian Tea Room in New York on Fifty-Seventh Street and, to the flash and hum of still and TV cameras, declared with one voice that I was not to be insulted, not touched, their sister who in her only fur coat, of fiery-red fox, had seemed a

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<sup>57</sup> Many of the contributions to *MetrOpol'* were denounced by the Soviet authorities as works of pornography.

distant beggar woman, a Cinderella, a scarecrow lost in snows and misfortunes (16).

[Нет, Ира, говорю я себе, рано вешать нос, твоя судьба решается не в какой-либо мелкой конторе, за ней, между прочим, неотрывно следят шесть самых красивых красавиц Америки, из которых, видя их постоянно в кино и по телевизору, прочится миллионная армия средних американцев, и они собрались раз все вместе — пять белых, одна — шоколадная — в фешенебельной русской чайной в Нью-Йорке на 57-й стрит и под вспышки фотоаппаратов, жужжание камер в один голос потребовали, чтобы меня не обижали, чтобы не трогали их сестричку, которая в единственной своей шубе из огненно-рыжей лисы казалась далекой нищенкой, золушкой, замарашкой, затерявшейся в снегах и несчастьях (18).]

The publication of this novel was awaited with great excitement and anticipation in Erofeev's own country. Reaction to the novel after its publication was mixed, but the general critical response was characterized by a mixture of outrage and confusion.<sup>58</sup> There is no doubt that Erofeev and his publishers in many countries counted on the sexual content of the book to contribute to a market success. This success failed to materialize both in Russia and in the countries where translations soon appeared. The mass reader was not prepared to rise to the intellectual demands of the book, while literary critics more often than not considered it just bad writing. In this way, the book presaged the fate that would befall most of the postmodernist prose writers in the course of the 1990s. Although theorists claim that postmodernism erases the boundaries between mass and high culture, this does not in any way guarantee that postmodern

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<sup>58</sup> There was little attempt to analyze the novel beyond its most obvious and offensive themes. Writing in *Novyi mir*, Evgenii Ermolin concluded that surface appearance had replaced depth and spirituality. Tat'iana Sotnikova sees the only significance of *Russian Beauty* to be the way it made Erofeev a celebrity in the West, turning him into a prisoner of his own public image. In his review of the English translation, David Plante also pans the novel due to its confusing plot and lack of depth. Elena Tikhomirova, whose more detailed analysis is examined below, wonders whether "the author himself is not serious about any meaning he projects." (55)

writing will be accepted by the same mass readership that demands romance and crime stories. Literary scandals based on the violation of thematic taboos are short-lived and *Russian Beauty* enjoyed much more notoriety than actual success.

It is at any rate difficult to imagine that the author had marketing in mind when he was writing the text in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, the book is permeated with sexuality. Irina Tarakanova lives on and through her voracious sexual appetite and the plot is driven by her various escapades. She is fully sexual in her relations with both men and women; categories such as “lesbian” or “heterosexual” are meaningless in describing her activities and attachments. In fact, her appetites and proclivities are so omnivorous that they do not contribute anything at all to her characterization. While those who dislike Erofeev’s novel have an easy time pointing out that it seems to contain nothing but gratuitous sex, it is just as reasonable to claim that sex and sexuality are not part of this work’s content at all. Sexuality in *Russian Beauty* is not an appetite, a craving, a source of pleasure or a means to power. For Irina, it is impossible to interact with the world, to communicate with her fellow human beings, or to find her place in the world without using sex as a means of negotiating her way. Sexual attraction and aversion, erotic couplings and decouplings, pursuit of and flight from partners—it is on these relationships that Irina depends for her sense of being a subject, an autonomous individual. In other words, Irina obtains only through her sexual organs that which most human beings obtain through their integration into a linguistic sign system. The Russian Beauty can and must still save the world, but no longer through the piety and humility of a Sonia Marmeladova. Irina will save Russia by running naked across an ancient battlefield.

What does it mean to save Russia; I asked my new friends, what does it mean? did I get a single intelligent answer from them? I did not. . . . “Oh, give up your silly dreams!” I said to them harshly; I was going to meet my death! They understood this and listened to me, though they were dubious: “But won’t this, Irina Vladimirovna, be terrorism? Won’t it be ecologically harmful?”

“No,” I say, “it won’t harm anything, and no human blood will be spilled.” “So what will be spilled? Everyone knows what: the semen, stinking like pus, of Russia’s great foe, the voluptuous flesh-devouring demon, usurper, and autocrat. And once it is spilled, he will rapidly droop, grow wrinkled and weak, and then justice will prevail, the sorcery’s endless spell will be broken, because the only explanation for all this is withcraft (217–18).

[Что значит: спасти Россию? Я друзей моих новых спрашивала: что это значит? Получила ли я от них какой-либо осмысленный ответ? Не получила. . . . Ах, оставьте вы эти свои глупейшие мысли! — я с ними строго разговаривала: я на смерть шла! Они это понимали и слушали, хотя сомневались: а не будет ли это, Ирина Владимировна, с вашей стороны, терроризмом? не повредит ли экологии? — Нет, говорю, ничему не повредит, и крови людской не прольется. — А что же прольется? — Известно что: вонючее, как гной, семя главного врага России, плотоядного демона, узурпатора и самодержца. А как прольется, он немедленно сникнет, сморщится, ослабеет, и тогда сила справедливости восторжествует, закончится вековечное колдовство, потому что иначе как колдовством всего этого не объяснить. (176)

Irina can only describe the struggle with the demon in terms of sexual coupling.

Defeating the beast can only be expressed in terms of sexual satiation and detumescence. This characterizes her relations not only to questions of good and evil, but also her relationship to politics, culture, friendship, work, family, and truth. This also makes it necessary that she not be exclusively heterosexual in orientation, monogamous in choice of partner(s), or limited in her techniques. Any limits on her sexual desires would necessarily limit her ability to relate to reality. If Freud was correct to see human sexuality at the root of all social relations and of all psychic disorders, one could read Irina Tarakanova as a simple exteriorization of this truth of the unconscious. This is almost certainly part of Erofeev’s conception of Irina as the Russian Beauty.

In her review of Russian “sex bestsellers” during and after perestroika, Elena Tikhomirova recalls the particularities of how sexuality had been subordinated to very specific cultural discourses. She identifies Vasilii Rozanov as the first to yoke sexuality to theories of “lofty love.” This link is taken up and complicated by ideas and themes such as Aleksandr Blok’s poems to the Beautiful Lady and Mikhail Kuzmin’s ethereal conception of homosexual relations. Tikhomirova plays on the multiple meanings of “blue love”<sup>59</sup> as she follows its paths through early 20th-century Russian culture until it reaches a kind of apotheosis in Andrei Platonov, many of whose works implicitly propagandize “the idea of the transformation of sexual energy into creative energy” (49). She seems to conclude that the burst of erotic writing in recent Russian literature is simply the result of many decades of pent-up repression. She cannot, at any rate, contribute any new understanding to Erofeev’s *Russian Beauty*, about which she simply claims that there are an astonishing number of different possible interpretations (55).

It is easy to overlook one important aspect of the narrative of *Russian Beauty*: Irina is also a writer. While she is not a professional writer and claims early in the novel that she has no talent for writing, the fact that she is producing a written text is revealed at several points, although in a seemingly haphazard or nonchalant tone. The most obvious gesture is her exclamation at the beginning of Chapter Eight when, taking up again the narrative begun in Chapter One, she tells the reader “*I erase and revoke all this nonsense!!! Don’t read any of the above!*” (86) [“ВЕСЬ ЭТОТ ВЗДОР ОТМЕНЯЮ И ПЕРЕЧЕРКИВАЮ!!! **Предыдущее не читать!**” (73)] Irina is clearly constructing her narrative as a written text, although the actual scene of writing is barely alluded to in the course of the action.

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<sup>59</sup> When speaking of love, the Russian attributive *goluboi* [blue] denotes male homosexual relations. This same adjective is associated with the sky (and, metonymically with things heavenly or related to divine truth), with nobility (similar to the English notion of “blue-blooded”), and with various symbolic themes common to European romanticism (cf. *Die blaue Blume*, by the German poet Novalis).



This often overlooked detail in the novel links it to the two well-known stories examined above. In all three works, Erofeev constructs a first-person narrative in which the protagonist is a writer of text. While sexuality and violence hold the attention of most of Erofeev's readers, the act of writing is Erofeev's hidden theme, bound inextricably with the other two. Tikhomirova does not recognize the extent to which Erofeev conducts the same kind of examination that she began in her study of the link between sexuality and discourse in Russian culture. Her inability to recognize this is perhaps due to the very different conclusions that she reaches regarding the nature of this link. While she believes that sexuality in Russia has been subject to repression through a discourse of spiritual sublimation, Erofeev's heroine illustrates the way in which discourse and sexuality are two aspects of an indivisible whole.

Irina's narrative is characterized by a peculiar energy that corresponds to her general character. She repeatedly claims in the course of the novel that she needs love. This is expressed in the text by a narrative that expresses at every moment the protagonist's powerful and all-consuming desire. Her sexual appetite is only part and parcel of a larger structure of desire that manifests itself in a will to control the narrative absolutely, and in that way to control the world and all the people in it. Her never-ending array of male lovers provides a series of signifiers that circumscribe a specific social milieu: the boss at work, the socially privileged artist, the servants of the security apparatus, border guards, spoiled children of the *nomenklatura*, the bohemian urban dissident, etc. The series can go on endlessly because it constitutes a desire with no object. Irina's erotic life illustrates the function of the peculiarly Lacanian notion of the object-cause-of-desire, the *objet petit a*. It deflects from and obscures the true object of desire, designated in the final analysis by the phallic signifier. For desire to function, this phallic signifier must remain repressed and forgotten in the obscurity of the Oedipal drama.

Irina's tragedy can be understood as the failure of this repression. Her encounter with the man she calls Leonardik brings her desire and her discourse to an end. Their relationship is characterized by an alternating approach and flight on the part of Irina. She is drawn to his symbolic power and her desire is enough to overcome his physical impotence. Her erotic power over him leads to his death, but his symbolic power over her grows only stronger after his physical disappearance. His identification with the state and with the Law is unmistakable and his return from beyond the grave is the traumatic return beyond which Irina's signifying chain cannot continue.

The end of the narrative presents a curious problem regarding the general status of narrative discourse in the novel. While Irina's stream-of-consciousness narrative seems confusing, it presents no metaphysical problems until the end of the novel, where the discourse simply stops with the completion of her wedding-suicide. As has already been noted, Venechka Erofeev perished at the end of *Moscow to the End of the Line*, but in that work the narrative voice adds, from somewhere beyond death, that it all ends here. Irina's narrative voice presents a more difficult problem. We have seen that her narrative does not tell her story chronologically, but why should we then expect her narrative to cease at the moment of her death? If there has been a confluence of narrative time and narrated time, at what point did this confluence take place? If there was always a disjuncture between the heroine and her narrative, then from what location is her story being told and what has happened to that voice at the conclusion? Or, to put the question in psychoanalytic terms: what are we to make of a narrative voice that clearly speaks in the name of the ego, seems to pass from existence along with the ego, but must necessarily be emanating from some "other" place?

While the "place" of Irina's voice may ultimately be impossible to pin down, there is one voice that clearly speaks from "beyond death." The reader eventually understands that Vladimir

Sergeevich, the Soviet relic as well as Irina's Leonardik, has brought the odor of death and decay to replace Irina's bergamot scent. And one of the few anchor points given in the novel is at the beginning, when the signifying chain of Irina's narrative begins during the gynecological examination at which she learns of her pregnancy. The truth of Irina's discourse is the discourse itself, emanating from the position of the post-Soviet Russian subject understood psychoanalytically; that is to say, it is a subject that exists only in the instant of signification and ceases to exist once enunciated. The signifier kills.

This nexus of narrative, sexuality, and death is not coincidental, but has been a concern of Erofeev's throughout all of his creative life. His very first published text was an early version of his essay on the Marquis de Sade. In this essay, as revised in 1994, Erofeev notes that Russia has always been a "paradise for sadists" and begins by claiming that Sade's value for the present is as a writer, which is to say as a "student of verbal truths." A survey interpretation of Sade's major writings constitutes the bulk of the essay, in which Erofeev claims that Sade does not glorify the behavior that bears his name, but demonstrates the inexorable law that leads from an ethical stance praising hedonism to violence and ultimately to political despotism.<sup>60</sup> Erofeev concludes:

Culture must pass through Sade, verbalize the erotic forces of nature, determine the logic of sexual fantasies. Only in the conditions of free knowledge of erotic laws, the elimination of hypocritical taboos, free mastery of the language of the passions, and, finally, a mentality that allows us to read Sade not so much as a pornographic revelation interesting in and of itself (a guidebook for masturbators), but as the philosophical credo of a sensualist, only then will it be possible to overcome the muteness that binds our confused and embarrassed culture.]

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<sup>60</sup> Slavoj Žižek has noted that not only Lacan but also Horkheimer and Adorno have, independently of each other, identified the writings of Sade as a radically honest ethical stance, fundamental for an understanding of modern culture.

[Культура должна пройти через Сада, вербализировать эротическую стихию, определить логику сексуальных фантазий. Лишь при условии ненатурального знания законов эротики, уничтожения ханжеских табу, свободного владения языком страстей, наконец, такой ментальности, которая позволяет читать Сада не столько как порнографическое откровение, занятое само по себе (путеводитель для мастурбатора), сколько философское кредо наслажденца, можно преодолеть ту болезнь немоты, которая сковывает «смущающуюся» культуру (Erofeev, “Markiz de Sad” 309–10).]

If we return to Popov’s novel again briefly, it becomes possible to suggest another reason why the dissident writers cannot approach the body of the dead leader. The graphomaniac discourse functions only as long as it does not approach too close to its object of desire. Writing, for all of Erofeev’s and Popov’s protagonists, becomes analogous to the drive that can only circulate around partial objects, for any approach to the repressed phallic signifier, to the instantiation of the law, threatens the integrity of the signifying chain itself. Russian writers and poets, far from being signifiers of Russian national identity, are rather captives of the signifying chain itself. The Russian specificity consists in the fateful position of the poet and writer within a symbolic system.

### **3.4. The Slippery Signifier**

It should not surprise us that this concern with and treatment of the role and significance of the writer in Russian culture does not manifest itself in any really analogous trend in Russian cinema. Aleksandr Rogozhkin’s film version of *Life With an Idiot* [*Zhizn' s idiotom*] (1993) is a remarkably faithful adaptation of Erofeev’s story for the screen. For much of the film we hear the narrator’s voice quoting large chunks of Erofeev’s text almost verbatim while the action of the narrative is presented visually. The result is a film that reproduces the intellectual and artistic content of the story without adding anything particularly cinematic to the film. It is

notable that critical discussion of this film only rarely treats *Life With an Idiot* as a work of cinema art in and of itself; it is always seen in its relation to the Erofeev text. It is as if a more thoroughgoing transformation of the story into the images of a visual text would fail to represent the agony of the Russian intellectual in the same way. This suggests that the unmasking of the grotesque brutality and perversion inherent in the symbolic construction of the Russian *intelligent* can only be carried out by means of an artistic repetition using the same tools of representation employed by the intelligentsia itself—the written word. A dissection of Russian identity construction on the level of the Symbolic order is not to be found in a media that relies on visual representation for its expression.

The single most notable exception to this principle is a film that addresses the issue of the signifier in a very direct way. The title of Vladimir Khotinenko's 1993 film *Makarov* refers simultaneously to the protagonist of the film, Aleksandr Sergeevich Makarov, and to a model of handgun, which the protagonist obtains at the beginning of the film. The protagonist, played by Sergei Makovetskii, is a poet struggling to survive in the chaos of post-Soviet Russia. He obtains the gun as a means of self-defense, but once he is in possession of his "Makarov," he begins to sink into a kind of mental illness that manifests itself in a complete loss of his previous identity. The critic Lidiia Maslova describes the problematic of the film as "the transformation of an *intelligent* into a bullet after his unsuccessful attempts to become a human being" (Maslova 9). It is not completely clear what Maslova means by his unsuccessful attempts to become a human being. She certainly has in mind his failure as a poet in the new conditions of a market-driven economy. But the film suggests that the new economy is not the determining factor in his fate.

Makarov and his wife live in a world completely and absurdly dominated by Russian poetry. They recite verse to each other over the table at meals. In this environment, their young

son Osia (presumably named for Mandel'shtam) remains mute, although normal child development would have him talking at his age. Makarov's own given name and patronymic, Aleksandr Sergeevich, identify him immediately as a poet, giving him an identity he cannot simply discard at will. The hero is already as firmly structured in the symbolic network at the start of the film as he is at the end. Khotinenko has exaggerated the extent to which the identity of the poet is already given by a stifling milieu as repressive as it is artificial. A tradition that has elevated its poets and writers to the extent that Russia has done leaves anyone who would bear the name "poet" no freedom at all. Poets and writers are taken up into a cultural unconscious that they themselves are as helpless to fight as a neurotic who has not been analysed. This is reinforced by contrast with the single most ridiculous figure in the film, the young poetry critic, friend and idolizer of Makarov, who sings the praises of postmodernism as the new trend by which a poet can "decompose the world" in order to "return to the word its original meaning." In the field of battle demarcated by the definition of "Russian Literature," this is a call to arms. Postmodernism opposes the stance of writers who recite the words of great poets as holy scripture or magic incantations. Khotinenko seems to call into question the very significance of postmodernism inasmuch as it is subject to the power of the signifier no less than any other literary trend. "The Word" does not have any "original meaning."

Makarov as signifier takes control of the life of Aleksandr Sergeevich, turning the gentle poet into an instrument of violence. There is nothing particularly inevitable about this transformation: the signifier can take on any number of signifieds at any given time. There is no way to predict what position a given subject will take up under a given set of conditions. Psychic structure is always present as potential, as Lacan points out in his theory of psychosis. It is a matter of pure chance whether something in the subject's experience will "trigger" the mental illness. Serious film critics such as Elena Plakhova and Natal'ia Sirivlia have noted the

possibility of a basically Freudian reading of this film. Once he has obtained the gun, the poet finds that the weapon releases the forces of his repressed instincts, his id, and the powerful forces thus released lead him to violence and destruction. This reading recognizes the role of the erotic as analyzed above. Makarov's relationship with the mysterious Margo is important in that it is



Figure 4

never clear whether Margo's fascination with Makarov is due to the power of his poetry or to the power of his gun: she seems to need both elements simultaneously in order to find him sexually attractive.

