

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 24
Issue 1 *Russian Culture of the 1990s*

Article 2

1-1-2000

Introduction: Centrifuge and Fragmentation

Helena Goscilo
University of Pittsburgh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Goscilo, Helena (2000) "Introduction: Centrifuge and Fragmentation," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1473>

This Introductory Material is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Introduction: Centrifuge and Fragmentation

Abstract

The seismic changes inaugurated by desovietization not only recast the entire framework of Russia's cultural priorities, production, and reception, but ultimately revised fundamental concepts of what constitutes culture...

Keywords

fragmentation, desovietization, Russia, Russian culture, culture, economy, genres, pulp fiction, Postsoviet Russia, sex, sexualization, criminalization, machismo, stylization

Introduction: Centrifuge and Fragmentation

Helena Goscilo
University of Pittsburgh

The seismic changes inaugurated by desovietization not only recast the entire framework of Russia's cultural priorities, production, and reception, but ultimately revised fundamental concepts of what constitutes culture. The reduction, then withdrawal, of formerly guaranteed state subsidies, a steady barrage of nationwide financial crises amidst the announced transition to a market economy, increased contacts with the West, and the emergence of the New Russians as an influential (and highly controversial) quasi-class resulted in comprehensive rethinking and reformation in all spheres. Seventy-year-old habits and fulfilled expectations died a slow but, in several cases, violent and irreversible death.

As the centralized, government-sponsored model of culture, with its sacrosanct hierarchies and huge organizational networks, ceded to a dizzying welter of discrete, smaller-scale enterprises, seemingly unassailable institutions within traditional structures teetered and crumbled. Literature, art, film, music, theater, and ballet lost not only official sponsorship, but also status and audiences. Under the impact of widespread disillusionment with ideology, the elimination of censorship, and an initially uncritical receptivity to Western forces, popular culture rapidly dislodged High Culture. The axiom "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" acquired vivid life as state publishing houses foundered, mammoth subscriptions to major literary journals evaporated, the country's premier libraries and museums (e.g., the Lenin Library in Moscow, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg) verged on collapse and curtailed their services, the Bolshoi Theater broadcast desperate appeals for foreign aid, and the film industry shrank to the point of near-evanescence. Formerly lionized writers at both extremes of the political spec-

trum (Rasputin, Solzhenitsyn, Limonov) proved irrelevant to those cultural developments that galvanized the media and the urban population. Russian culture of the 1990s, in a sense, reflected the vagaries of Yeltsin's presidency in its ever-shifting parade of figures and entities enjoying shortlived glory in the fickle but tirelessly focused spotlight. (Mark Lipovetsky's article identifies the major currents in the readership-poor Russian literature of the 1990s, while Mikhail Gnedovskii's article on the prize-winning museum in Krasnoiarsk, Siberia, addresses the phenomenon of creative vitality on the "periphery.")

Media Might and Pop on Top

While Culture as conceived during the Soviet era dwindled into an endangered species, new genres overran the cultural market, which catered to a steadily growing appetite for visual stimulation and light entertainment, as well as enthusiasm for the outsized gesture and the violation of cherished taboos. Pulp fiction garnered millions of readers; glossy magazines flooded kiosks and bookstalls; television shows responding to a taste for the confessional, scandalous, and voyeuristic thrived; flamboyant, extravagant, and highly publicized receptions, parties, and presentations became a dominant urban form (often dubbed *tusovka*); sales of pirated recordings, videos, and software grew into a multi-million dollar industry; cafés and privately owned restaurants, clubs, galleries, beauty salons, and countless small businesses materialized almost overnight, altering the face of Moscow and transforming it into Cellular-phone City. The exclusive Central House of Literati (TsDL), the jealously guarded citadel of Moscow's literary elite, became a ruinously expensive culinary haven affordable only to New Russians. While internationally renowned, landmark museums struggled to survive, Marat Gel'man's modest-sized, programmatically irreverent gallery drew visitors and media coverage with such tongue-in-cheek shows as "The Art of the Kompromat" and, to commemorate Pushkin's bicentennial this year, "Fak iu, Danthes!"—a title and rhetorical position calculated to shock while eliciting Pushkin-empathy. (The article by Helena Goscilo in this issue analyzes the role of glossies during the decade.)