This Freudian reading leaves out the role that Khotinenko has clearly attributed to the signifier itself. Makarov loses his identity to the

extent that he is taken into the structure of the signifier Makarov. This is illustrated in a brilliant, although unabashedly artificial image at the end of the film. As the protagonist stares into his image in the mirror and contemplates suicide, the film shows us his physical transformation into a bullet (Figure 4). He is completely subsumed into the structure of the Makarov. His symbolic identity is simultaneously his death sentence. The film suggests no way out of this situation, but poses one single question at the beginning and the end of the film: *Makarov nuzhen?* The contexts require different English translations: at the beginning of the film the thuggish dealer whispers to him "Hey, need a Makarov?" while at the end of the film the question, whispered in the mist by a disembodied voice asks "Is Makarov necessary?"

The important link that is easily missed in Makarov is the way in which the signifying chain that gives structure to identity manifests what is traditionally regarded as the poetic function of language. Margo needs both elements of Makarov, the poet and the gun, because

they are really one and the same signifier. The opposition between violence and culture that gives the family its stable identity is a red herring: it is the poetic function of the Symbolic that makes the poet into an instrument of violence.

The experience of Russian postmodernism suggests that the power of any individual poet to give or take away from the word is much less than readers of poetry tend to assume. The deconstruction of Soviet discourse, with which this chapter began, turns out to be an impossible task. It is the accomplishment of Russian postmodernism to teach Russians to recognize this discourse for what it is. Russian literature is not a great humanistic tradition in which talented and gifted poets and writers teach Russians who they are and how to live. Russian literature is a profoundly anti-humanistic linguistic structure in which the individual cannot create his or her own autonomous identity but without which no identity can exist at all. The specific feature of Russian culture is that this humanistic tradition has gained such explicit power over the collective imagination and has become, as in the claims of Boris Groys, a creator of reality.<sup>61</sup> Art is more real than reality itself. According to this logic, it is a minor point to argue whether Russian postmodernism accomplished its task of deconstructing and overcoming Socialist Realism. Russian postmodernism shows us how the mechanism “Russian literature” operates “under the hood.” Far from wishing to destroy the literary tradition, these writers exalt Russian literature as the inhuman environment in which humanity continues to negotiate its identity. The next chapter will examine the implications of this assertion in its most extreme form.

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<sup>61</sup> See the discussion in Chapter 1.



## Chapter 4. The Discourse of the Psychotic

### 4.1. Sots-art

In this chapter I will look specifically at the work of Vladimir Sorokin, a writer whose work could easily have been discussed in the previous chapter along with other representatives of postmodern literature. Sorokin is, however, a special, perhaps even unique, figure among the writers of late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Although he is often categorized together with other more or less clearly defined postmodernists and his name figures in various lists of “tough,” “cruel,” or “alternative” writers, in-depth discussions of his texts always take place in isolation. Consensus among scholars and critics proclaims Sorokin as the single most consistent representative within Russian prose literature of the movement known as sots-art.

Sots-art is the movement that comes closest to representing a distinctive Russian contribution to international postmodernism. While its name echoes the contemporaneous movement of pop-art in the West, and in particular with the work of the American artist Andy Warhol, its dependence on Soviet Socialist Realism and Stalinist aesthetics makes it a phenomenon particular to the Soviet Union. Its history began in the mid-1960s with the early work of Komar and Melamid.<sup>62</sup> They coined the name “sots-art” for their distinctive style in 1972 and the first exposition of their work followed soon after. The essence of their art was the reproduction of the internal logic and the external form of Stalinist Socialist Realism in its most distinctive and enduring models and clichés. The artists themselves never saw their work as a simple parody or even a “deconstruction” of Socialist Realism. Komar and Melamid drew

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<sup>62</sup> The basic outlines of the history of the movement are summarized in the booklet by Olga Kholmogorova.

attention to the stylistic distinctiveness of this aesthetic practice. While an ironic stance very often stood out clearly in their work, their paintings and installations often seemed to oscillate between two worlds: they were simultaneously parodies of Socialist Realism and the best representatives of that method.

It proves to be extremely difficult to characterize sots-art in any definitive way. The artistic practice of Komar and Melamid was highly paradoxical at its core. It was both oppositional and imitative; it was both inside and outside of Stalinist discourse. The paradox was emphasized in the early work of the two artists in their practice of placing themselves within the work. Often, the only distinctly foreign element in an otherwise Socialist-Realist image was the signature of the two artists at the bottom. More insistent is their presence as young pioneers



Figure 5

in their early *Self-Portrait* [*Avtoportret*] of 1972 (Figure 5).

This image clearly questions the relationship of the artists to their artistic creation, the relationship of subject to object. “We are all products of the system, it is all inside us rather than outside...” [“Все мы продукты системы, и все это в нас, а не вне...”]<sup>63</sup> This awareness of the pervasiveness of Soviet ideology gives the reflexivity of this work an added dimension. The image does not only interrogate the relationship of subject (author) and object (work of art), but also denies the viewer the privileged position of dispassionate subject gazing upon the artistic

object. The viewer must negotiate the discursive field that locates an oppositional subjectivity within a more or less purely Stalinist aesthetic.

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted by Kholmogorova from an interview with Komar and Melamid. She does not specify which of the two artists spoke these words.

In this way, the most successful examples of sots-art will be those works that manifest absolutely no style of their own but that mimic most perfectly a foreign style and an other discourse. One consequence of such a practice is that the sots-art “movement,” to the extent that such can be identified, cannot develop or evolve in the way that most aesthetic movements do. Like postmodernism in general, sots-artists cannot seek the new but can only immitate variations of the dominant aesthetic. The distinctiveness of the work of sots-art consists in its ability to engender a moment of dissonance in the consciousness of the viewer. This dissonance goes beyond the cultural significations analyzed in the previous chapter. Komar and Melamid’s signed slogans (e.g., “Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood”) do not exemplify the instability of the Symbolic order but rather disengage the signification of the work from the notion of agency. In a similar way, Erik Bulatov’s “Krasikov Street” or “Brezhnev” portrait (see



Figure 6

Figure 6) achieve this dissonance by effacing the signifier while remaining faithful to stereotypical Stalinist imagery.

There are relatively few followers of sots-art in the strict sense. Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov and Lev Rubinshtein, poets who are often associated with sots-art, are more properly understood as conceptualists. Their works deconstruct rather than reproduce Soviet discourse.

While sots-art in cinema has been limited mostly to experimental filmmakers such as the Aleinikov brothers, one feature film of the early 1990s provides a particularly

interesting counterpoint to both Sorokin’s prose and to the visual sots-artists. Sergei Livnev’s *Hammer and Sickle* [*Serp i molot*] (1994), with its unconventional interrogation of gender

identity, seemed like something quite new when it was first released,<sup>64</sup> although upon more careful consideration it is not too far from the ineffable ironic stance that we saw in Komar and Melamid. The film's plot is reminiscent of Boris Groys's concept of Stalinist "total art" inasmuch as it portrays the actual "making of a Soviet Man" out of a peasant woman. This undertaking is shown to



Figure 7

be as much a creative artistic project as a strategy for providing the manpower to build a state. The film has a multi-layered structure that enables it to function at once as an exercise in sots-art, an demonstration of Stalinist myth-making, and, ultimately, a meditation on the sots-artistic gesture in post-Soviet culture. The new Soviet man and woman, Evdokim Kuznetsov and the bride chosen for him by the State, are first depicted as happy Soviet citizens who find fulfillment in building a socialist society. They are perfectly embedded in a standard Stalinist narrative. As the plot progresses, however, Evdokim finds himself increasingly frustrated and alienated from the society around him as he experiences increasingly intense desires that cannot be satisfied within



Figure 8

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<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Susan Larsen's comments ("Melodramatic Masculinity 107–115). Most of the film's early viewers were Westerners; the film received no official distribution within Russia and was rarely, if ever, seen in anything but video copies.

the limits of his predefined identity. His alienation first becomes palpable at the key moment in the film's plot, in which Evdokim and his bride become the prototype for Vera Mukhina's famous worker and peasant-woman statue that would travel to Paris for the 1937 World's Fair. This part of the film is narrated as a documentary film within Livnev's larger film. As the two young people are captured in a freeze-frame at a dance (Figure 7), we see them still vibrant and full of life. By the time they actually pose as models for the statue, however, they seem to be genuinely frozen in place, prisoners of their new role as the masterwork of the number one artistic genius—Stalin



Figure 9

himself (Figure 8). The final statue (Figure 9) has effectively killed them off: their form is lifeless and cold as they travel to their triumph in Paris.

This narrative of Evdokim's metaphorical death within the Mukhina narrative is then repeated at the level of the basic plot narrative. Evdokim is finally transformed (again, by Stalin himself) into a museum exhibit for the edification of the people. Completely paralyzed by a gunshot wound to the spinal cord, Evdokim has lost all power of agency. It is at this moment, however, that he has become transfigured into a Soviet hero, about whom novels (one entitled *Hammer and Sickle*) are now written. While the visual sots-artists produced images that were openly parasitic on Stalinist art, Livnev's film makes explicit the more-than-Symbolic death of the subject that was already implicit in the earlier works. The de-subjectification of the signifier leads directly to the verbal art of Vladimir Sorokin, to which I will now turn.

## 4.2. Sorokin and his Style

While Sorokin has also been categorized variously as a conceptualist or postmodernist, his best-known literary texts come close to the method of *sots-art* in the way they reproduce the discourse of Socialist Realism in Soviet literature. His first medium was graphic art and it is no doubt through his work with visual culture that he first became familiar with the ideas and trends of *sots-art*. His talent is his ability to mimic with perfect accuracy the style of a diverse cast of Russian prose writers of the present and the past. Sorokin's artistic project is an ambitious one, but without any distinctive style in his writing that we could refer to as the "Sorokinesque," it is a difficult undertaking to describe with any precision what Sorokin accomplishes in his writing or what his artistic agenda might be.

This difficulty is manifest in one of the earliest scholarly attempts to come to grips with Sorokin's writing in the larger context of post-Soviet or, more specifically, post-utopian cultural practice. Serafima Roll's analysis of "stripping Socialist Realism of its seamless dress" takes for granted the notion that postmodernist culture in Russia is engaged in an overarching project to dismantle the cultural edifice of the Soviet era.<sup>65</sup>

Roll examines two specific aspects of Sorokin's writing: the shocking aspects of his short stories at the level of their content, and his subversion of discourse through the use of other voices and through the multifarious breakdowns of linguistic coherence in his texts. Although these two moments are certainly key in Sorokin's works, Roll's analyses fail to elucidate in any detail how these texts actually function. She summarizes the content of several of the stories from the 1992 collection entitled simply *Vladimir Sorokin*, and claims that they "demystify the

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<sup>65</sup> It must be noted that many of Russia's postmodernist writers of the late 1980s made explicit statements of just this conviction in their interviews and in newspaper essays. Sorokin is a rare exception in this regard. Self-declared postmodernists were no more likely than their 1960s predecessors to deny the seriousness of the work in which Russian writers are always engaged. The "work" of late- and post-Soviet postmodernism was (and remains?) the demontage of Soviet aesthetic practice.

Soviet myth of human happiness” (66). Yet, she makes no attempt to illustrate the mechanism of this demystification and it remains completely unclear how depictions of decapitations, public lewdness, sexual perversions, pedophilia, senseless violence, and naked aggression lead to the “demystification” of human happiness. It is much more intuitive to claim that such extreme fantasies leave cultural mystifications untouched. It is not unreasonable to say that the Soviet myth of human happiness is preferable to the “reality” of which Sorokin provides a glimpse in these texts.

It is the uncertain status of “reality” that makes Roll’s analysis so problematic. At the very outset, Roll claims that post-utopian writing works toward “the exposure of the complexity of everyday life hidden beneath the veneer of the highly politicized and ideologically glossed literary space” (65). Shortly thereafter, in a description of the usual structure of Sorokin’s short prose works, Roll claims that these stories typically begin with a “vignette of the Socialist ideal” followed by a subversive and shocking second half that exposes “the ‘actual’ life events hidden beneath the glossy pictures of social paradise” (66). Through the first half of her essay, Roll seems to believe that the “shocking” second half of Sorokin’s short stories exists to provide a “real-life” contrast to Soviet reality. By the end of the essay, however, having understood that Sorokin is up to more than simply contrasting reality and ideological varnishing, she concludes that “Sorokin suggests that writing is not an imitation of any reality, but a secondary order of reality, that of signs” (74).

Roll takes great pains to show that Sorokin is engaged in a project of deconstructing and demystifying the ideology-saturated culture of a totalitarian society. It is nevertheless difficult to say what would be left of society once ideology is removed. Furthermore, Roll investigates two very distinct textual practices in Sorokin’s writing, which she is forced to continue treating separately throughout her article. If we leave aside for a moment the relation of the text to

reality, it remains to analyze the relation of the text to itself. Specifically, the question arises as to why Sorokin combines the scrupulous imitation of traditional literary styles with what can only be described as mad textual ravings, preverbal grunts, ritualistic incantations, and linguistic and phonetic gymnastics. Why are these two authorial signatures so often juxtaposed in a single story?

It is worth referring to a number of specific texts in order to illustrate the exact nature of the phenomenon. In “A Business Proposal” [“Delovoe predlozhenie”], the narrative opens with a discussion in the editorial offices of a student publication. Two authors are trying to get their multi-part manuscript accepted for publication and find they must fight against the dull stupidity of a short-sighted editor. The conflict is a familiar one to a reader of late Soviet urban prose—the honest, earnest struggle of the sincere individual against bureaucratic recalcitrance. The style of the writing is uncomplicated, conversational, and bland “standard literary Russian.” At the midpoint of the story comes the break between the two strikingly different halves of the story as most of the participants in the confrontation begin to leave.

“Gena, would you please stay for a minute?” said Avdotin while fastening his briefcase. “They came by from the VPP about your article, I totally forgot to tell you...”

Kolomiets went over to the couch and sat down again.

Anton fastened the briefcase, wiped his chin, and, looking out of the open window, said:

“I was thinking yesterday about this mess with the construction brigade. You know, I have a business proposal to make to you.”

Kolomiets smiled and nodded in assent.

“Why don’t you close the door,” said Avdotin quietly.

Kolomiets rose, went to the door and, having closed it, turned the round bolt of the lock twice.

He then turned to Avdotin and smiled yet more broadly, baring even white teeth.

Avdotin slowly got up from the table, approached him, and, reaching out with his hand, caressed his cleanly shaven cheek with his trembling fingers. Kolomiets gave a quiet laugh and laid his palms on Avdotin’s broad shoulders. They looked into each



other's eyes for a moment, and then their faces slowly moved toward each other.  
They kissed for a long time, leaning against the door.

[— Гена, останься на минуту:— проговорил Авдотин: застегивая портфель. — Тут из ДНД приходили насчет твоей статьи, я забыл совсем сказать тебе...

Коломиец подошел к дивану и снова сел.

Авдотин застегнул портфель, потер подбородок, глядя в открытую дверь:

— Я вчера думал насчет этой катавасии со стройотрядом. Знаешь, у меня к тебе есть деловое предложение.

Улыбаясь, Коломиец кивнул.

—Закрой-ка дверь, — тихо проговорил Авдотин, Коломиец встал, подошел к двери и, прикрыв ее, повернул дважды круглую ручку замка.

Потом повернулся к Авдотину и еще шире улыбнулся, обнажив ровные белые зубы.

Авдотин медленно выбрался из-за стола, приблизился к нему и, протянув руку, провел дрожащими пальцами по его гладко выбритой щеке. Коломиец тихо засмеялся, положил ладони на широкие плечи Авотина. Многовенье они смотрели в глаза друг другу, потом лица их медленно сблизились.

Они долго целовались, привалившись к двери (Sorokin, V., *Sobranie sochinenii* 1:490–91).]

This is exactly the kind of sudden transition that Sorokin makes routinely in his stories and that have earned him the reputation of a “shocking writer.” The shock in this case comes from the transition from a typical business meeting, conducted according to the well-known rules of Soviet “professionalism,” to an erotic encounter between the editor and one of his authors. The shocking element would seem at first glance to stem from the unconventional makeup of the couple—homoerotic encounters were not commonly found among the materials considered worthy of depiction in literature.<sup>66</sup> But an examination of the language of this passage reveals

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<sup>66</sup> It is easily overlooked by scholars that the reader of more than two or three stories by Sorokin must necessarily acquire some sort of immunity from the full effect of the shock. It does not take long before readers become familiar both with the repertoire of “shock devices” and with the feeling of having the narrative rug pulled out from under them. The connoisseur of Sorokin’s prose begins to expect it.

that in fact no sharp break has occurred at all. The discourse of the narrative continues unbroken in the same voice, with the same intonation, the same vocabulary and level of sophistication. As the story moves quickly toward its conclusion and the subjects of sexual perversion, dismemberment, incest, and cannibalism are spoken of or alluded to, the constancy of the discourse becomes all the more striking. It makes little sense to speak of the relationship of Sorokin's prose to Soviet reality when there seems to be no relationship between Sorokin's narrative discourse and the diegetic reality of the story's content itself.

A similar phenomenon may be observed in the long narrative *Four Stout Hearts* [*Serdtsa chetyrekh*], which contains no radical break in the middle. The action-packed narrative features sex and violence in abundance from the very first page. The narrative itself moves along with a rhythm all its own that is completely unaffected and has no relation to the story being told. In a central episode, the main figure murders his own mother, destroys her body in a meat grinder, and transforms her into the "liquid mother" that will serve as a linguistic cypher and talisman for the remainder of the story. The brutality of the scene, too long to cite here, is not manifest in the language of the story at all (Sorokin, V., *Sobranie sochinenii* 2:367–73). The narrative moves along, unchanging from a description of a mother-and-son holiday reunion to the gruesome violence of matricide.

The brutality in Sorokin's prose strikes the reader with such force not simply owing to the violence depicted in the story proper. It is the complete lack of appropriate context, the unexpectedness of it all, that shocks and repels contemporary readers. Scenes that are commonplace in Hollywood's blockbuster action films and on nightly television news have not traditionally been considered fit for literary depiction, particularly in the Russian tradition. Violence in Sorokin's printed texts strikes the unprepared reader with a greater force that does violence on television.

In the years since Sorokin's major works have been published,<sup>67</sup> several scholars and critics have attempted to solve the riddle of Sorokin's narrative voice, which is distinctive in its very ability to mimic the voices of others. In much the same way that the image of the sots-art painting is frozen in semiotic time and space, so Sorokin's narrative voice seems frozen and impervious to outside influence or internal forces. N. N. Shneidman, the author of several books on late Soviet literature, recognizes Sorokin's play with various literary styles as a manifestation of postmodernism, but does not recognize the degree to which the discourse of the moment operates exclusively according to its own laws. In a brief plot summary of "Season's Opening" ["Otkrytie sezona"], Shneidman notes that the Turgenevesque hunting trip is reminiscent not only of the *Hunter's Sketches*, but also of the much more recent genre of village prose.

But then, all of a sudden, everything changes. Sergei aims and shoots, and the dark running shadow collapses. They approach what turns out to be a dead human body, then cut it into pieces and prepare to cook and consume its liver. Thus, what begins as a description of an idyllic episode in rustic life ends with the portrayal of an incongruous cannibalistic scene (186).

Shneidman seems to consider unimportant that this scene is incongruous only to a reader outside of and unfamiliar with Sorokin's aesthetic. To the hunters themselves, absolutely nothing has changed. They are no more and no less in the Turgenev mold after they have consumed their human prey than they were before the kill. The narrative makes no distinction. To the extent that the narrative voice has a consciousness, that consciousness is completely oblivious to the content of the story it tells.

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<sup>67</sup> Sorokin was one of the last Soviet underground writers to be published. He was already writing through most of the 1980s. Although he first came to the attention of wider audiences outside of Moscow in 1985 with the publication of two stories in *Literaturnaia A—Ia*, and the publication in the emigré press of *The Queue* [*Ochered*] in Russian and in translation had garnered him considerable prestige, he remained so unacceptable a writer to such a broad segment of the reading public that he was unable to find a publisher for his works until several years after Soviet press censorship was abolished. His book-length works written in the 1980s came out in complete editions in Russia only in 1994–1995.

Boris Groys discusses Sorokin in a short section of his book on the “total art” of Socialist Realism, of which Stalin was the demiurgical author / creator. Socialist realism was a true, “full-blown” modernism and, thus, naturally gave way to the postmodernism that Groys discusses under the rubric of “post-utopian” art. Post-utopian art could only overcome the Stalin-demiurge by repeating him. Like the repetition compulsion familiar from psychoanalytic discourse, post-utopian authors master Stalin by submitting him to their repetition of him in their own version of the old aesthetic. It is, therefore, quite unambiguously a question of power.

The relevance to Sorokin is not completely clear, for while Groys discusses the prose writer in this same context, he stresses the way in which Sorokin lays bare the “mythological network” in which the individual is dissolved (99–102). One might ask whether Sorokin retains for himself an exceptional status vis-à-vis the mythological network, or whether he acknowledges his own subjection to it. Is the extraordinary intertextuality of his prose an exercise of his own demiurgical pretensions? Such a relationship to the text would seem to violate the *sots-art* attitude embodied by Komar and Melamid as discussed above.

Perhaps the most serious and sustained attempt to explain the phenomenon of Sorokin comes from several publications by Mark Lipovetsky. He stresses the role of mythology and mythologization, and his own conception of Russian postmodernism as a “dialogue with chaos.” For Lipovetsky, no understanding of Sorokin can be complete without a full appreciation of the role of mythologization and ritual in Soviet culture. In a complex analysis of almost the entire corpus of Sorokin’s written works, both prose and drama, Lipovetsky demonstrates how Sorokin remythologizes and re-ritualizes totalitarian mythologies and rituals, thus bringing to the surface what had been hidden in the normative Soviet narrative. Lipovetsky goes further than any other scholar to date in describing the “operation” of Sorokin’s prose, but he does not go significantly further than any other commentator in elucidating its meaning. The totalizing power of

discourse remains unchanged and the price of attaining freedom is to be struck dumb (Lipovetsky, “Vladimir Sorokin’s ‘Theater of Cruelty’” 190).

It has been clear to almost all commentators that a psychoanalytic reading might be particularly revealing in the case of Sorokin’s discourse. Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover has been more unequivocal than most on insisting that Sorokin’s work bears a great affinity to the avant-garde and, thus, to the surrealist impulse that developed simultaneously with the rise of psychoanalysis.<sup>68</sup> She turns her attention to the role of desire in Sorokin’s texts and characterizes his system as an “excremental poetics.” Sorokin’s attention to bodily functions shows us the way to understanding the role of desire in his texts:

Sorokin’s poetics is a poetics of the body, in which body parts function as corporeal or incorporated representations of signs caught up in the drama of desire and signification (*signifiance*). The body is thus a producer of signs and as such a transgressive “limit,” offering access to experience and allowing discourse to be lived by both the speaking and reading subject (285).

By this point, Vladiv-Glover’s vocabulary has become unambiguously Lacanian and her argumentation is fascinating, but not entirely convincing, for she spends more of her article speaking of the Real than of the Symbolic. The driving force of Sorokin’s prose for Vladiv-Glover turns out to be the desire to become the *objet petit a* for the Other, a hopeless goal. What could it mean if an aesthetic practice (sots-art in its visual or verbal mode) that deals explicitly with issues of representation, speech, and narrativity exhibits a breakdown, an atrophy, or a decay of the Symbolic order, of the signifying function?

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<sup>68</sup> Vladiv-Glover’s reading of Sorokin as avant-garde is a weighty claim that merits further treatment. She implicitly challenges those who insist that Socialist Realism was in its own way a kind of postmodernism *avant la lettre* (this would include, above all, Epstein in his “Origins and Meaning” essay) or a fulfillment of the modernist project (Groys). Those who make such claims must also, for the sake of a consistent argument, convincingly demonstrate that Russian postmodernism, including sots-art, is at least foreign, if not antithetical, to the avant-garde impulse as exemplified in early 20th-century European culture.

### 4.3. Text Gone Criminally Insane

Jacques Lacan taught extensively about just this kind of breakdown of the Symbolic order in his work on the psychoses. It was the subject of his dissertation and became the focal point of his third yearly seminar (1955–56), in its published form subtitled *The Psychoses*. In this seminar, he broached one of his most significant hypotheses: the structure of the psychotic personality is a manifestation of the foreclosure of the paternal signifier from the Symbolic order. The paternal signifier, called at other times the “primary signifier” and, more frequently in later years, the “Name-of-the-Father,” is the fundamental element in the processes of the Freudian Oedipus complex as reformulated by Lacan. It is the “paternal metaphor” that gives the developing child access to the Symbolic order and to language. If the paternal signifier is merely repressed, the realization of the paternal metaphor is still achievable and the individual will perhaps develop into a neurotic personality. If, however, the paternal signifier is foreclosed, shut out of the realm of possibilities, then the paternal metaphor cannot be realized. A person for whom the paternal signifier has been foreclosed will struggle to attain language within a potentially psychotic psychic structure that can be “triggered” at any time.

The structure of psychosis has more than a passing relevance for the understanding of Sorokin. Vladiv-Glover is not the only scholar to make use of psychological categories in the analysis of his writing. Even commentators interested primarily in the verbal structure of Sorokin’s prose note the tendency of the text to enact a kind of linguistic insanity. Serafima Roll, for instance, writes:

The layers of life that re-surface from under the ideologically glossed veneer of the first part [of “The Tobacco Pouch”] do not have any comprehensible or rational signification. While containing remote references to the “real world,” they remain in the completely non-referential domain of the hero’s disturbed and schizophrenic psyche. The borderline between the two is of course

fragile, but in this specific case, ... the real psychotic tendencies prevail (Roll 70–71).

Such passages could be cited from other critics and scholars as well.<sup>69</sup> The non-referential nature of the discourse, the mad ravings, the linguistic breakdown, often down to the phonetic level, are all reminiscent of a psychotic's discourse.<sup>70</sup> In his reconsideration of the Schreber case, made famous by Freud, Lacan made the point that the psychotic's discourse does in fact have an interlocutor: the subject's own unconscious.

Nowhere does Lacan claim that the Symbolic order completely ceases to operate in the psychotic patient. Without anthropomorphizing the texts of Sorokin, it is possible to see in an overview of his works a series of interrogations of, and with, the symbolic and signifying systems. In and of itself, such an interrogation is mere postmodernism. The characteristic Sorokinesque moment is the moment of failure. I will attempt an inquiry into the “origins and meaning”<sup>71</sup> of this failure.

One of Sorokin's most multifaceted experiments with the power of discourse is his large work titled *The Norm* [*Norma*], completed in 1984 and first published in Russia in 1994. *The*

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<sup>69</sup> For other examples, see the review by Aleksandr Shatalov in which he likens Sorokin's writing to the schizophrenic style of Sasha Sokolov (204) or Lipovetsky's borrowing of Katerina Clark's notion of “modal schizophrenia” for understanding chaos and absurdity in Sorokin's early short stories (“Theater of Cruelty” 178–86).

<sup>70</sup> The title of this chapter is clearly a reference to Lacan's “four discourses,” although I make no claim that one could formulate a discourse of the psychotic as a “fifth discourse.” I would only stress the importance of isolating the specific structure of this discourse, as Lacan began to do for his four.

<sup>71</sup> For Russian culture this phrase hearkens to Nikolai Berdiaev, who used it for his inquiry into the sources of Russian communism. It is self-consciously cited by Mikhail Epstein for the title of his ambitious analysis of Russian postmodernism (and, by extension, Russian cultural history from the beginnings of the Petrine empire).

*Norm*<sup>72</sup> is an exceedingly heterogeneous and self-referential collection of texts. They would at first seem to be unified by an obscure framing story, telling how the text of the work, as well as its ostensible author, fell into the hands of the KGB. But it quickly becomes clear to the reader that the book is unified by a single signifier: the word *norma*. The first part consists of a series of short texts written in various styles and depicting discrete, different contents. The word *norma* signifies a substance that the characters of the various texts consume as nourishment. The sign *norma* directs the reader towards a fully concrete and tangible referent. The food is described in careful detail; it appears in various liquid and solid forms, takes on various shades and hues. Only after absorbing several of these texts does the reader at some point suddenly and unexpectedly come to the realization that the substance being eaten is the processed feces of small children from whom the material is harvested in schools and childrens' homes. While the nature of the substance changes not a bit, the entire readerly experience of the text is radically and irrevocably changed.

Throughout the book, the signifier *norma* plays a role, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. As Peter Deutschmann has suggested, the semantic content and the semantic emptiness of the word play their respective roles. *Norma*, after all, has really no meaning of its own until it is equipped with a modifier, a complement, or a referent. It can refer to an amount of something, to a standard, to a quality, to a guide, or an imperative. It does, however, carry with it a voice of authority, a guide for behavior, a standard for evaluation. A *norma* is something to which one ought to conform. Failure to measure up to a *norma* is, of course, abnormal. This message is particularly clear in the second part of the book which consists simply of a list of phrases that take the reader from “normal birth” [normal'nye rody] to “normal death” [normal'naia smert'].

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<sup>72</sup> The italicized English word will refer to the title of the work, the italicized Russian word will refer to the specific word as it functions in the text as key signifier.



The signifier *norma* is the glue that holds the texture of this book together. In those places where the signifier is not explicitly present, particularly in the third and fifth parts of the book, its role in the text becomes most interesting. The third section of the book contains a text, subtitled “Cattle Plague” [“Padezh”], that tells of the brutal destruction of a collective farm on which the “livestock” consists of human beings held in cattle stalls. As Lipovetsky has demonstrated, this text is a complex structure comprising a Buninesque frame narrative, which contains in its turn the text of “Cattle Plague” proper. This inner text is itself constructed as a series of distinct discourses, each one modeling a specific modality of Socialist-Realist writing. At the center of the action is a miniature model of the dilapidated collective farm, which reproduces the farm with exacting detail, but in its ideal (in other words, normalized, form). A pair of Party inspectors systematically destroy both the collective farm and the model until “everything possible is destroyed and unity between the ‘model’ and ‘reality’ is achieved” (Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction* 209). It is a perfect literalization of the Socialist-Realist cliché of making dreams into reality.

The fifth part of the book has been discussed in detail by Deutschmann. It consists of a series of letters by a World-War-II veteran who complains of the lack of respect he is given by neighbors and relatives at his dacha. The retired veteran addresses his letters to a certain Martin Alekseevich, the actual owner of the dacha. The tone of the letters is first one of trust and confidentiality, but along with the texture of the letters, it gradually sinks to the level of obscenities, abuse, accusations, and finally incomprehensible ravings. Deutschmann sees in this development the result of the frustration experienced by the old man when his expectations are disappointed, when the *norma* of social behavior is no longer observed. If Deutschmann is correct, it is not the social transgression per se that leads to the disintegration of the old man’s psyche, but more the breakdown of the signifier that leads to the malfunction of the text.

Just as the signifier *norma* holds together the texture of the text, its disappearance, breakdown, or failure leads to a disintegration of the text itself. *Norma* is not only the title of the book, but it also serves as what Jacques Lacan referred to in his teaching as “the quilting point,” the signifier that gives coherence to an entire symbolic network of other signifiers. This central organizing signifier does not itself have a signified, but it serves as the nexus for the entire signifying chain. When this quilting point disappears or becomes unstable, symbolic communication becomes impossible.

Psychoanalysis once again comes to the aid of textual analysis. In his discussion of this fifth part of *The Norm*, Deutschmann finds schizophrenia to be the necessary result of the interplay of power and language in Sorokin’s work. His explanation is convincing for this particular text, but would have to be examined anew for every other similar case. Even in his early short stories, some of the most characteristic and most incomprehensible moments of Sorokin’s work are those in which the text seems to lose its coherence, to become delusional, to babble nonsensically, to lose its grip on any kind of reality outside of its own discourse. But the contexts are too varied and the linguistic and visual mechanics too specific for one master key to explain every case. Still largely unaddressed is the question of the relationship of Sorokin’s play with literary styles and discourses to these moments of textual schizophrenia, where the literary work itself seems to go insane.

Deutschmann insists (correctly, in my opinion) that the signifier *norma* never completely loses its semantic content. Although it functions as the organizing signifier in the text in the way that Lacan characterized his quilting point, it continues to represent social norms and, by extension, social power. Thus, the structural breakdowns of the text parallel the psychic breakdown that takes place in the subject, for whom the organizing power of society does not function as it does for most. The logical conclusion of such reasoning, however, is that psychic

breakdown is to be traced back to a breakdown in societal authority, to a failure of Lacan's Big Other. Deutschmann concludes his analysis of *The Norm* thus:

The signifier "norma," equipped with a large extension, becomes a *point de capiton* only when just about everything is explained by norms (which is easy to recognize in the narrated figures of *The Norm*, particularly the writer of the letters to Martin Alekseevich, and in the representatives of State authority). From this narrow perspective, the real uncertainty and openness of the Big Other is reduced to the primitive opposition normal–abnormal, which satisfies us by virtue of its simplicity. But since the system of norms is reduced by Sorokin to a sticky, disgusting "norm," we are forced to recognize that the actual substance of our passions is shit.

[Der mit einer großen Extension ausgestattete Signifikant "norma" wird erst dann zum *point de capiton*, wenn schlechthin alles auf Normen zurückgeführt wird (was an den erzählten Figuren in NORMA, insbesondere am Schreiber der Briefe an Martin Alekseevič und an den Vertretern staatlicher Autorität leicht zu erkennen ist). Aus dieser engen Perspektive wird die eigentliche Unbestimmtheit und Offenheit der großen Anderen auf die einfache Opposition "normal–abnormal" vereinfacht, welche uns gerade dank ihrer Simplität zufriedenstellt. Indem aber bei Sorokin das Normsystem der großen Anderen in eine klebrige, ekelerregende "Norm" zurückgeführt wird, müssen wir erkennen, daß die eigentliche Substanz hinter unseren Begeisterungen Scheiße ist (50).]

One of the virtues of this interpretation is the recognition of the role played by desire in the operation of the signifying system of the literary work. Its conclusions rely, unfortunately, on a psychoanalysis of several characters from the various stories of *The Norm*. A much stronger interpretation would explore the way that desire operates within the verbal texture of the work itself rather than in the psyches of fictional characters. This can be done by drawing out the conclusions reached in our reading of *The Norm* into an examination of Sorokin's more recent long work, *Blue Lard* [*Goluboe salo*].

Although some commentators have called this text a relatively readable work, the text puts up significant roadblocks to the casual reader. It begins as an epistolary work, a series of

strange love letters written to a boy. The language is barely Russian at all; the lexicon of the letters is liberally fortified with words and expressions from foreign languages, mostly from Chinese, and a whole repertoire of terms that can perhaps best be characterized as reminiscent of a kind of Orwellian Newspeak. The opening lines of the book constitute a representative example:

Greetings, my small one.  
My weighty boy, tender bastard, divine and filthy top-  
direkt. To recall you to mind is a hellish business, rips laovai, it is  
*weighty* in the literal sense of the word.  
And dangerous: for sleep, for L-harmony, for the  
protoplasm, for skandkhi, for my V-2.

[Привет, mon petit.  
Тяжелый мальчик мой, нежная сволочь, божественный  
и мерзкий топ-директ. Вспоминать тебя—адское дело, рипс  
лаовой, это *тяжело* в прямом смысле слова.  
И опасно: для снов, для L-гармонии, для протоплазмы,  
для скандхи, для моего V-2 (7)]

Readers will have a difficult time orienting themselves in this strange text. Not all readers will be aware of the presence of two glossaries at the back of the text, a guide to Chinese words and expressions used in the text, and a second list of “other words and expressions” (345–50). Having discovered them, the reader will certainly attempt to use these lists of defined words as a way to make sense of the text. These efforts will be frustrated, however, inasmuch as the glossaries are largely self-referential and in any case do not give sufficient information to make the text any more “readable.”

The most the hapless reader can do is to try to construct meaning out of the fabric of the text much as one would attempt to work out any difficult puzzle. With or without use of the glossaries, the reader of *Blue Lard* constructs meaning out of a texture of signs with unclear or completely unidentified referents. Although the text holds together, it becomes disconnected

from any recognizable reality; what is really going on in the story is the cloning of great Russian writers who, through their literary activity, produce a mysterious substance called Blue Lard.