The apparent replacement of monolithic state conglomerates by diverse multiplicity was partly illusory, for the nineties witnessed the birth of sizable private empires wielding incalculable influence:

the car-czar Boris Berezovsky, for instance, underwrote *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (*Independent Newspaper*), owned a controlling share of the TV channel ORT, and (in a quid pro quo arrangement that came to characterize the decade) financed the intelligentsia's Triumph award.¹ Yet the *de facto* dissolution—or, more accurately, voluntary divestment—of the monopolist official center that had both controlled and sustained Soviet culture undisputedly led to the proliferation of myriad independent, self-promoting ventures that treated culture not as ideological carrier, but as marketable commodity. Power became highly personalized, and such ideologues as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Iurii Luzhkov capitalized on the society's revised Cult of Personality, advertising themselves through product endorsements² and dramatic "performances" that kept them in the limelight: a widely publicized renewal of marriage vows and periodic rows with journalists in Zhirinovskiy's case, and an international extravaganza to celebrate Moscow's 850th anniversary in Luzhkov's.

Nostalgia, or The Way We Were

Whereas during the early phase of Postsoviet euphoria Russia indiscriminately embraced everything Western, the watershed year of 1995 marked a perceptible recoil. The tidal wave of nostalgia sweeping through Postsoviet society manifested itself in the establishment of Russkoe Bistro, which challenged McDonald's supremacy in fast foods by serving pirozhki, borshch, and other quintessentially Russian fare at more than a dozen outlets, with plans to create a chain analogous to the golden-arched giant; in Russkoe Radio, which became the nation's most popular station by playing exclusively Russian music to an audience of 664,000 daily listeners in almost forty cities; in the New Year's extravaganzas orchestrated by the entertainment mogul Leonid Parfyonov (executive director of NTV), whose recreations of campy Brezhnev-era musicals captured more than sixty percent of the national TV audience in 1996 and 1997; in Russian linguists' lobby to ban an extensive list of foreign words from Russia's mass media; in the prominence of the rock/pop group Liube, which in its purely Russian revisions of old favorites tapped widespread enthusiasm for national materials; in the committee appointed by Yeltsin to forge a new "national idea"; in the revival of Orthodox Church marriages and of such institutions as the fabled nineteenth-century English Club; in Yeltsin's exhorta-

tion that Russians purchase not the abundant imported goods stocked in stores, but the pricier, shoddier, and less accessible items manufactured at home; in the fashion for memoirs, with works by Bella Akhmadulina, Andrei Bitov, Andrei Voznesensky, El'dar Riazanov, and biographies of Stalin's henchmen; and in the popularity of Russian films from the Stalinist and Thaw eras: Ivan Pyr'ev's Stalinist musicals catered almost daily to avid TV audiences, while the most celebrated and prize-winning recent films (by Petr Todorovskii, Ivan Dykhovichnyi, Sergei Livnev, Pavel Chukhrai, and Sergei Mikhalkov) were all retrospective. (The film industry's compulsion to revisit the past in gender-specific terms that seek to recuperate Russian masculinity is the subject of Susan Larsen's article.)

Sexualization

Sex as a cultural phenomenon, as opposed to everyday praxis, remained one of the most prized Postsoviet imports and manifested itself ubiquitously: in the first Russian sex talk show, *Pro eto (About That)*; strip shows targeting both men and women; nightclubs such as the notorious Hungry Duck; videos and films featuring rape, group sex, and kindred "delicacies"; undisguised and ill-disguised venues for prostitution right off Red Square, such as the Night Flight club; sex manuals and advice about giving and achieving pleasure during intercourse; the publication of gay and "lewd" texts, including the fairy tales censored out of A. Afanas'ev's classic nineteenth-century folklore collection; canvases and installations that challenge Robert Mapplethorpe's supremacy in controversial art; men's porn magazines, headed by *Andrei* and *MaKhaON*; solicitations in the guise of personal ads; the transformations of bathhouses (*bani*) into nests of political sex scandals; the infiltration of explicit sex scenes or references to "sexual anomalies" and the bodily lower stratum into literary texts (Liudmila Petrushevskia, Valeriia Narbikova, Liudmila Ulitskaia, Viktor Erofeev, Vladimiar Sorokin, Vladimir Sharov, Igor' Iarkevich); the inclusion of expletives, sly innuendos, or unambiguously "racy" talk in song lyrics, such as those of Liube's "Elki-palki" and "Tetia doktor"; and the pathological passion for hormonizing everything that others homogenize by the pseudo-political clown Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, self-proclaimed "sexual knight of all the girls in Russia" and leader of the misnamed Liberal Democratic Party: his published credo, *Azbuka seksa (The ABCs of Sex, 1999)* proposed a novel domestic industry