This first, futuristic sci-fi part of the novel leads to a second, mystical-pagan part and then, finally, to a third part that takes place in a historically identifiable but at the same time completely fictional Russia. It is the Russia of 1954, still ruled by Stalin, who has divided Europe with Hitler after their common victory in the Second World War. This is Stalin but, at the same time, not Stalin. The historical pantheon of Stalin's henchmen is here seemingly in its entirety, including Khrushchev, who now appears as a sadistic nobleman and not very secret lover of Comrade Stalin.

As in the first part of the novel, the reader is once again presented with a text that holds together, makes sense, but has lost all connection to the historical realia upon which it feeds for its material. The characters in the story carry recognizable names and occupy recognizable positions, but at the same time they seem completely strange. Each historical figure carries some familiar, some distorted, and some completely unexpected traits. Stalin, for example, is still the feared tyrannical leader of the Soviet Union. His fearsome gaze and capricious whims are well-known parts of every Stalin portrayal. However, the central moment of his "cult of personality" in this world is his drug addiction—his most powerful gesture is injecting himself with a narcotic. In what for many Russian readers is perhaps the most shocking portrayal of the work, Anna Akhmatova (AAA) and Osip Mandel'shtam<sup>73</sup> are portrayed as crazed, delusional vagrants desiring nothing more than to offer up their very bodies to be abused for the greater glory of Stalin.

It quickly becomes clear that there is little use in trying to analyze these characters for any hidden meaning in their portrayal. The world of *Blue Lard* is one in which every figure both

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<sup>73</sup> Two of Russia's most important 20th-century poets, still revered by many Russians not only as literary giants but also as martyrs to Stalinist tyranny.

is and is not his/her historical prototype. This is something more than the free play of signifiers that I and others have analyzed in so many works of Russian postmodernist writers, including many earlier works of Sorokin. *Blue Lard* is a text that is trying very hard to make sense, to “speak” coherently. But the attempt seems to be on the verge of veering off into delusion or nonsense during one of Stalin’s drug-induced euphorias or during the “creative process” of Russia’s Silver-Age poets, now cast as repulsive *iurodivye*.<sup>74</sup> The text seems in imminent danger of losing its coherence, of breaking down into the transsensical cry so familiar from Sorokin’s other works.

Unlike *The Norm*, *Blue Lard* has no central signifier that can function as the quilting point, giving meaning to the discourse of the text. While a more classically Freudian approach to this problematic might look for what is repressed in the text and how this repressed element might announce itself in hidden or disguised forms, Lacan alerts us to the possibility that the master signifier might not be repressed within the text, but foreclosed from or by it. It was in fact a written text, the famous memoirs of President Schreber, that allowed Lacan to illustrate for his students the structure of psychosis.

Prior to all symbolization—this priority is not temporal but logical—there is, as the psychoses demonstrate, a stage at which it is possible for a portion of symbolization not to take place. This initial stage precedes the entire neurotic dialectic, which is due to the fact that neurosis is articulated speech, insofar as the repressed and the return of the repressed are one and the same thing. It can thus happen that something primordial regarding the subject’s being does not enter into symbolization and is not repressed, but rejected. . . . In the subject’s relationship to the symbol there is the possibility of a primitive *Verwerfung*, that is, that something is not symbolized and is going to appear in the real (Lacan, *Seminar III* 81).

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<sup>74</sup> The “Holy Fools” that have played so major a role in the history of the Russian church and society. Their first appearance coincides with the rise of Muscovy and the first “Russian” ideology (see, for example, the standard account by Billington 59–60).

Lacan taught that the psychic structure of psychosis is engendered by the foreclosure of the master or primordial signifier, what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father. This is the signifier that initiates the Oedipus drama, institutes the Law of the Symbolic order, and allows the ego to become a subject. The foreclosure of the primordial signifier does not automatically result in psychosis. Indeed, some readings of Lacan suggest that it may be a quite normal psychic process. It does, however, set up a structure that disturbs the normal operations of symbolization. Without the law of the primordial signifier, the subject is left anchorless, without that quilting point that enables the link between signifier and signified. Furthermore, the subject is left without the means to comprehend what now appears as the unregulated desire of the Other.

This structure of foreclosure does not render speech impossible. Indeed, the psychotic is more often the one who won't shut up. The discourse of the psychotic may be characterized as a proliferation of meaningfulness without meaning. Meaning itself is not extinguished, but the processes of symbolization that produce meaning are so disturbed that the meaningfulness of the psychotic's discourse manifests itself not in symbolic meaning, but in hallucinations in the Real. *Blue Lard* fits fully into this structure, with which *The Norm* merely flirted. *The Norm* lurched back and forth over the division between the discourse of the neurotic (in which the master signifier, *norma*, is repressed and returns in various guises) and the discourse of the psychotic (in which the master signifier is simply missing and the text breaks down into nonsense).

Lacan insists that the rejected signifier returns in the Real. What can this mean in the context of *sots-art*? It seems clear that the blue lard itself, a nonsensical, indescribable, inscrutable, indivisible, and temperatureless substance returns from nowhere else but the Real. The blue lard is fundamentally different from the *norma* of the earlier work. The *norma* retains at least some measure of semantic substance and even if this substance is illusory, it allows the

signifier to function as the primordial signifier and guarantor of the Symbolic order. The blue lard means nothing, it is nonsense itself. From where does it return? From the very bodies of cloned Russian writers, the creators (but here only their simulacra!) of the Symbolic order. In other words, from the Lacanian Big Other. But by rejecting this name from the Other, the subject has gained freedom from the big Other, from the Law, from the Name-of-the-Father. The Law need not dictate the subject's identity. The price is merely one's sanity. Or the recognition that delusion is the only real truth the subject can ever know.

Russell Grigg, who translated *Seminar III* into English, has written an essay on the Lacanian conception of psychosis that gives additional insight into the significance of the notion of foreclosure. Foreclosure is the necessary precondition for the psychotic structure, but it is not the trigger of an actual psychosis. Grigg claims that Lacan identifies this trigger in some of the most difficult passages of *Seminar III*, those in which he addresses the role of "*l'appel*." Grigg offers several possible English translations for this term, including the "call," "calling," "appeal," or even "interpellation" (60). The coincidence of terminology with the Althusserian notion of identification through interpellation is striking. Grigg goes on to remind us that the Lacanian foreclosed signifier, as it returns from the Real, is marked by the properties of the Imaginary (57). It is in the Imaginary order that the primary operations of identification take place, operations that may be seen to be effective in the discourse of Russian nationalism. Since that language itself constitutes for Lacan the Big Other, the failure of symbolization in foreclosure structures a failed encounter with the law. The trigger of the psychosis, an encounter with a "real father," may also be conceived as an encounter with any possible representative of the Big Other, including, first and foremost, the State.

Sots-art began as an encounter with the particular aesthetics of Socialist Realism in Stalinist culture. As has been seen, the peculiar operation of sots-art goes beyond the specifics



of any particular totalitarian culture. What this analysis suggests is that the aesthetics of sots-art is a reaction to and commentary on a fateful conjunction of totalitarian state power from which there is no escape (the Big Other, the ubiquitousness of language); the desire to create, through the cult of the Word, a “national culture” for Russia in the absence of a Russian nation; and the dangers posed by imaginary identification in a multi-ethnic empire in crisis. The self-referential moment in sots-art is neither parody nor satire. The experiment in socialist art forms is the signifying chain set loose of its moorings, the result of a failed symbolization upon which the most basic identificatory processes of this particular culture can only endlessly repeat the same senseless course.

#### **4.4. Sorokin and Cinema: *Moscow***

Endless repetition seems to have bored Sorokin himself, who in recent years has moved from literary prose to screenwriting. His first major script was the screenplay to the film *Moscow* [*Moskva*] (2000), directed by Aleksandr Zel'dovich. The film took many years to produce due to problems with funding, and the script by Sorokin was published in 1997 at a point when completion of the film was in doubt. Mark Lipovetsky's widely read discussion of the film in a 1998 issue of *Iskusstvo kino* was thus a discussion of the verbal text of the film. In it he discussed the film as a portrayal of the “new Moscow style,” a kind of neo-imperial style reminiscent of Stalinist monumentalism, within which Sorokin's trademark fascination with verbal discourse could still be seen. Zel'dovich's film was, on the one hand, very faithful to Sorokin's text, but the visual product shifts the emphases of the scriptwriter's literary work, on the other.

The plot of the film is built from the interactions of six characters, three female and three male, over the course of several days sometime in the mid-1990s. Irina is the deeply indebted

owner of a nightclub with two adult daughters, Masha and Ol'ga, the latter of whom suffers from autism. Irina has become romantically involved with Mark, the psychiatrist who is treating Ol'ga, while Masha is engaged to be married to Mike, a small-time bandit-businessman with larger ambitions. Mike has been betrayed by Lev, who transports large sums of cash for Mike during his international travels. Mike brings Lev to the nightclub where he is to remain until a missing consignment of cash can be located. These six individuals become involved in a tangled web of sex and violence in which Mark commits suicide, Mike is killed by rivals, and Lev marries both sisters with the mother's blessing.

The outward appearance of the world depicted in Zel'dovich's *Moscow* bears some similarity to Livnev's earlier stylization of Evdokim Kuznetsov. The six main characters are also somewhat stiff in their movements. Their motions and gestures are cold, their speech is mechanical. They rarely speak to or with each other in an actual dialogue; their individual voices seem to take a trajectory into the void rather than to engage another subject. Their speeches exist to be performed rather than for communication. Messages do not reach their intended recipients, but hang in a stifling atmosphere that surrounds and oppresses everyone.<sup>75</sup>

The behavior of the autistic daughter Ol'ga differs only in degree from that of the other "normal" characters and her first song performed in the café, seemingly sung to a rock, is emblematic for the existence of all characters in this world. Ol'ga's songs are important for another reason as well: they are displaced renditions of Soviet-era songs associated with military heroism and the relationship to one's native land. In Ol'ga's rendition, they are characterized by strange tonal dissonances and uneasy rhythms, which destroy the semantic meaning of the text for everyone except the singer herself, who seems to take some secret pleasure in the sounds and words she produces. Thus, the songs are both overly familiar and completely strange, a private

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<sup>75</sup> Objects seem to follow the same rule: the missing money around which the action circulates is not so much missing, as it simply failed to arrive.

language with which an autistic woman converses with herself and creates something approaching meaning.

Whatever the original role of the Chekhovian allusions in Sorokin's script,<sup>76</sup> Chekhov is the source for much more than verbal quotations in the completed film. The entire atmosphere is suffused with a kind of Chekhovian vacuum. Although the spoken lines of the characters are mechanical and empty, as noted above, there is nothing else to carry the action of the plot. Sex and violence, the other two distinct elements of the film, are equally meaningless. The language of Chekhov's dramatic works and the dialogue of *Moscow* differ only in the way in which they gesture toward the vacuum. Whereas Chekhov exploited the emptiness of speech to illustrate the inability of human individuals to achieve any real emotional or spiritual communication, the human speech of the film gestures toward a failure that transcends individuals. Sirivlia has noted this aspect of the dialogue in the film and sees it as a consequence of the filmmakers' desire to foreclose attempts at interpretation.

As a result, all the signs that make up the text are torn from their usual set of values and associations and are exhibited before us completely unadorned, in a mysterious flickering hollowness. . . . By way of such ruptures between the outer organization and emotional content of the text, Zel'dovich manages to communicate to the viewer a certain feeling of spiritual vacuum, of the impossibility of a conscious perception of reality with which his characters are afflicted.

[В результате все знаки, из которых составлен текст, оказываются изъятыми из привычного ряда оценок и ассоциаций и инсталлируются перед нами сами по себе в загадочной, мерцающей пустотелости. . . . За счет подобного рода разрывов между внешней организацией и эмоциональным содержанием текста Зельдович и умудряется сообщить зрителю то ощущение духовного вакуума, невозможности осмысленного восприятия реальности,

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<sup>76</sup> Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov noted Sorokin's affinity with Chekhov as early as 1992 in his afterward to Sorokin's collection of stories.

которым маются его персонажи. (Sirivlia, “Nemoe kino” 70–71)]

Sirivlia’s terminology describes the failure of speech on the level of the Symbolic. Signs taken out of their context, appearing before us only as hollow materiality, short circuit the function of signification in discourse. Subjectivization in the Symbolic order becomes impossible as speech is reduced to small, local, and disfunctional attempts to construct a discourse without metaphor. The film *Moscow* catalogues for us the results, which include an autistic woman singing to herself, the comical argument between Mike and Mark as to which of them Russia needs most, and Lev’s narration of a riverboat city tour for Ol’ga: “This is the Kremlin. The President lives here. This is the chocolate factory Red October. They make chocolate here. This is the Church of Christ the Savior. Here people will pray to God.” These are representative of any number of scenes in the film in which we are faced with discourse that is familiar but at the same time completely meaningless in the larger context of the film.

Sorokin and Zel’dovich have stated in numerous interviews that they made this film to be a portrayal of the reality of Moscow in the 1990s. This makes it all the more remarkable that the film is to a large extent a collection of cultural and literary clichés with no immediate relevance to post-Soviet Moscow. It is even more remarkable that Moscow itself as cultural signifier is almost completely absent in the film. It is present in the title and in the form of a large sign constructed out of hollow metal tubing, which is seen in a key scene near the end of the film (see Figure 10). While other familiar cultural signifiers appear in the abortive attempts



Figure 10

at discourse in the film, (e.g., superfluous man, the Unknown Soldier, money) the name of the city does not figure in the dialogue of the film as a literal or metaphorical element. In an interview published on his personal website,<sup>77</sup> Sorokin reveals that the name of the film was not important to him and that, in fact, Zel'dovich thought it up. As screenwriter, he was principally interested in an image rather than the word: "... for the film the more important thing is that Lev hides the money in the word 'MOSCOW,' which stands at the entrance to the city" ["... для фильма более важно то, что Лев деньги хранит в слове «МОСКВА», которое стоит на въезде в город"]. The sudden appearance of MOSCOW here, at the end of the film, recalls the fate of the signifier in the second part of Lacan's definition of foreclosure—it returns in the Real *as signifier*.

This film is not, however, simply a neat illustration of Lacanian structure. "Moscow" as signifier remains as foreclosed from discourse at the end of the film as it was throughout. It is more dead sign than signifier, illustrating what Sirivlia called a "mysterious flickering hollowness." Its dead weight is made manifest in one of the cleverest verbal exchanges of the film:

**Masha:** By the way, you never told me where you hid the money.

**Lev:** In Moscow.

**Маша:** Кстати, ты так и не сказал, где ты прятал деньги.

**Лев:** В Москве. (Sorokin and Zel'dovich 112)

Furthermore, Sorokin himself, in the quotation above, called the appearance of MOSCOW here not a *sign* but an *image*, a word he seems to have chosen quite deliberately. Finally, it is not clear what a "return in the Real" could mean in the context of this film. MOSCOW does share one important property with the stolen money: the money is also invisible until the very end of the film and not only its location but its very existence is somewhat in doubt. It remains

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<sup>77</sup> <<http://www.srkn.ru/interview/moskva.shtml>>.

unrepresented and unrepresentable in the dialogue as well, alluded to more than directly named. This does not prevent the money from becoming the direct cause of Mike's violent death and (via Lev) the indirect cause of Mark's suicide.

The foreclosure of the signifier can be traced through the very different reviews written by Lipovetsky, to which I have alluded above. In analyzing the script, Lipovetsky borrowed from Vladimir Paperny the idea of *Culture Two*, one half of a binary opposition between experimental and monumental culture.<sup>78</sup> *Culture Two* became for Lipovetsky the best term to describe the "new Moscow style" that he saw at the center of Sorokin's script. In reviews of the film that he wrote in 2001 for *ArtMargins* and *Iskusstvo kino*, the central place formerly occupied by the "new Moscow style" has been replaced by a void [*pustota*], over which the filmmakers have constructed a new language of power. This new language of power, however, recalls a much older discourse on power that takes its orientation from the MOSCOW, the now foreclosed signifier that would reference not the post-Soviet Moscow of the 1990s, but the much older center of the Soviet and even pre-Soviet imperial state. Moscow as the heart and center of the imperial state is the missing metaphor. Just as the missing money did not so much stop the action of the film so much as knock it off course, the foreclosure of the primary metaphor does not make discourse impossible but rather sets it loose from its moorings. This provides the missing context not only for the Chekhovian pseudo-dialogue but also explains one of the strangest plot points of the film—Mike's obsession with ballet. Ballet was and continues to be an art form enjoyed by a social elite. Ballet became more accessible to the broad mass of the people in the USSR, but the change took place not because ballet was democratized, but rather it

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<sup>78</sup> I'm making do with a crude oversimplification of Paperny's work, which began with architecture but ultimately developed a complex and ambitious cultural diagnosis. *Kultura-2* was published in Moscow in the mid-1990s, before Sorokin's script was completed, and was frequently discussed among intellectuals and artists. An English translation was published in 2002.

became identified with the best of “Soviet” culture and thus an art form that could be claimed united all Soviet peoples. As a source of Soviet state prestige, ballet became unambiguously part of what Paperny designates *Culture Two*. Thus, Mike's desire to sponsor the ballet was not so much a new Russian tycoon's attempt at philanthropy as it was a longing for the monumental grandeur of the Soviet empire.

Sots-art is certainly Russia's most distinct contribution to the transnational postmodern phenomenon. In the 1970s, the work of Komar and Melamid concentrated on the specific monumental qualities of Socialist Realism. As the Soviet Union crumbled, sots-art expanded to comment on pre-Soviet Russian culture as well as the international culture of global capital. Vladimir Sorokin in particular shows how the operation of all available Russian discourses depend on the invisible support of the legacy of imperial state power and culture. As long as this imperial legacy remains invisible, the desire to create a new Russian national culture must founder on the shoals of its own internal contradiction. The reproduction of this contradiction is at the heart of the split personality of sots-art, with which this chapter began. The creation of a coherent Russian identity cannot be achieved by transcending, disavowing, or forgetting but rather by engaging with the imperial legacy. The following chapter will examine an example of such an engagement.

## Chapter 5. Restructuring Fantasies

### 5.1. Time Warps

One of the most sensational prose works to be published in the late perestroika period was a novella written in 1989 by Aleksandr Kabakov. *Nevozvrashchenets*, which was soon translated into English as *No Return*, is the story of a scientific researcher in Moscow who has the surprising ability to “extrapolate” coming events out of the present situation and, thus, to predict the fate of the country. In performing this extrapolation, he experiences the future as if he were actually living in it. The result is a kind of virtual time travel, in which the futuristic technology usually encountered in a traditional sci-fi plot is replaced by the fantasy of the first-person narrator himself, inasmuch as he is living in the future through the very act of “creating” it. The future seen by the narrator is a brutal dystopia of crime, violence, ethnic conflict, terror, and a totalitarian post-Soviet state. It is the nightmare scenario that haunted many Soviet citizens during the last years of perestroika. Any attempt by the reader to understand the specific causes of the chaos is frustrated by a narrative style that is as opaque as the world it attempts to describe. Some scholars consider the novella to be poorly written (Shneidman, *Russian Literature, 1988–1994: The End of an Era* 155), and since *No Return*, Kabakov has not been among the most significant or visible of post-Soviet writers.<sup>79</sup> The significance and notoriety of his novella came from the uncanny skill of Kabakov’s own extrapolation of the political and social developments that would lead to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the chaos of the early 1990s.

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<sup>79</sup> Although he has not given up creative writing, he now works mostly in editorial positions, a kind of work he did in the years before 1989.



The uncanny relevance of the novella to the ongoing trauma of the Soviet breakup obscures the fact that as a work of creative prose it is exemplary of a kind of narrative that is both quintessentially postmodern and quite different from the works of the writers and filmmakers examined in the previous two chapters. Temporal juxtapositions become increasingly common in many works of this period, which meditate on the state of the country through the juxtaposition of various periods in Russia's troubled history. These works are united not only by a particular content but also by a specific artistic style. Kabakov's "poor writing" has the effect of creating readers who are thrown into the very same chaos that confronts the hero of the narrative. When the narrator of "Life with an Idiot" encounters himself in the insane asylum at the end of the story, the attentive reader has already been prepared for this surrealistic event by the intensely intellectual substrate of the narrative and the symbolic structure created. The phantasmagoric hell related to us by the first-person narrator of *No Return* confuses the reader as much as it reflects the confusion and helplessness of the hero.

This chapter will examine the work of two significant representatives of this particular kind of Russian postmodernism. The writer Viktor Pelevin and the filmmaker Karen Shakhnazarov are different from each other in many ways, but Shakhnazarov's films of the late 1980s/early 1990s and Pelevin's prose works up to around 1997 share several significant traits. Both engage in frequent temporal juxtapositions, in which the characters seem to exist in more than one reality. Although the contrast between different time frames and geographic locations are often quite drastic, the hero of the narrative suffers no rupture in consciousness as a result. At the same time, the subject is confronted with confusing and often frightening situations that threaten to destabilize his or her very sense of personal identity and profoundly to interrogate his or her integration into a larger social collective. Both Shakhnazarov and Pelevin manifest in their work an intense interest in significant events in Russian history and an eagerness to return

to the same cursed questions that have been worked over by so many minds before them. The period demarcated by the reign of Nicholas II elicits a particular fascination for them both.<sup>80</sup> Their works do not lend themselves to any kind of simplistic program for the salvation of Russia despite the fact that Pelevin in particular has invested some considerable energy into his reputation as a writer with a message.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the intensity of their questioning does reveal something of the specific challenges facing the search for a viable Russian identity in the context of a crumbling empire.

## 5.2. Viktor Pelevin and His Virtual Worlds

Viktor Pelevin was unquestionably the most popular Russian writer for most of the 1990s. His books were read and eagerly discussed by people of all ages and of various educational levels and social positions. A large number of web sites appeared, and rumors concerning his obscure personal life circulated with a mystifying intensity.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, he was a controversial figure due to the often irreverent content and tone of his tales, as well as to the opinion held by the vast majority of professional critics that the young writer was a frivolous joker lacking any true literary talent. The titles of many journalistic reviews of his works illustrate this attitude: Aleksandr Zakurenko's "The Sought-after Void" ["Iskomaia pustota"], Pavel Basinskii's "The

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<sup>80</sup> As we have seen in the films of Govorukhin, nostalgia for the empire was strong in the late- and post-Perestroika period, and calls for the restoration of the monarchy were frequent. Many seemed to believe, in complete disregard of the work of political and social historians, that the Russian Empire on the eve of the Revolution was essentially healthy and that the Bolshevik takeover could have been avoided by more competent rulers.

<sup>81</sup> Pelevin's popularity has more than a little to do with the myths and legends that surround his person and he has been an active propagandizer of them. For details, see McCausland, "Viktor Olegovich Pelevin."

<sup>82</sup> One site in particular, <<http://pelevin.nov.ru>>, has become a valuable resource for scholars due to its longevity, the consistency with which it is maintained, and the seriousness of the writers who request or allow their writings on Pelevin to be posted there.

Pelevin Syndrome,” or M. Sverdlov’s “The Technology of Authorial Power” [“Tekhnologiya pisatel'skoi vlasti”], the last of which is a long-winded declaration of war upon the writer who purportedly terrorizes any critic who dares to find fault with his works. Igor' Shaitanov, chairman of the jury for the Russian Booker Prize in 1997, justified eliminating Pelevin’s novel *Chapaev and Pustota*<sup>83</sup> from the competition on the grounds that “[w]orks like this act like a cultural virus—they destroy the cultural memory” (quoted Cowley 22).<sup>84</sup> One aspect of Pelevin’s image as a writer that contributes to his popularity is the opinion among his fans that he is a writer of ideas. According to this opinion, he preaches the teaching of Eastern spirituality in much the same way that Dostoevskii in his time preached his particular ideas of Orthodox Christianity. Clearly the professional critics do not share this opinion regarding the seriousness of Pelevin’s message.<sup>85</sup>

Nonetheless, the work that first brought Pelevin to the attention of the wider public, the 1992 novella *Omon Ra*, shows only an incidental interest in any teachings coming from Asia. This book was interpreted as a brilliant and biting satire of the Soviet space program and, in a wider sense, the Soviet attempt to construct a virtual reality that would supplant ordinary

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<sup>83</sup> I follow the practice of many Slavists and refer to this novel with a direct translation of its Russian title. Andrew Bromfield’s translation into English was published in the United Kingdom as *The Clay Machine Gun* and in the United States as *Buddha’s Little Finger*. Neither title attempts to capture the absolutely essential concept of the Russian title, in which the protagonist’s last name, Pustota, is the Russian word for “emptiness” or “void,” and the title as a whole follows the general preference among Russian literati for such bifurcated titles as *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Fathers and Sons*, and the like. Bromfield’s rendering of the protagonist’s name as Pyotr Voyd compensates somewhat.

<sup>84</sup> Shaitanov later tried to contextualize more properly his terminology, apparently believing that Cowley and others were deliberately misrepresenting his point of view (Shaitanov 4). This is in general consonant with the whole tenor of discussions around Pelevin’s talent and worthiness as an author in the tradition of true “Russian literature.”

<sup>85</sup> Boris Paramonov is a significant, albeit strange exception. He maintains that Pelevin’s philosophical content merits his inclusion in the pantheon of Russian writers.

everyday reality. It is perhaps Pelevin's most densely written work and it is not possible to treat all of its themes here. Some of the most important and characteristic aspects of his writing, however, do find expression in this first longer work.

The story takes place during the childhood and youth of the protagonist, and many of the story's themes are introduced with a childlike inflection. His given name, Omon, is taken from the acronym for the *otdel militsii osobogo naznacheniiia*, a "special purpose" paramilitary police division. The second name, Ra, refers to a god of Egyptian mythology and is adopted by the youth later in the novel. He is thus marked by his very name as bifurcated into Soviet and "Eastern" parts.<sup>86</sup> The adult world is experienced by the boy as stultifying, dull, and vaguely oppressive, and he quickly finds that escape into fantasy makes life much more bearable and interesting. His fascination with flying is a yearning for freedom, a desire to escape the mundane world of his everyday existence. It seems clear from the very start of the story, however, that freedom in this case is more than simply freedom from the material constraints of society. Early in his childhood, Omon discovers that freedom can be found within his own imagination. While watching a film about fighter pilots, he realizes that "I can look out from inside myself like looking out of a plane, it doesn't really matter at all where you look out from, what matters is what you see" (7–8). Once the boy has learned the power of his own consciousness, he decides that he has no need to depend on the external world for his individual experience. In his childish imagination, he can literally go anywhere he likes under his own power and at any time he wishes.

From the time he begins his cosmonaut training, however, Omon seems to be caught in the tight and deadly grip of external reality. He is soon told that Soviet technology does not

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<sup>86</sup> It is significant that this is different from a common conception of Russian identity as being the mediator between East and West. For Pelevin, the "East" is always *other* to Russia; Russia's position vis-à-vis the "West," quite important in other contexts, has no real significance for this particular binary.

allow for manned space flights and, thus, the flights are all automated. For reasons that are never explained, these automated flights still require a crew, the members of which can never return to Earth and therefore die at the end of their missions. In this way, Omon's realization of his dream to fly into space becomes a death sentence. Omon's particular assignment will be to fly to the moon and explore its surface in a motorized vehicle, after which he will leave a beacon and shoot himself in a last heroic act of self-sacrifice. Omon does not wonder why he must take his own life rather than simply die of suffocation on the surface of the moon. At no point during his training does the boy ever doubt that he will indeed be launched into space and land on the moon despite numerous additional clues to the contrary that even the attentive reader is likely to overlook. The fact that Omon, sealed in the capsule of his rocket ship, will never leave Earth, is only revealed at the end of the story. The only thing real in the entire production is the gun by which Omon is to die for the glory of the space program.

Within the narrative, it remains unexplained why it is necessary for several young men to participate in a staged fantasy for which the authorities could easily have hired actors. Indeed, they have apparently done exactly this for other aspects of the Soviet "space program." A key to the mystery comes in an indirect way from Colonel Urchagin, the wheelchair-bound KGB officer who supervises the training of young cosmonauts. On the eve of his purported space flight, Omon is called aside by Urchagin who gives him a kind of final blessing:

Remember, Omon, although man, of course, has no soul, every soul is a universe. That's the dialectic. And as long as there is a single soul in which our cause lives and conquers, that cause will never die . . . . Just one pure and honest soul is enough for our country to take the lead in the conquest of space; just one pure soul is enough for the banner of triumphant socialism to be unfurled on the surface of the distant moon. But there must be one pure soul, if only for a moment, because the banner will be unfurled within that soul (150).

[Запомни, Омон, хоть никакой души, конечно, у человека нет, каждая душа — это вселенная. В этом диалектика. И пока

есть хоть одна душа, где наше дело живет и побеждает, это дело не погибнет. . . . Достаточно даже одной чистой и честной души, чтобы наша страна вышла на первое место в мире по освоению космоса; достаточно одной такой души, чтобы на далекой Луне взвилось красное знамя победившего социализма. Но одна такая душа хотя бы на один миг необходима, потому что именно в ней взвьется это знамя. (*Sochineniia* 1:107)]

This confession of faith by the old colonel links the political satire of the story with Pelevin's larger metaphysical concerns. Omon must participate in the mission believing in the reality of his trip to the moon, for it is only in his consciousness that the trip can ever take place. In turn, if the trip takes place in his consciousness, then it takes place in reality in the same way that the young boy believed he could fly simply by using his imagination. Thus, the power that gave the young boy a life-giving freedom is the same power that allows a totalitarian state to represent itself through simulation as a major power in space exploration.

Pelevin's notion of freedom, imagination, and the aesthetic creation of reality quite distinctly recalls the notion developed by Boris Groys of the Soviet regime, specifically in its Stalinist form, as an essentially aesthetic project. It is, therefore, not surprising that much of the humor in this novella bears a generic resemblance to the techniques employed by the sots-artists. One concrete example from an early scene of the novel will illustrate this observation: upon matriculating in the Mares'ev Red Banner Flying School, the new cadets are drugged and their legs are amputated at the knees. No Russian reader can fail to understand the macabre joke. Mares'ev is the hero of Boris Polevoi's famous novel *The Story Of a Real Man* [*Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke*] (1946), in which a fighter pilot who has lost his legs in an accident returns to active duty through sheer force of will. The boys in the flying school can only become "real men" through a materialization of the novel with which two generations of Soviet youth had been raised.

While Pelevin's earlier parody of Soviet reality was often limited to the quotation of linguistic clichés to humorous effect, his use of Soviet tropes, images, and rituals approaches the style of the sots-artists. One clear example of this is the appearance in the story of the canine Laika, the "first Soviet cosmonaut." We should recall here the "Laika Cigarette Box," a work by Komar and Melamid, in which they make the dog into an aesthetic object by transferring her to canvas. Pelevin goes one step further by bringing Laika back to life as an aging and incontinent, but decorated and glorified member of the Soviet gerontocracy.

A number of commentators have called attention to the visual aspect of Pelevin's writing style. Viacheslav Kuritsyn, writing about *The Life of Insects*, goes so far as to refer to Pelevin's prose as "cinematic" (Kuritsyn 8). However, Pelevin's use of devices reminiscent of sots-art is quite different from the reign of the image and the failure of the Symbolic that we observed in the work of Sorokin. When Laika is represented as a static aesthetic object, the failure of the symbolic identification leaves only the dead image, from behind which an unnameable horror forever threatens to emerge. When Laika is resurrected from the dead for a cameo appearance in *Omon Ra*, she is a physical wreck, reinterpreted as a sort of canine general secretary. She now represents not Soviet power, but rather Soviet impotence and the pathetic attempts of a sclerotic regime to decorate itself with the trappings of power. This is not the failure of the Symbolic order, but the embarrassment of symbolic identification with a false Big Other that has not only a drinking problem but diarrhea as well.<sup>87</sup>

Pelevin's dedication, *Geroiam sovetskogo kosmosa*, is rendered into English as "For the Heroes of the Soviet Cosmos." This is not to be understood as the cosmos "up there," but to all of Soviet space: physical, cultural, and metaphysical. *Omon Ra* shows much more clearly than any of Pelevin's earlier works both the degree to which the realm of individual and collective

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<sup>87</sup> I've examined several other examples of Pelevin's relationship to and movement away from sots-art in the article "Viktor Pelevin and the End of Sots-Art."

human consciousness was refracted by the Soviet political regime and the resulting cultural milieu, and the degree to which that consciousness then projected itself back upon reality, rendering it something much more than simple external reality. The verisimilitude that Pelevin maintains throughout the entire story depends on the childlike faith that characterizes the protagonist until the last page of the story, where he attempts to find out “where exactly on the red line” he is. The implication of *Omon Ra* is that no one in “Soviet space,” much less its “heroes,” yet know exactly where on the red line they would find themselves, if they knew where and, more importantly, how to look.

One of the most symptomatic readings of Pelevin’s work, particularly in relation to his attention to human freedom, comes from E. Pronina. Her interpretation is unabashedly psychological and she begins by asking why Pelevin is so popular. Her first suggestion is that Pelevin reflects the sensation of living in a world in which reality is changing faster than the individual person can adapt. The individual is forced to live in multiple realities because each new reality replaces the old one very quickly. Pelevin’s answer to this is expressed in such works as “Prince of Gosplan.” In the portrayal of the computer game, Pelevin shows us how the individual creates a third reality out of the confluence of his internal reality of consciousness and the external reality of the environment. This suggests a high degree of individual freedom as the individual creates a kind of virtual environment out of his own consciousness. Pronina then goes on to show how other works by Pelevin demonstrate the contemporary trend toward multiple personalities on the internet. Chapaev and Pustota, for example, manifests the kind of complex personality constructed out of multiple aspects of the ego. This also suggests that identity formation takes place in the mode of free play. However, Pronina’s analysis takes a sudden turn when she characterizes the new human personality as a fractal. A fractal is defined in natural science as a geometric shape that reproduces within itself the structure of a larger formation of



which it is itself a part. Pronina suggests that the increasing digitization of human society reduces the individual human personality to a kind of fractal. The individual does not develop independently, but absorbs the rituals (“iterations”) of the larger society through “reproductive thought” [репродуктивное мышление] (22). Pronina makes a weak attempt at the end of her article to rescue human freedom from the trap that she has described. She contrasts the behavior of Vera Pavlovna, who through solipsistic selfishness brings about cataclysmic changes in a world she does not understand, with Sasha, the young hero of “A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia,” who manages to comprehend the meaning of life by recognizing the order of the universe by listening to the call of his inner nature (26–30). Pronina ends her confused article with the insipid claim that Pelevin must defend human freedom of choice because he is a “humanist writer” (30).

Pelevin grants himself the greatest amount of freedom to play in his first full-length novel, *The Life of Insects* [*Zhizn' nasekomykh*]. The characters in this novel seem to exist simultaneously both as insects and as human beings. Pelevin does not allow us such a simple way out, however, for in the very first chapter the narrator describes what seems to be a concrete event of transformation:

If there had been a witness to this scene, we must assume he would have leaned over the balustrade, expecting to see three broken bodies lying on the ground below. But he would have seen nothing down there except eight small puddles, a crushed cigarette pack, and the cracks in the pavement.

On the other hand, if he possessed preternaturally sharp vision, he might just have discerned three mosquitoes in the distance, flying away in the direction of the village concealed behind the trees (6–7).

Окажись у этой сцены свидетель, он, надо полагать, перегнулся бы через перила, ожидая увидеть внизу три изувеченных тела. Но он не увидел бы там ничего, кроме восьми небольших луж, расплющенной пачки от сигарет «Приморские» и трещин на асфальте.

Зато если бы он обладал нечеловечески острым зрением, то смог бы разглядеть вдалеке трех комаров, улетающих в сторону скрытого за деревьями поселка (*Sochineniia* 2:10).

This is the only passage in the novel suggesting an actual transformation from human to insect. For the rest of the novel, characters are described sometimes as humans, sometimes as insects. There is no pattern to this alternation, nor are there any consistent signals given to mark the passage between the two modes. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that the indeterminate status of insect and human modes of existence is only the most obvious wrinkle in the fabric of the novel. Both time and space become increasingly distorted as the story progresses. Characters often appear as the protagonists of one chapter only to reappear as minor characters or mere set pieces in another. The disruption in focalization is accompanied by constant disruptions in linear time, making it impossible to be sure that the events being described are not taking place after events that have not yet been described. This confusing narrative flow is accompanied by one of Pelevin's signature pieces: a never-ending philosophical discussion about the nature of being, the possibility of self-awareness, and the nature of free will between two moths: Dima and his alter-ego Mitya.