as a panacea for the nation's economic woes, with pornutopian dreams of licensed prostitutes launched into space to alleviate the stress of the Motherland's beleaguered cosmonauts. And, of course, the claimed bare-skinned antics of Yeltsin's various appointees (Kovalyov, Skuratov, et al.), plus the luridness of their exposés, kept the public entertained, if not edified. (Nadezhda Azhgikhina's article surveys the full range of Postsoviet clubs, while Eliot Borenstein examines Russia's wholesale discursive sexualization.)

Criminalization or Manacled Machismo

Criminalization as both social problem and artistic mode figured prominently in Russian culture of the 1990s. The belittling image of the New Russian as an avaricious, Neanderthal hoodlum bedecked in gold chains and flanked by armed bodyguards revived an almost moribund genre of urban folklore: the *anekdot* (joke or gnomic funny story). Moreover, the New Russian's own, contrasting, sense of self as a national epic hero inspired revisionary works in funeral art and handicrafts: the numerous deaths occasioned by gang shootouts proved lucrative for embalmers and gravestone specialists, whose skills at beautifying bullet-riddled corpses and sculpting gigantic, gaudy monuments to commemorate the deceased grew in demand and altered the appearance of cemeteries. And, while famous folk art communities such as Fedoskino resembled ghost towns, abandoned by younger generations of craftsmen who sought a livelihood in the cities, the enterprising Grigorii Bal'tser became a champion of folk art, New Style. The scorned caricature of the New Russian formed the cornerstone of Bal'tser's unique emporium in the centrally located Manezh Square, "The World of the New Russians" (Mir Novykh Russkikh), subsequently relocated to the Arbat. This utopian space functioned as both gift shop and sui generis museum, a repository of items that preserved, celebrated, and sold the New Russian lifestyle in art and handicrafts produced by masters famous for their finely-detailed depictions of scenes from traditional Russian fairy tales, epics, and rustic life. Palekh lacquer boxes and trays, Gzhel ceramics, Khokhloma bowls and spoons—all impeccably executed—ironically condensed all the satirized, criminalized elements of New Russians' fatuously tasteless excesses.

More broadly, the fad for crime novels, the prominence of crime in the prose of Sorokin and Petrushevskiaia, the criminal hero in

such films as P. Chukhrai's *Vor (Thief)*, A. Balabanov's *Brat (Brother)*, and V. Krisstofovich's *Priiatel' pokoinika (Friend of the Deceased)*, and the popularity of the group Liube, whose early albums favored criminal personae and whose musical-drama film *Zona Liube (Liube Zone, 1994/95)* is Postsoviet Russia's answer to *Jailhouse Rock*, all illustrated what one critic called Russia's romance with the zone, i.e., the life of prisoners/criminals.³

Stylization As the Last Refuge

Stylization was rampant in the 1990s, betraying the desire to disclaim an identifiable self, in a slippage or retreat into culture's readymade. The reflex of placing quotation marks around one's creations signaled disengagement from the Russian traditions of ideological or philosophical commitment and articulation through cultural forms—a disavowal of the pre-Derridian, pre-deconstructionist Russia. Writers, artists, and performers adopted discourses, stances, and personae of famous predecessors: Vladimir Sorokin's texts consisted almost exclusively of socialist realist clichés, Turgenevian lyricism, and Dostoevskian cadences. For years Dmitrii Prigov's poetry was everyone else's—indeed, the earmark of his verses is their non-Prigovian authorship. In art, Bella Matveeva not only assumed the persona of Louise Brooks in her self-installations, but in her salon performances orchestrated scenes from *fin-de-siècle* brothels meticulously researched for verisimilitude; the Petersburg painters Oleg Maslov and Viktor Kuznetsov donned the roles of Nero and his *pueri delicati* or acted out scenes from the *Satyricon*; the nationalist, religious drag queen Vladislav Mamyshev, known throughout both capitals as Vladik Monroe, uncannily metamorphosed into Marilyn Monroe, Joan of Arc, Napoleon, Lenin, Hitler, and Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the musical group Liube owed its popularity to its agent Igor' Matvienko's acuity in identifying nostalgia, criminalization, sexualization, and stylization as the decade's increasingly impassioned tendencies. Liube's collective public persona condensed precisely these traits. The ambiguities of the band's lyrics and performance style attracted listeners attuned to irony, while proles and nationalists with a straightforward, literal apperception of Liube's texts welcomed them as exhortations to imperialist drives and elegies for a once-powerful military state. The billboard campaign en-