It is clear that one of Pelevin's central concerns is the freedom to dream, to think, and to imagine. Transcending boundaries of time and space is a liberating activity that the writer claims for himself, grants to his fictional characters, and certainly seems to be preaching to his readers and fans. Before moving on to what is the most important and central work in this complex of ideas, it is useful to turn to the other major time traveler in post-Soviet culture.

### **5.3. The "Call" of the Empire**

Three films made by Karen Shakhnazarov (and co-scripted by Aleksandr Borodianskii) form a remarkable triptych although they were not conceived as a set. The first of these films,

*City Zero* [*Gorod zero*] was made in 1988 at Mosfil'm studio. *Assassin of the Tsar* [*Tsareubiitsa*], a Russian-British co-production, was released in 1991 only several months before the demise of the USSR. *Dreams* [*Sny*], a thoroughly post-Soviet film in its subject matter, was released in 1993. Despite their differences, the three films use similar devices to meditate on a single topic: in what ways does the weight of history bear down upon those who must live through the Soviet collapse?

Varakin, the protagonist of *City Zero*, is a mid-level industrial representative who has travelled from Moscow to meet with the management of a provincial factory and negotiate changes in the construction of the air conditioners that they ship to Moscow. From the moment he arrives in the town, he feels ill at ease. Everyone with whom he meets seems to behave strangely. His discomfort becomes acute when he arrives at the manager's office and finds the secretary working completely naked.



Figure 11

Soon the strange occurrences become more serious. Varakin becomes involved in an apparent suicide, and in the aftermath he finds that his very identity is under attack from all sides. The entire town has agreed that Varakin must not only accept responsibility for the suicide of the cook who shoots himself in despair after Varakin refuses to eat a cake that

he baked as an exact facsimile of Varakin's own head (see Figure 11). Furthermore, everyone in the town is convinced that Varakin is in fact the cook's own son and no one can understand why Varakin would want to reject this role.

*City Zero* can be a tedious and difficult film to watch. This is not only due to the fact that the viewer is no wiser than the protagonist about the strange events taking place in the town. It is due in even larger part to the very slow pacing of the film. Varakin, as played by Leonid Filatov, reacts with an exaggerated pause to almost every single unexpected incident in the action of the film. His pauses seem to result from a combination of utter confusion and a hopeful, almost desperate expectation that his interlocutor might yet give some explanation for the strange events taking place. These pregnant pauses are so ubiquitous that his behavior starts to resemble a machine that no longer runs correctly. His attempts to leave the town end in failure as the people of the town become ever more eager to see Varakin accept his role as the cook's son.

In all, Varakin's behavior seems to reflect a profound anxiety arising from a failed interpellation. His insistent long pauses as he encounters various residents of this town indicate his need to understand the particular hail or call that is addressed to him. Unable to leave the city, Varakin is increasingly disturbed by his additional inability to understand how the inhabitants behave and what they want from him. The desire for freedom of movement is weaker in him than is his desire to *understand what is wanted of him*. He finally begins to accept his fate as Nikolaev's son, but only after his most serious attempt to escape the city brings him no further than a neighboring village that is home to a subterranean wax museum of local history.

The tour that Varakin takes of this underground museum is the most important sequence in the entire film. The museum is no less bizarre than the present-day environment in which Varakin has lived the last day. "Local history" turns out to include depictions of Trojan princes, Roman warriors, and even Atilla the Hun, apparently all key figures in the development of "our city." Other scenes depict conspiratorial meetings of Russian revolutionaries, the town's first

rock-'n'-roll performance, the Christianization of Rus', a brief visit by the young Stalin, and the dacha of the chairman of the local writers' union who bears an unexpected resemblance to the well-known Soviet actor Oleg Basilashvili—unexpected only because the pampered writer, portrayed by Basilashvili, has not yet appeared to play his minor role in the film's plot. The other “historical” figure to appear in the flesh is that first rock-'n'-roller, who will turn out to be Nikolaev, the very same cook who committed suicide and is now purported to be Varakin's father. Taken as a whole, these museum figures form what Nancy Condee, in her review of the film, refers to as its “subconscious network of associations” (566).<sup>88</sup> They present a historical



Figure 12

constellation that is at one and the same time totally absurd and determining for Varakin in a very personal way. The tour culminates in a large installation consisting of a dual carousel of the most varied kinds of individuals, some recognizably Russian or members of ethnic minorities, others

apparently subversive or simply inexplicable (see Figure 12 and selected detail shots in Figure 13).

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<sup>88</sup> She also refers with disgust to the “lobotomized” version of the film released in the United States, from which this museum sequence has been cut almost in its entirety. One can understand the desire to shorten such a slow-paced film for its US release. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the choice to subject the film's “subconscious network of associations” to yet further repression makes the sense behind the symptoms of a dysfunctional Soviet society even more impenetrable (and thus more fascinating?) to American viewers. There is probably more to this “act of denial” than meets the eye.

Rather than interrogate history as legacy, this film depicts the aggressive assault of an unrecognizable history upon a hapless individual. The condensations and displacements that



Figure 13a



Figure 13b



Figure 13c

characterize Varakin's nightmare are the very same kinds of distortions that characterize much of the most appealing aspects of Pelevin's writing. The devices that allow Pelevin to explore new possibilities of artistic expression and multi-valent identities serve here to undermine and destroy the integrity of a presumably solid Soviet citizen.

Eventually, after his death in the town many years hence has been foretold,<sup>89</sup> he seems ready to succumb to his new identity as Makhmud, the son of the cook Nikolaev. It is at this moment that almost the entire cast of characters, who have gathered apparently to accept Varakin into their midst, decides to pay a visit to the ancient oak tree, another historical monument of the town. This oak was believed by pagans to be charmed: anyone who tore a branch off this tree would become ruler<sup>90</sup> of the tribe. The new ruler would, however, be obligated above all to defend the tree itself in order

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<sup>89</sup> The prophecy comes unsolicited from an apparently clairvoyant child who, significantly, distorts Varakin's surname (to Varanin) while quoting the text etched on his eventual tombstone.

<sup>90</sup> *vozhd'*: in Soviet political history, this term is most commonly associated with Stalin.

to protect its branches from anyone who might become the next usurper. Despite the fading of pagan beliefs with the coming of “more civilized times,” the powerful of Russia (Dmitrii Donskoi and Ivan the Terrible are mentioned by name) have continued to tear a branch from the tree whenever they pass through the town (by now the viewer understands that *everyone* passes through this town). Since the coming of Soviet rule, the tree has been “preserved by the State.” This all too clear reference to State power becomes an exquisite metaphor for the post-Soviet condition when, after the town’s prosecutor allows his mistress to rip a branch off for herself, the tree is discovered to have rotted from the inside. Large pieces of the tree fall to the ground and, as the people greedily gather souvenirs for themselves, the prosecutor whispers to Varakin that he must take this chance to make a run for it and escape. It is not explained why Varakin can now leave the town when he could not do so earlier.

This disappointing *deus ex machina* resolution of the film’s intrigue makes more sense if we recall Lacan at this point. Varakin’s inability to respond to his interpellation in City Zero, his confusion at what the city wants from him, is a manifestation of a failure of identification in the Symbolic.<sup>91</sup> Symbolic identification begins in the encounter with the lack in the Other, the attempt to determine what the Other wants. The lack in the Other is by its very nature mysterious and impenetrable. The discomfort in this film comes from the fact that Varakin has been thrown into a pre-Symbolic stage where he must in effect undergo symbolic castration all over again. From this perspective, it makes perfect sense that the moment in which the lack in the Other (now specifically the Big Other of State power) is exposed for all to see is the moment in which the tyranny of the symbolic chain is ruptured and Varakin can escape. It is hardly a

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<sup>91</sup> Identification is one of the earliest topics to be elaborated by Lacan, but this makes it no easier to get a concise summation of it in his writings. For a coherent overview, see Bowie, especially Chapter 2. In Lacan’s own work, the topic is addressed directly in *Seminar II* (on the Ego) and in his paper on the “signification of the phallus,” as well as, most famously, in his notoriously difficult “subversion of the subject” (these last two in *Écrits*).

hopeful ending, however. The film's closing scenes depict the closing of the wax museum, its figures one by one shrouded in darkness, while Varakin rows a small boat out into a large lake shrouded in a fog. The atmosphere suggests that submission to a capricious Symbolic order might very well be preferable to the horror of the indeterminate Real, which offers no points of orientation, thus no identification at all, as well as no possibility for escape.

The key installation in the wax museum, the dual carousel at which Varakin ends his tour, is entitled *Grezy*, a term usually translated into English as "day-dreams" or "reveries," but in this context perhaps best rendered as "fantasies." The notion of fantasy links the function of the wax museum in *City Zero* with the role of fantasy and imagination in Pelevin's writing and with the development that we see in the next two films by Shakhnazarov, both of which continue to manifest a specific interest in Russia's imperial past, studied through its individual leaders.

*Assassin of the Tsar* takes place in a contemporary psychiatric hospital in Russia. Malcolm McDowell plays Timofeev, a usually well-mannered patient in the hospital, who insists that he has murdered no less than two Russian Tsars, including Nicholas II, in past lives. Once a year he manifests on his body the wounds that the assassin of Alexander II received during his execution. He is also troubled with remorse over the second killing, the notorious murder of the deposed royal family in Ekaterinburg. Oleg Iankovskii plays Smirnov, the psychiatrist who is determined to cure the patient by playing the role of the last Russian Tsar in the fantasy of the patient's delusion. As one might expect, it is the doctor who begins to manifest physical traits of the Tsar and as his mental state deteriorates, the two men are seemingly transported back to Ekaterinburg and to July 1918. The contemporary narrative line never actually disappears, however, and Smirnov does die, of apparently "natural" causes, while visiting Ekaterinburg. The film is much less saturated with cultural associations than *City Zero*, but it is certainly more than an excuse to tell a "lovingly observed tale of the last days of the Russian royal house," as



Julian Graffy claims in a rather ungenerous review. While the portrayal of Russia's imperial ruler may have been positive, there is no attempt to minimize the problematic nature of his legacy. It can be repressed for a time, but sooner or later returns with deadly force.

While Varakin's experience in the first film had many of the characteristics of a nightmare, dreams become the means by which Shakhnazarov juxtaposes present-day Moscow and pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg in his next film. *Dreams* is a genuinely funny film in which the 19th-century nightmare (the real material effects of late Imperial rule) is kept well out of sight, while the 20th-century nightmare of post-Soviet squalor and moral decay is depicted in images more phantasmagoric than naturalistic. Liudmila Mordvinova plays Countess Prizorova, the young and attractive wife of a close adviser (Oleg Basilashvili) to the Tsar in the closing years of the 19th century. She is troubled by dreams in which she sees herself living as Masha Stepanova, employed as a dishwasher in a grimy Soviet-style cafeteria in the already post-Soviet Moscow of 1993, as well as posing in erotic photographs that her pimp, also played by Basilashvili, then sells on the Arbat. Her psychiatrist is unable to help her, but, in time, the dreams torment her less and less, and it actually seems that she is beginning to enjoy the thrill of her other life, which is growing increasingly grotesque in its appearance. As Aleksandr Shpagin notes in his review, the modality of this film is that of *steb*, a kind of biting humor both sharp and ironic. Shakhnazarov makes no significantly new contribution here to the debate on the imperial legacy, and the film received almost no critical attention when it was released. It is significant to the degree that its narrative is a skillful example of the kind of storytelling becoming popular at the time through people like Pelevin. The film ends not with any resolution of the dream problems of the Countess, but with Masha Stepanova's encounter with an oil painting of a woman identical to herself, found in the ruins of an old pre-Revolutionary country estate. Shakhnazarov thus ends the film with the famous riddle best known as the story of the

Chinese emperor who dreams that he is a butterfly, but can never be sure that he is not actually a butterfly dreaming of being a Chinese emperor.

It is useful to do a parallel reading of *Dreams* with Pelevin's story of "Vera Pavlova's Ninth Dream." This story tells of an old cleaning lady in a Moscow public lavatory who believes that she has brought about Perestroika and all the accompanying changes in the Soviet Union through a solipsistic application of sheer fantasy and willpower. While she is pleased with the way reality bends to her will, the inevitable "return in the Real" comes in the form of a mass of human excrement, a flood of Biblical proportions, which wipes out the entire city of Moscow. The final "trick" in this clever story comes when the heroine wakes up from her awful "dream," the ninth dreamt by Vera Pavlovna, the heroine of Nikolai Chernyshevskii's notorious utopian novel *What Is To Be Done?*<sup>92</sup> Pelevin's story, like *Dreams*, references the Russian State in a mediated way, inasmuch as Chernyshevskii's novel was glorified by the Bolsheviks as a guide for the future development of a communist society. Identifying the specific target of Pelevin's satire never seems to be as important as the pleasure of his "fantastic" storytelling.

#### 5.4. Fantasy—Reality—Identity

The popularity of Pelevin, especially among young people, reflects the same attitude that these people have towards the possibilities of the internet and other new technologies for the development of subjectivity through the free play of fantasy in the construction of multiple personalities (Pronina 18–19). This attitude is evident in the response of those who react enthusiastically to Pelevin's third and most significant long work, the novel *Chapaev and Pustota*. This novel appeared in 1996 and also features a protagonist existing in two parallel worlds: as a decadent poet in 1919 Petrograd and as a patient in a psychiatric hospital in the mid-

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<sup>92</sup> The concluding sentences of Pelevin's story are printed in the obsolete pre-Revolutionary Russian script in order to make clear the textual nature of the joke.

1990s. Angela Brintlinger has looked closely at the chronotope of the madhouse and at its significance for this novel. It keeps Pelevin's playful fantasies in close proximity to some of the most seriously gruesome episodes in Soviet history. She also makes the most concise and coherent argument for *not* viewing the narrative as the portrayal of two equally valid realities, as is done in Shakhnazarov's *Dreams* or in Pelevin's own *Life of Insects*. Petr Pustota certainly seems to exist physically in post-Soviet Russia. His fantasies of serving with Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev during the Russian Civil War, however, are much more than simply the delusions of a madman.

The figure of Chapaev truly represents the fullness and the emptiness of Soviet culture. Pelevin's Chapaev is cobbled together out of bits and pieces of the historical Chapaev, the 1925 novel by Furmanov, the extremely popular 1934 film by the so-called Vasil'ev "Brothers," and the even more popular *anekdoty* or jokes featuring Chapaev. In addition (and in contrast) to all these sources, Pelevin's Chapaev is above all a spiritual guru for the young and confused Petr. Their conversations take the form of pseudo-Socratic dialogues with Buddhist content and although many of Pelevin's fans take the Buddhist teaching to be meant in total seriousness, it is difficult to overlook the note of irony in their intellectual exchanges.<sup>93</sup> For example, Chapaev's attempt to teach Petr to appreciate that reality is not to be found in the external world takes the following form:<sup>94</sup>

"...Tell me, where's it live, this gonad of yours?"  
"In my consciousness."  
"And where is your consciousness?"  
"Right here" I said, tapping myself on the head.  
"And where is your head?"  
"On my shoulders."  
"And where are your shoulders?"

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<sup>93</sup> It is not, however, only Pelevin's "fans" that take the Buddhist message seriously. Aleksandr Genis, for example, considers it to be absolutely central to the concept of this novel.

<sup>94</sup> As in the Chapaev jokes, Petr is always addressed in these exchanges as Pet'ka.

“In a room..”  
“And where is the room?”  
“In a building.”  
“And where is the building?”  
“In Russia.”  
“And where is Russia?”  
“In the deepest trouble, Vasily Ivanovich.”  
“Stop that” he shouted seriously. “You can joke when your commander orders you to. Answer.”  
“Well, of course, on the Earth.”  
“We clinked glasses and drank.”  
“And where is the Earth?”  
“In the Universe.”  
“And where is the Universe?”  
I thought for a second.  
“In itself.”  
“And where is this in itself?”  
“In my consciousness.”  
“Well then, Petka, that means your consciousness is in your consciousness, doesn’t it?”  
“Seems so.”  
“Right,” said Chapaev, straightening his moustache (*Buddha’s Little Finger* 140).

[...Скажи-ка мне, где эта манда живет?  
— В моем сознании.  
— А сознание твое где?  
— Вот здесь, — сказал я, постучав себя по голове.  
— А голова твоя где?  
— На плечах.  
— А плечи где?  
— В комнате.  
— А где комната?  
— В доме.  
— А дом?  
— В России.  
— А Россия где?  
— В беде, Василий Иванович.  
— Ты это брось, — прикрикнул он строго. — Шутить будешь, когда командир прикажет. Говори.  
— Ну как где. На Земле.  
Мы чокнулись и выпили.  
— А Земля где?  
— Во Вселенной.  
— А Вселенная где?  
Я секунду подумал.

- Сама в себе.
- А где эта сама в себе?
- В моем сознании.
- Так что же, Петька, выходит, твое сознание — в твоём сознании?
- Выходит так.
- Так, — сказал Чапаев и расправил усы. (172)]

It would be a misreading of this passage to assert that it is an authorial exaltation to adopt Eastern mysticism, for this would be as strange as the telling of a typical “Chapaev joke” to advocate for the “reds” over the “whites.” The content of this dialogue is its form and the intertextual network of variegated narratives built around the signifier “Chapaev.” This becomes more clear in the “therapy” conducted by Timur Timurovich Kanashnikov, the chief doctor in the psychiatric clinic and Pustota’s mentor in his post-Soviet reality. Through drugs and a mysterious apparatus, Kanashnikov has found a way to enable several patients to pool their minds together into a sort of collective consciousness. By opening themselves up to other identities, Kanashnikov explains, it is hoped that when the individual mind once again becomes detached “the patient can become aware of the arbitrary subjectivity of his own morbid notions and can cease to identify with them” (*Buddha’s Little Finger* 38) [пациент может сам ощутить относительность своих болезненных представлений и перестать отождествляться с ними” (53)]. The individuals with whom Petr will mind-meld are not at all chosen at random: Simply Maria<sup>95</sup> is a young man with an ambiguous gender identity and a love of Western culture, Serdiuk is a philosophical alcoholic, and Volodin is an organized crime boss. Together with Pustota, the decadent poet and representative of the intelligentsia, these four characters represent four possible models for the reconstruction of a Russian identity and four options for Russia to take in its future development. During their therapeutic sessions, Simply Maria fantasizes about

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<sup>95</sup> His name is taken from the eponymous heroine of *Simplemente Maria*, a Mexican soap opera about the adventures of a poor-but-honest girl and the men who try to exploit her. Both the soap opera itself and its starring actress were wildly popular in Russia during the early to mid-1990s.

entering into an “alchemical marriage” with none other than Arnold Schwarzenegger (in his cyborg Terminator incarnation); Serdiuk finds employment with a Japanese firm and willingly submits to the bizarre cultural rituals followed in the Moscow branch office of the firm until an embarrassing business failure requires a hara-kiri sacrifice on the part of the Russian employee; Volodin talks metaphysics with his fellow bandits in a drug-induced euphoria. Their individual fantasies begin to infect each other, until even Chapaev becomes involved and decides that it is time for his Pet'ka to check out of the asylum. Chapaev's alternative is emptiness, a total rejection of the external world and retreat to a place out of time and space that nonetheless has a name: Inner Mongolia.

It is clear that the “subjectivities” to which Timur Timurovich refers in his description of his therapy has nothing to do with a Lacanian notion of the subject. The identities that the four patients take on in their fantasies and with which they interact are not subjects at all, but projections of their false egos. Only Timur Timurovich finds the falsity of these identities to be of interest. For Lacan, the ego comes into existence only through the alienating effect of the mirror image; for Chapaev, any ego-based identity is a barrier to human freedom and enlightenment; for Pustota, identity is always more of the nature of a question than of an answer; for Pelevin, finally, the ego constitutes the force field of his creative writing. Although these identities are all false projections, the resulting narratives generated in the group therapy sessions constitute a large bulk of the novel as well as its deep-structure intrigue, for the ontological status of Chapaev and the constellation of characters around him remains indeterminate inasmuch as they function as Petr's mentors at the same time that they are unmasked as creations of his own consciousness. This is the “hook” that Pronina identified in her analysis as the secret of Pelevin's popularity. Despite the philosophical layer that seems to weigh the narrative down at times, *Chapaev and Pustota* was Pelevin's most popular and widely-read work at the time,

particularly among young readers. The conception of identity as a group construct, as a non-localized phenomenon, had great appeal for a generation growing up in the age of computer technology and the internet. The proliferation of computer bulletin boards and chat rooms at least provided urban youth the opportunity to experiment with anonymous and alternative personalities and identities in a decentered and chaotic environment. The reality of this or that identity is highly contingent; personalities can be switched on and off seemingly at will.

The works analyzed here show that the category of fantasy has become more than the creative activity of the artist or writer. It designates the condition of culture on the border between a conventional conception of identity and history and a still mysterious future in which the old modernist conception of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, life-creation or creation-in-life, becomes accessible to every individual in a much more comprehensive way than it was to the avant-garde of the 1910–1920s. One possible reaction to this situation, taken to the limits of its logic, is the recognition of all identities as self-created, contingent, and therefore constructed. This is the logic of Pelevin's *Chapaev*, and the only recourse for the enlightened free individual in such a case is the abandonment of these constructed (and thus, for *Chapaev*, "false") identities and flight into Inner Mongolia. This is Pelevin's characteristic formulation of Buddhist teachings on the meaning of emptiness. All possible reactions to the new culture, however, seem to leave unanswered the question of the status of the postmodern subject in this reign of phantasmatic egos.

This is the question addressed by Slavoj Žižek in his book *The Plague of Fantasies*, a work that sounds a note of warning against those who would celebrate the postmodern rise of unstable and shifting identities as a liberatory development. As he often does, Žižek makes his arguments using examples from Western popular culture that might not have the same validity for the Russian case. But Russia, like Žižek's native Yugoslavia, is a culture that has a much

richer experience than does the West in dealing with the plague of troublesome and conflicting identities. In a discussion of anonymity and impersonation on the internet, Žižek consistently returns to the assertion that symbolic identification is already structured as an assumed identity. Fantasy, even when engaged in a play of alternate identities, is never really free, for it is engaged in a negotiation with the mysterious but insistent desire of the Other. Pelevin seems to acknowledge this in his choice of characters and fantasy scenarios. The four characters in the asylum, as already noted, are not chosen at random but appeal to consistently repeating structures in Russian culture: the infatuation with the West, the *iurodivyi* or holy fool in his late-Soviet guise as mystical alcoholic, the corrosively utopian exhortations of the intelligentsia, and so forth. These structures exist at the level of both the Imaginary and Symbolic registers; they are alienating images and yet constitutive of the subject in the Russian cultural context. Attempts to deny this fail in the most banal of ways. One of the most quoted passages in Pelevin's novel is, ironically, the one utterance that seems to contradict the entire tenor of the work. It comes near the end, in which the "cured" Pustota, having checked out of the asylum, tries to enlighten a Moscow cabbie.<sup>96</sup> The driver quickly recognizes the type and retorts:

Of course, it's stupid of me to try to talk to you seriously, but I should point out that you are not the first person ever to talk such drivel. Pretending that you doubt the reality of the world is the most cowardly form of escape from that very reality. Squalid intellectual poverty, if you want my opinion. Despite all its seeming absurdity, cruelty, and senselessness, the world nonetheless exists, doesn't it? And all the problems in it exist as well, don't they? (*Buddha's Little Finger* 327)

[Глупо, конечно, говорить с вами всерьез, но я должен заметить, что не вы первый порете эту чушь. Делать вид, что

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<sup>96</sup> The cab driver as purveyor of folk wisdom and the authentic voice of the common people is hardly a uniquely Russian phenomenon. As any resident of the larger Russian cities in the 1990s can attest, however, this figure took on a particular significance in the first, turbulent years of post-Soviet rule in the context of the growing alienation of the populace from the programs of the purportedly freely and democratically elected Yeltsin government.



сомневаешься в реальности мира, — самая малодушная форма ухода от этой самой реальности. Полное убожество, если хотите знать. Несмотря на свою кажущуюся абсурдность, жестокость и бессмысленность, этот мир все же существует, не так ли? Существует со всеми проблемами, которые в нем есть (389)?]

Pustota has no answer for the driver, who throws the passenger out of the car after claiming that anyone not believing in material reality also denies the existence of The Creator of that reality. In this, the driver surprisingly seems to echo the conclusion of Žižek who sees the inevitable logic of fantasy in cyberspace leading to a denial of the Symbolic order as such. The ability to falsify anything on-line, from texts to identities, turns the aesthetic notion of the simulacrum into the reality of cyberspace. This is the foreclosure of the Big Other of the Symbolic order itself, the guarantor and enabler of symbolic identification.

Fantasy scenarios constructed in cyberspace or in a play of postmodern subjectivities are already a kind of second-degree identity construction that cannot be truly intersubjective. The alternative interpretations suggested by Sally Dalton-Brown in the title of her article on Pelevin, that between ludic nonchalance and ludicrous despair, is far from rhetorical. The energy of even the most playful and entertaining of Pelevin's tales come from their attraction to the most serious questions of Russian history and identity. At the same time, his popularity seems to rest on the way in which he welcomes the brave new world in which these most serious questions can be dismissed as false consciousness and replaced with an alternative false consciousness at will. It is not surprising that discussions of his Eastern mysticism, like discussions of his fascination with computers and psychotropic drugs, lead to irresolvable contradictions. The Buddhist retreat into the void is, in Lacanian terms, the search for a retreat from the Symbolic into the Real. As Varakin's escape from City Zero suggests, this retreat may be the shortest distance from chaos to terror.

## **Chapter 6. Disintegrating Russia Resurgent**

### **6.1. Prelude to a Conclusion.**

This work has examined various attempts by writers and filmmakers to dissect, analyze, reconfigure, and reconstruct Russian identity in the post-Soviet context. Throughout the argument, I have privileged a single analytical framework in order to study the structural formations underlying this project and to identify the significant ways in which these structures ossify or change. Chapter One presents a survey of the historical prerequisites for an understanding of Russia and of current scholarship on the nature of the post-Soviet state and various conceptions of Russian identity. The notion of a void at the center of Russian identity, ubiquitous in Russian culture before as well as after the Soviet period, is not simply a rhetorical trope, but an awareness that Russian culture is engaged in an attempt to construct a substantial identity in a place that resists any such positive essence.

Chapter Two deals with Imaginary Russia in the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Writers and filmmakers with diverse backgrounds and political orientations attempted to construct a positive identity for Russia either by recovering a lost Russia from the past or by identifying Russia through a more or less complex interaction with some kind of collective “other.” The “others” for Russia are the West and the East, terms that are to be understood more conceptually than geographically. Encounters with the East continue to be located in the periphery of the Russian and Soviet empires, while the insistent discourse of the West manifests itself in the metropolitan capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow. While such strategies were more or less successful in the past, post-Soviet culture finds that such constructions are

increasingly problematic as the “other” speaks back to the center in ways that the center cannot incorporate. Imperial Russia imagined itself as a civilizing agent for the primitive peoples of the periphery, while the West was regarded with admiration, envy, or disdain. The East invited Russia to assert itself through territorial expansion and cultural domestication; the West represented a challenge to Russia, an alternative that Russia was compelled to emulate or reject. The context of the 1990s disrupts both of these scenarios. The periphery can no longer be subdued, nor does it wish to be “civilized,” while attempts to come to terms with the West in some adequate way lead to a self-orientalizing maneuver even by such a self-designated patriot as Nikita Mikhalkov.

Chapter Three deals with those writers (and one filmmaker) who take seriously the role of writing and of literature for Russian identity and attempt to deconstruct that process. In the period of Stagnation, nonconformist culture drew its *raison d'être* from official culture. With the advent of perestroika, writing designated as “other prose” moved to center stage. Having lost its status as “other” to official culture, writers calling themselves postmodernists responded to crisis by interrogating the very activity of writing and the importance of verbal culture for Russia’s sense of identity and value. While Russian identity has often tried to find support in a literature that functions as a receptacle of eternal truths and as a guide for living, Russian postmodernism reveals the verbal text to be the agent of a process of subjectivization that is never complete but must continue in a narrative that drives endlessly forward. Erofeev, Popov, and Narbikova (among others) demonstrate in their most successful works that literature does not reveal truth, but can only end by encountering itself (e.g., the narrator of Erofeev’s “Life with an Idiot”). *Russian Beauty* reveals desire to be the unnamed motor that brings the literary narrative into motion. It is also Erofeev who most successfully unmask the despotic tendency in Russian literature, an aspect of Russian culture that is taken to the limits of its logic in

Khotinenko's film *Makarov*, in which the signifier not only creates but also destroys the individual.

Chapter Four deals with the works of Vladimir Sorokin, who takes the despotic Russian signifier *beyond* the limits of its logic. Drawing inspiration from the *sots-art* movement, Sorokin engages in an intensely self-referential reenactment of Socialist-Realist discourse, whereby the text often approaches what can only be described as insanity. Sorokin's work is ultimately an analysis of both the power and the failure of literary discourse, in which the distinction between great beauty and grotesque violence is radically contingent. While Sorokin's early successes were in deconstructing Socialist-Realist narrative, he has demonstrated in his most recent novels and film scripts that the failure in the Symbolic order continues to haunt post-Soviet discourse as well.

Chapter Five turns from deconstruction to reconstruction. The often lighthearted and entertaining works of Viktor Pelevin and the films of Karen Shakhnazarov suggest the possibility of refiguring Russian identity through a kind of cultural archaeology of the rubble left by the Soviet collapse. Viktor Pelevin exalts the individual's ability to reorient himself or herself in a reality that is never simply the given reality of the material world. While Russian culture can often take the form of a deceptive Potemkin Village, it can also open up a void that allows for infinite possibility. He seems to suggest that the individual can construct a new reality. Fantasy becomes an important category for both Pelevin and Shakhnazarov, who seem to suggest that the raw materials for a new Russian identity are to be found in Russian history and individual fantasies. Among these raw materials are the traditional Eastern and Western alternatives. But Žižek reminds us that fantasy is never truly free—symbolic identification is always structured as an assumed identity and an imagined reality can often transform itself into a regime of terror.

These examinations of Russian collective identity have involved the orders of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. They can also be structured according to the relationship between two others, the imaginary “other” that structures the ego and the symbolic “Other,” the Big Other of the Symbolic order. The imaginary “other” is the Eastern or Western other that gives shape to concepts of Russian identity rooted, for example, in spirituality (as opposed to the commercial West) or Russian civilization that stands against Eastern mysticism or barbarism. The insufficiency of these Imaginary constructions in the post-Soviet context are made manifest in the films of Bodrov, Khotinenko, and Mikhalkov. The “Other” of the Symbolic turns out to be Russian literature, which Russian postmodernist writers such as Erofeev, Popov, and Sorokin unmask as an operation obeying the laws of desire and the signifier rather than as a repository of spiritual values. Pelevin and Shakhnazarov exemplify the attempt to come to terms with both the Big Other and the various “others” of Russian culture, constructing possible fantasy futures out of alternative pasts. As we have seen, such attempts run the risk of eliminating the Big Other altogether and, thus, the loss of that which gives coherence to identity and subjectivity.

The particular works analyzed here span a time period that does not have a specific beginning and end. The cultural reconfigurations of Russian identity that we have examined have been in one way or another related to a postmodern sensibility. With the exception of the early Solzhenitsyn, the literary works examined in this dissertation were written from the late 1970s (by the aesthetic experimenters in the literary underground) to the mid 1990s. The films have been those made from the years of Perestroika up to the end of the century. However, postmodernism had ceased to be a dominant trend in Russian literature in the mid-1990s. Its legacy is a generation of individual writers who continue to resist traditional realism but who no longer constitute any formal movement or tendency. The literary landscape in the late 1990s has become more varied with the arrival of new writers, but less interesting with the disappearance

of sharply defined aesthetic programs. Two large writers unions continue to dominate the organization of literature, but these organizations seem more interested in politics than aesthetics and delineate a large but crude chasm between “conservative” and “liberal” writers.<sup>97</sup> As far as filmmaking is concerned, while individual films such as Zel'dovich's *Moscow* continue an experimental impulse, Russian cinema of the late 1990s and early 2000s has been characterized by consolidation both in the economics of the industry and in the aesthetics of the films being made. The 1997 election of Nikita Mikhalkov to lead the Filmmakers Union of the Russian Federation provides a convenient marker with which to identify both aspects of this consolidation. Russian films since 1997 have benefitted from a more solid economic and industrial base while at the same time answering more and more frequently Mikhalkov's call for a cinema that would both attract and inspire a viewing audience.<sup>98</sup>

In view of these developments, it would seem that both literature and cinema reacted to the consolidation of the market economy in Russia by slowly retreating from the kind of aesthetic experimentation and philosophical meditations on Russian identity that characterized Russian culture so strongly during the early part of the 1990s. Such a simple interpretation of cause and effect would lead us to suggest that Russian postmodernism, in contrast to its Western counterpart, has retreated in the face of modern capitalism. Rather than see this as proof of the uniqueness of the Russian variant, it has become increasingly easy to see in recent developments a convergence of Russian and Western cultural models. In literature, the most significant recent development on the literary landscape has been the rise of writers such as Aleksandra Marinina and Boris Akunin, whose detective novels had mass appeal and could make a profit for their

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<sup>97</sup> N. N. Shneidman, chronicler of Russian literature through three earlier monographs, has published a fourth in which these developments are traced in more detail. See in particular his opening chapter.

<sup>98</sup> See the first part of Lawton's article, “Russian Cinema in Troubled Times,” for a summary of institutional developments in the second half of the decade.

publishers. These writers and later epigones imitate, for their part, the genres characteristic of Western mass culture of the last several decades. The renaissance of Russian cinema, due in large part to the rise of private studios, has led to increasingly powerful producers who knew how to cover costs and make a film that will be profitable. This “producers’ cinema” not only looks increasingly like Hollywood, but has rapidly adapted to Western genres. The wide distribution of “difficult” films has become increasingly rare, while high-tech historical films, Muscovite vampires, and Russian godfathers are breaking records at the box office. Far from contradicting the nexus between late capitalism and postmodernism, the waning of canonical “Russian” postmodernism more likely marks the moment in which Russia joins the multinational capitalist fold.<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, with the rise of Vladimir Putin, changes in Russian political culture have affected the discourse on Russian identity. In society at large and particularly in the realm of politics, the imperative no longer seems to be define Russian identity but rather to assert it. Culture both presaged this change and has responded to it. The nationalist writers that I examined in Chapter Two as representatives of a decaying tradition are still actively writing and the patriotic orientation of much Russian literature is still strong. Cinematic blockbusters are increasingly turning to Russian history not to analyze or throw light upon unpleasant realities but to exalt and reaffirm the greatness of the Russian imperial and Soviet past.

While it is not possible to establish an exact end date, the cultural period examined in this dissertation seems to have come to an end. As noted above, it is too simplistic to designate this transition as the end of “postmodernism” in Russia. Neither is it satisfactory to see in recent developments merely a return of older forms of narrative, a return of the cinematic hero, or a

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<sup>99</sup> It is striking how little attention the work of Fredric Jameson received in Russia, particularly among those Russian writers and critics who pioneered the use of the term “postmodernism” to describe post-Soviet culture.

return to history. “New Russian Culture,” a term sometimes heard during late Perestroika, is likewise inadequate to describe either the culture of the 1990s or of the twenty-first century. Rather than attempt to describe current developments in Russia as a new period in culture, I would like to continue lines of thought examined earlier and briefly examine two works that represent significant new twists on the discourse of Russian identity.

### 6.2. Viktor Pelevin: *Homo Zapiens*

Viktor Pelevin’s 1999 novel *Homo Zapiens* [*Generation “P”*] was greeted enthusiastically by Pelevin’s fans as it shared many of the trademark themes of the writer’s earlier works: Buddhist mysticisms, virtual realities, playful language, and an irreverent attitude toward cultural icons. Aleksandr Genis, generally well disposed to Pelevin’s works, criticized the novel for simply repeating the earlier works. Nevertheless, this novel is different from *Chapaev* in that it no longer deals with cultural alternatives for Russia. It dismisses all alternatives as mere deceptions. The unconscious of *Chapaev* has been replaced by the virtual reality of mass media and video technology, and this has significant consequences for the philosophical stance of the work.