Yeltsin supporter in the last election), nicely encapsulated the complexities of Liube's paradoxical position. Touted as the icon of blue-collar patriotism, Rastorguev, with seeming appropriateness, appeared as the burly, uniformed spokesman for Peter I, a "Russian" cigarette that evokes memories of the country's former expansion and glory. Both "national" cigarette and advertising strategy, however, belonged to RJ Reynolds, the U.S. tobacco giant competing with Philip Morris for the East European smokers' market. Such contradictions abounded in the 1990s, especially whenever economics and nationalism intertwined.

In short, the 1990s in Russia ushered in an inconceivable wealth of novelties and conflicting impulses reified in diverse cultural genres. Which of them will survive into the twenty-first century is a question that remains open as Russia's economic woes intensify in a Dostoevskian key that disquietingly bodes devastation and drama without the kind of reassuring resolution and closure vouchsafed, however provisionally, by "neater" genres and less explosive times.

Contents and Acknowledgments

The articles in this issue focus on the period preceding the economic meltdown of August 17, 1998, mainly because seven months are inadequate for gauging the lasting impact of that financial disaster on Russian culture. The culture of the 1990s, after all, is a moving target, and our tracking devices are subject to human frailty, just as our coverage is subject to the realities of publication: considerations of space have precluded assessments of pulp fiction, music, television, and fashion in our purview. And, inevitably, the principle of selection, which operates in any collection of this sort, might strike readers with specialized interests that differ from ours as insufficiently catholic, if not downright arbitrary. In assembling the issue, we have spotlighted those aspects of the contemporary Russian scene that impress us, and Russian producers and consumers of cultural products, as dominant or vigorously battling for their place in the Postsoviet sun. Our sanguine assumption is that future studies will compensate for our omissions.

I take pleasure in thanking the Russian and East European Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh for underwriting the translations and visuals in this issue. Sincerest thanks also to generous, hospitable colleagues at the following institutions whose invitations to give talks not only brought multiple delights of a personal

and professional nature, but also enabled me to rehearse and develop some of the ideas pertinent to this volume: the College of William and Mary, the University of Oregon, Portland State University, Reed College, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana, Wake Forest University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Virginia. Finally, I express affectionate appreciation to my junior colleagues—the talented graduate students in Slavic at Pittsburgh whose intellectual zest keeps me, elatedly, on my mental toes; and above all, to Sasha Prokhorov, a super-addressee from whom I invariably learn in the process of discussing his work.

We gratefully acknowledge the pertinent sources for permission to reproduce visuals.

Notes

1. The 1990s quickly became the era of Search for Sponsors as the elimination of state subsidies for literary, film, and sundry other cultural organizations forced their representatives to seek support elsewhere. By underwriting the Triumph award, Berezovsky “entered the ranks” of, or at least rubbed shoulders with, the intellectual and artistic elite, while the latter received the financial backing to which it had become accustomed. A similar exchange of “favors” between the affluent Diana Medman and the moneyless women editing the gender-focused journal *Preobrazhenie* (*Transformation*) allowed the publication to operate. The film industry’s inability to secure adequate independent financing accounts for its recent retreat to government funding.

2. While Zhirinovsky proclaimed his sexual potency and helped to peddle the vodka named after him, Luzhkov had his own TV station and a perfume created especially for him (called Mayor), was a habitué of most photo op events in the city that he transformed into his private fiefdom, publicly commented “from above” on Yeltsin’s policies, and arrogantly violated the law prohibiting the old “propiska” ‘registration’ system mandated by the Soviet regime. To many he resembled a mafia boss in complete command of his organization, which happened to be the city of Moscow.

3. See Andrei Titov, “Seans,” *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (1996): 143-44.