The hero of this novel, Vavilen Tatarskii, is a writer trained at the famous Literary Institute in Moscow. In Yeltsin’s Russia, however, he finds that he is unable to live as a writer and thus abandons literature in favor of advertising. His transformation from writer to “creator” corresponds to the fate of Russian literature, which finds it difficult to survive in its previous forms in capitalist Russia. Advertising seems to offer a rewarding outlet for Tatarskii’s creative talents and at first he seems to be working with language in much the same way as a poet would. He juggles and recombines literary, colloquial, and commercial discourse in imaginative and entertaining ways. But the freedom he feels in this verbal creation is an illusion, for in the



course of this postmodern *Bildungsroman*, Tatarskii comes to realize that he and everyone else in the world is being controlled through video technology by a secret Guild that has constructed a virtual reality. This is a significant departure from Pelevin's earlier works, in which the hero moves toward enlightenment and freedom. Tatarskii's enlightenment consists in the realization that he has been manipulated from the start and that he has no choice but to abandon his free will, even as he is elevated by the Guild to the status of a "god." In *Homo Zapiens*, freedom is as illusory as the material reality that Chapaev destroys with his clay machine gun in the earlier novel.

The story is symptomatic of capitalist culture and responds to the widespread feeling that the contemporary individual is simply duped within a reality constructed by an unseen but omnipresent power with the aid of advanced technology. Were it not for Pelevin's irony, much of the novel's content could be interpreted as social criticism. The monologue by the spirit of Che Guevara, with its description of the "wow-impulses" (oral, anal, and displaced wow-types) echoes the Freudian terminology of psycho-sexual development, but in what would later be described by Lacan as the Symbolic order, the chain of signifiers has been replaced by the circulation of money. For Tatarskii's developing identity as "creator" within the capitalist order, money becomes the element that holds the system together in much the same way that the operation of the signifier ultimately holds subjectivity together.

The signifying chain continues to operate, however, as it is the lifeblood of Tatarskii's activity as slogan-writer as well as of Pelevin's writing style. Metaphor and metonymy are pushed to the limit and beyond in Tatarskii's slogans, dozens of which are quoted in the text of the novel. The "beyond" refers to the limit of the Russian language, for the use of English in this novel exceeds both in quantity and quality that seen in Pelevin's earlier writing. The humor of the novel depends on a complex and convoluted aural, semantic, and syntactical interaction

between two language systems . Mark Lipovetskii was correct when he predicted that this novel would be impossible to translate adequately into English—Andrew Bromfield’s admirable attempt to do so will not help to illustrate any of the examples and I will not cite from his version. Lipovetskii highlights the use of well-known brand names that obtain a dual status through Pelevin’s clever manipulation of them through two languages at once (215). A more vivid illustration can be seen in the evolution of an advertising clip for the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. This huge church, the original of which was destroyed in 1931 by order of Stalin, was in fact rebuilt from the original design in 1997 and serves as a powerful symbol of a reclaimed and revitalized Russian spirituality. In his attempt to reach specifically useful target groups, Tatarskii comes up with the slogan Christ the Savior: A solid Lord for solid gentlemen<sup>100</sup> [“Христос спаситель: солидный господь для солидных господ”] (159). This initial pun evolves further, however, as Tatarskii recalls and incorporates an earlier campaign involving Western soft drinks. The casting of the cathedral bells (Russian: *kolokol*) is associated with the popular soft drink Pepsi-cola (Russian: *pepsi-kola*), whereby a cork inside the bottle mimics the clapper of the bell. The irreverent development continues, as the church *kolokol* is brought into playful combinations with women’s stockings [*kolgotki*], sausage [*kolbaska*], and Coca-Kolyma Tales<sup>101</sup> (161–62). The slippage of the signifier is taken to an absurd extreme through the carnivalesque transformation of Russia’s most revered cultural traditions, literature and Christian spirituality, into little more than a series of dirty jokes.

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<sup>100</sup> The humor depends on the etymology of the Russian word *gospodin*, derived from the medieval word for a nobleman but now used as the rough equivalent of “gentleman” as well as “mister” in direct address (cf. *Herr* in German). It stands in metonymic relation both acoustically and etymological to the religious designation of Christ as “Lord.”

<sup>101</sup> This last variant referencing Varlam Shalamov’s horrifying tales of Stalinist prison-camp life.

The influence of foreign culture, particularly anglophone culture, on post-Soviet Russia has found expression in many works of literature and film. Pelevin's earlier works have made extensive use of the English language and of global, mostly American, pop-culture. In works such as *Chapaev and Pustota*, however, such invocation of foreign culture served as a way to meditate on the fate of Russian culture not so much in the global context but in the historically configured Russian context. East and West are cultural options for Russia in ways that are constrained by political and cultural history. In Lacanian terms, *Chapaev and Pustota* was an attempt to reconfigure Russian identity within the realm of possibilities offered by the Symbolic order, the Big Other of discourse as that discourse has been conditioned by almost two centuries of Russian culture. In *Homo Zapiens*, the transgression of linguistic boundaries results in the breakdown of the coherence guaranteed by the Big Other of language. While many interpreters of Lacan correctly point out the connection between the Big Other of discourse and the power of the State<sup>102</sup> (as both manifest the imposition of symbolic law), the Big Other is also the guarantor of individual freedom inasmuch as it insures the stability of the order of language within which the subject comes into being.

The English translation of this novel was published in the United Kingdom not as *Homo Zapiens*, but as *Babylon*, a much more perceptive translation as it not only renders the homology with Tatarskii's first name, but foregrounds the philosophical content of the novel. One of Tatarskii's drug-induced euphoric visions is of the Tower of Babel, the building of which is frustrated by God through the confusion of tongues. The construction of the Tower is apparently complete in Pelevin's novel, and it is made manifest not only in the material dwelling of the goddess Ishtar but also in the confusion of tongues in Tatarskii's advertising clips. Despite the irreverent humor and pervasive irony, Pelevin's novel offers a merciless and depressing analysis

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<sup>102</sup> Among those I have quoted, this would include Stavrakakis, as well as Žižek in *Tarrying with the Negative*.

of contemporary consumer society. It also seems to suggest that the question of Russian identity is no longer on the cultural agenda as all national distinctions must also be attributed to the unseen machinations with virtual reality. But perhaps it is yet not completely coincidental that the bridegroom of Ishtar must be a Russian. Before reaching any final conclusions on this question, it will be interesting to juxtapose this novel with a recent film that also comments on the global context of contemporary Russian identity.

### **6.3. Aleksei Balabanov: *War***

Aleksei Balabanov has been one of the most significant directors in post-Soviet Russian cinema. His surprise low-budget blockbuster *Brother* [*Brat*] (1997) and the commercially even more successful *Brother-2* [*Brat-2*] (2000) made him one of the best known directors as well. It would be difficult to underestimate the importance of these films for the renaissance of the Russian film industry in the last years of the 1990s. These two films demonstrated that it was possible for a Russian-made film to be a success at the box office in a way that in the several previous years had been possible only for foreign-made films. Danila Bagrov, as portrayed by Sergei Bodrov Jr., was the kind of hero that Russian audiences had apparently been waiting for: a self-assured, independent fighter who could avenge the humiliation that he had suffered. He was able, through cunning and sheer brute force, to solve heretofore intractable problems and vanquish seemingly invincible foes. Balabanov employed the aesthetics of Hollywood in the portrayal of the lone male hero, but Danila Bagrov represented a pure Russian wish-fulfillment, the composite self-image of the ideal Russian hero with elements of folklore as well as the venting of contemporary frustrations. Both films remain at this rather primitive level of narcissistic wish-fulfillment. Although *Brother-2* introduces the West as a world with which Russia has a complex relationship, on the level of the plot America exists simply as a field in which the

Russian hero realizes himself. The *Brother* films can be understood through the prism of the Lacanian Imaginary as already illustrated in Chapter Two. Unlike the films by Khotinenko and the senior Bodrov, however, the *Brother* films render an imaginary identification that is apparently successful and satisfying, if viewer response to the films is any indication. The narcissistic pleasure afforded by the younger Bodrov in these two films conditioned audience expectations for Balabanov's next major commercial film, *War [Voina]* (2002), also featuring Bodrov in a crucial supporting role.

*War*, which the advertising blurb insisted would not be *Brother-3*, is indeed different from the *Brother* films. It is even more aggressive in its ideology, but more complex in its presentation. Several aspects of the film recall Aleksandr Nevzorov's *Purgatory* (1997). Balabanov expresses a similar antipathy toward journalists, and he also, like Nevzorov, has Russia's enemies express his own criticism of the Russian state. *War* continues to be portrayed not as an event but as a state of being. The film is structured by the narrative of the protagonist, Ivan Ermakov (Aleksei Chadov), who we later realize is telling his story to a journalist. The story begins with a lengthy prelude in which we are introduced to most of the main characters. Ivan is a young Russian conscript taken prisoner by Chechen partisans. He is imprisoned together with two British theater performers, John and Margaret (Ian Kelly and Ingeborg Dapkunaite) who are a romantic couple, and a Russian officer, Captain Medved'ev (Bodrov), who is immediately characterized by Ivan as a source of strength and model for emulation—a real commander. They have been captured by Aslan Gugaev (Giorgi Gurgulia), a brutal warlord who ultimately releases Ivan and John, with instructions to bring back a ransom of two million pounds in order to save Margaret from gang rape and death. Failing to amass the required sum, John enlists Ivan's help to stage a rescue of Margaret. Thus begins the main action of the film, which is the journey back into Chechnya and the successful rescue of the hostages.

The names Ivan and John are etymologically identical and the two men represent to some extent Balabanov's concept of the archetypal Russian and English characters. John is a weak, slightly effete, and often whiny man who embodies and proclaims Western notions of human rights, justice, and civilian values. Ivan is the post-Soviet man who has been repeatedly let down and disappointed by his parents and his friends, as well as by the State and its armed forces. He is thoroughly disillusioned with ideology and with abstract notions of justice and has come to rely on his own prowess and to make his own rules. In this way, both John and Ivan represent a kind of everyman for his particular culture, conditioned by that culture's discourse.

Their subjectivity is thus much more bound up in the Symbolic than in the Imaginary. They have different and essentially unrelated reasons for returning to Chechnya. John wants to free his fiancée, while Ivan wants to free Captain Medved'ev and perhaps avenge himself on Gugaev. He also wants to be paid; he is ultimately a mercenary fighter. However, if John is simply the embodiment of a hypocritical Western political correctness, Ivan's character is somewhat more complicated. He is not simply the hardened subject of post-ideological disillusionment that he seems to be on the surface.

As the journey to Chechnya begins, the film seems to be transforming itself into a kind of buddy film. The two men work together for their related goals while coming into conflict over their respective attitudes to violence and justice. Ivan accuses John of "playing Dostoevskii," by which he means to say that John has adopted a stance by which he agonizes over the ethics of violence while his Russian comrade does the actual dirty work. Balabanov makes clear the contrast between the hypocrisy of the Western discourse of human rights and the willingness of Ivan to accept the state of war with honesty and integrity. He is, after all, only in it for the money—the rescue of Margaret is John's war.

The film becomes more complex when Ivan takes a Chechen shepherd captive and forces him to act as their guide through the mountainous terrain. Thus, the binary relationship John—Ivan becomes a triangular structure Ruslan—Ivan—John. John is disturbed by the way Ivan physically brutalizes their captive, but Ivan explains that violence is the only language that the Chechen understands. As soon becomes clear, however, Ivan knows that this is not so.

Without invoking Lacan, Natal'ia Sirivlia has interpreted the identifications in this film on the level. Using the metaphor of the mirror image, she claims that Ivan has learned his skills from his enemy and points out that even Aslan Gugaev ultimately praises Ivan's military prowess:

“You fight like a real mountain dweller!” complemented Aslan. “I live on the plain,” declared Ivan proudly. But one doesn't learn to wage war like that on the plain. Ivan obtained his “knowledge for victory” as a borrowing from the Chechens. His strength is a mirror reflection of their untamed and barbarian strength. This is not the meeting of two civilizations — it is their total assimilation.

[«Ты повел себя как настоящий горец!» — хвалит Аслан. «Я на равнине живу», — гордо отвечает Иван. Но на равнине так воевать не учат. Свою «науку побеждать» Иван позаимствовал у чеченцев. Его сила — зеркальное отражение их дикой и варварской силы. Это не встреча двух цивилизаций — это их полное уподобление (Sirivlia, “Voina bez mira” 212).]

Although Ivan ultimately subdues Gugaev through force, he must subdue Ruslan through more than simple violence, for he needs to be sure that Ruslan will not turn on him in the heat of battle. Ivan first humiliates Ruslan, the representative of a nation that has humbled Russia from without and through commercial and criminal activity infiltrated Russia from within its very heart. Indeed, Ruslan reveals that his son currently lives in Moscow and that he would like him to study at Moscow University. At this juncture, Ivan shows himself to be much more knowledgeable about the world of the Chechens than Abdul Murat's two captives in *Prisoner of*

*the Mountains*. Recognizing that Ruslan is not a barbarian but rather a subject formed within a strict clan structure, Ivan subdues his captive in the most effective way possible. He offers to help Ruslan avenge himself on the Gugaev clan in exchange for the latter's loyalty in the rescue mission. Furthermore and more importantly, he tells Ruslan that the punishment for failing to help them succeed will be the murder of his entire extended family. This rather bold threat is guaranteed by what ought to be Ivan's most unlikely ally : NATO.<sup>103</sup> By convincing Ruslan that he and John are on a mission from NATO, the shepherd realizes that he is helpless against an enemy that can rain bombs from the sky and reach his family at any point on the globe. By



Figure 14

making NATO the guarantor of his threat, Ivan has co-opted the Western alliance for his own purposes, but he has also donned the mantle of a military alliance that justifies its acts of violence with the very same notions of Western values that appear so corrosive to John's character. The discourse of human rights, so crucial to the symbolic identification of the Western liberal subject, is

adopted by the Russian subject as the guarantor of his campaign against the Chechens.

As Sirivlia suggests, Ivan may very well have learned some of his violent behavior during his captivity by Gugaev, but he could just as well have learned it from Hollywood action films. What he learns from Gugaev is to manipulate the "other" by speaking the "Other's" language. Like Pelevin, Balabanov has directed a film that seems on the surface to continue the ideological project begun by his earlier blockbusters, but the structure of the conflict is

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<sup>103</sup> It is crucial to recall that at the time of this film's release, NATO was associated by most Russians with the bombing of Yugoslavia, justified by the Western alliance as a humanitarian mission. Slavoj Žižek has an interesting (and, for once, non-Lacanian) take on this glaring paradox.



significantly different. Ivan intervenes as subject not through submission to the Big Other but by acknowledging its impotence. The fact that Western discourse of human rights comes to Ivan's aid does not represent the victory of Western values. Ivan's destitution at the end of the film (he is facing trial for the murder of citizens of the Russian Federation) is the inevitable result of a breakdown of the Symbolic order in which the State hypocritically maintains that the Chechens retain the legal rights of citizens of the Federation. The position of the Russian hero is apparently in the space between dueling hypocrisies, where victory can only be attained through the constant and contingent manipulation of discourses and the application of necessary force.

#### **6.4. Disintegrating Russia Resurgent: Conclusion**

The start of shooting *War* and the film's release encompass the period before and after September 11, 2001, and the attacks on New York and Washington have left their trace in the finished work. John repeatedly refers to the Chechens as terrorists, while other characters in the film rarely do. It is well known that Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to offer his condolences to the United States on the day it was attacked, and the calculated advantage gained by Russia through its participation in the war on terrorism is clear. The insistence that Al-Qaeda fighters were active in Chechnya allowed the Kremlin to align itself with the West in the war on global terror, while at the same time guaranteeing that Chechnya would never become another Kosovo. Putin's silent acquiescence to the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia seemed to signal that Russia was finally ready to let go of the old Soviet Empire, but only by making a clear distinction between the so-called near abroad (i.e., the Soviet Empire) and the non-Russian regions of the Russian Federation. Thus, the Kremlin attempted to insure that Chechnya would be regarded by the international community as an integral part of a modern state with a status resembling Kansas more than Kosovo.

Although Russian identity is no less problematic than it was in the 1990s, the first years of the twenty-first century have seen a clear strengthening of the Russian State [*Rossiiskoe gosudarstvo*], and a decrease of attention to questions of Russian identity. Although the Russian Federation is clearly not a nation-state, it has asserted itself in the international community with renewed vigor. Furthermore, there is a sense that the Russians people relate to the State with a renewed patriotism and that this more positive attitude is in reference not only to the State as it exists today but also as it existed in the past.

The most recent cultural reconfigurations of Russian identity do not offer any easy explanation for the contradictory rise of patriotism in the absence of a nation-state that would naturally engender such patriotism, nor do they predict what the future may hold. But the contrast with Eastern Europe reveals one specific difference. Žižek's interpretation of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe centered on the inevitability of collapse when the Big Other collapsed. It is crucial to understand that the "Big Other" in this case is both the Symbolic order as guarantor of the ideological underpinnings of the regime *and* the impotence of State power that could no longer effectively rule its people through force. The result was either a more or less "velvet" revolution, or the rise of virulent nationalism to fill the vacuum left by the gaping hole in the Other.

This homology between Symbolic order and State power does not operate in the same way in Russia. The fall of the Soviet Union did not lead either to the end or to the rebirth of Russia. Nor did a crisis of Russian identity lead to the collapse of the totalitarian state, for we have seen that the crisis of Russian identity has been acute since the first stirrings of nationalism as a political force in Europe. The disturbed relationship between the State and the collective identity of its people has provided the context for the most varied theoretical constructions of Russia's cultural identity. It is a commonplace to hear Russia praised as combining both East and

West despite the fact that this leaves Russia without definition on its own terms. More telling is perhaps Dostoevskii's Pushkin Speech, one of the important stages in Pushkin's transformation into Russia's "national" poet. As Dostoevskii famously claimed, Pushkin showed that one can only become truly Russian by becoming a "universal man." Pushkin could contain within his soul the genius of every foreign land. For Dostoevskii, this was the mission of Christian Russia—to bring a new Word to the world for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The end of the twentieth century perhaps became an inhospitable context for this particular expression of the Russian Idea. But the form of Russia may have outlived the content of the Idea. Perhaps this is the kernel of the repetition compulsion that keeps the Empire alive in the twenty-first century. Only when Russia becomes everything can Russians begin collectively to constitute something.

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