Bodies in Transition: 
Physical Transformation in Postmodern Russian Fiction and Visual Culture

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy 
in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By
Allison Leigh Potvin, M.A.
Graduate Program in Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures

The Ohio State University
2011

Dissertation Committee:
Angela K. Brintlinger, Advisor
Irene Delic
Yana Hashamova
Abstract

This dissertation investigates the representation of the human body in postmodern Russian literature and visual culture, including painting, sculpture, performance, and film. As Russia has gone through political and social change from Khruschev’s thaw to Putin’s rise, the image of the body in literature and art has shifted, with an increasing emphasis on the body as an object in flux. Faced with advances in technology, new theoretical approaches, and the fragmentation of identity in postmodern culture, artists have brought into question what it means to be human. Bodies expand, multiply, and transcend boundaries. They blur the lines between male and female, single and multiple, partial and whole, human and animal, human and machine, and subhuman and superhuman. The image of the fragmented, multiple, and contradictory postmodern body challenges authoritative discourse and cultural myths, while, at the same time, artists reuse, cite, and quote the art and literature of official culture.

This study will place Russian postmodernism within the context of global and historic trends in literature and art, while emphasizing the influence of the Russian avant-garde and formalist criticism on postmodern aesthetics. Viewing literary and artistic practice together will yield a more complete picture of the postmodern attitude towards the body at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium. My intent is not to give a comprehensive overview of the body in Russian literature and art, but to show the scope and application of the imagery of bodily transformation.
Dedication

For my parents,
Robert and Kathleen Potvin
Acknowledgments

This project has benefited from the generosity and encouragement of my friends, family, and teachers. First and foremost, I thank my committee for their patience and support throughout this process. I am indebted to you not only for reading, editing, and working through this paper with me, but for imparting a spirit of inquiry in the classroom, modeling professionalism, and for writing recommendations, even on short notice. I have learned so much from each of you. My advisor, Angela Brintlinger, has been an invaluable resource and reliable advocate, always knowing how to motivate, what questions to ask, and how to provide direction when I found myself lost along the way. Many thanks to my committee members, Dr. Irene Delic and Dr. Yana Hashamova who guided me through the growing pains of graduate school, and who always kept me on my toes. I also wish to thank Dr. Alexander Burry for writing letters of support, and for his comments in the early stages of this paper that have informed its shape today. The support of the faculty and students of the Slavic Department and the Slavic Center have helped me to develop as a scholar and as a teacher.

This project was conducted with the generous support of a Post-Prospectus Fellowship from the Graduate School of The Ohio State University. I am grateful for the opportunities this grant afforded me, which included traveling to museums and archives to conduct research. I was especially privileged to visit the Dodge Collection at the June
Voorhees Zimmerli Museum in Brunswick, NJ, and the Russian Icon Museum in Clinton, MA. I extend special thanks to the Museum of Modern Art libraries for granting me access to their unique collection.

The seed of this dissertation was planted during a year-long study abroad in St. Petersburg, generously funded by a Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship. My visit allowed me to explore the contemporary art scene in Russia, and to formulate several of the ideas in this dissertation. I extend my gratitude to the artists who have given permission to use their images in this dissertation.

Thank you to my friends and family who have offered words of encouragement and good humor along the way, as well as providing all manner of logistical support. I am grateful to my parents and sister for their ongoing and wide-ranging help and assistance. Thanks especially to Sara Lasser Yau and Cyrus Yau for providing a second home base for research, to Thaddeus Fortney for his enormous generosity of spirit, enlightening conversation, and unfailing affinity of mind, and to Rachael Riggs Leyva, Jedi proxy, for last-minute logistical heroism.

Thank you, finally, to Hannah Kosstrin, tireless cheerleader, voice of reason, reader, critic, wit, and lifeline. Words are not enough to express how lucky and proud I am to spend every day with you. I could not have done this without you. Thanks.
Vita

2001 .............................................................. B.A. Russian, Goucher College
2001-2002 .................................................... Research Associate, The Ohio State University
2002 ......................................................... Foreign Language Area Studies Fellowship, Moscow State University
2002-2004 ............................................. Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University
2005 ............................................................ M.A. Russian, The Ohio State University
2005-2006 ............................................ Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University
2006-2007 ....... Foreign Language Area Studies Fellowship, St. Petersburg State University
2007-2009 ............................................. Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University
2009 ............................................................... Visiting Lecturer, SWSEEL, Indiana University
2009 ............................................................... Post-Prospectus Fellowship, The Ohio State University
2010-2011 ......................................................... Academic Advisor, Clark College

Fields of Study

Major Field: Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note on Transliteration and Translation</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: We are Waiting for Changes (Мы Ждём Перемен)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Nothing's Shocking: Violence, Death, and Resurrection</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: A Cabinet of Curiosities: Monsters and Metazoa</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Flesh Made Data: Media, Cybernetic Technology, and the Body</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Body/Language</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Copyright information</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note on Transliteration and Translation:

In transliterating Cyrillic, I have tried to remain consistent throughout, adhering to a few rules. I have adopted the established spelling of Russian words that are common in English, such as “glasnost,” of proper names commonly used in English, such as Tolstoy, and of proper names as published by the author in English, such as Tolstaya and Lipovetsky. Where multiple variations appear in print, I have tried to establish preference. For instance, according to translator Andrew Reynolds, Victor Erofeyev prefers this spelling to other variations such as “Yerofeyev” or “Erofeev.” When quoting or referencing a translation, I use the transliteration provided by each individual translator. For less common words, and when unable to establish a preference for proper names, I use the transliteration scheme approved by the American Library Association and Library of Congress, but omit diacritics.

Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
List of Figures

Figure 1. St. Christopher Cynocephalus.................................................................24
Figure 2. Hl. Christophoros Kynokephalos, 19th C. Russia..................................24
Figure 3. The Mice Bury the Cat..........................................................................26
Figure 4. Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, Zoo-Homo sapiens, Feb. 17, 1977..38
Figure 5. Ideal Slogan (1972)..............................................................................50
Figure 6. Onward to the Victory of Communism! (1972)......................................50
Figure 7. Prigov’s eye, with washerwoman (New Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow)........80
Figure 8. Prigov’s Stalin (1998)...........................................................................82
Figure 9. Skulls in Profile (detail).........................................................................86
Figure 10. Komar and Melamid in profile............................................................86
Figure 11. Stalin and the Muses (1982-3)...............................................................92
Figure 12. The Origin of Socialist Realism (1981-2)............................................92
Figure 13. Komar and Melamid’s revision of the mausoleum...............................95
Figure 14. Pavlov’s Dog......................................................................................116
Figure 15. The Wings will Grow (1996-7).............................................................164
Figure 16. A fatherly Stalin..................................................................................164
Figure 17. Our Way of Life (1992)......................................................................166
Figure 18. Factory Worker and Collective Farmer...............................................166
Figure 19. Molokhovets’ map..............................................................................................178
Figure 20. “Map of types of meat cuts in St. Petersburg”................................................178
Figure 21. A Bear in the Summer Garden........................................................................180
Figure 22. The three-dimensional Butcher’s map............................................................180
Figure 23. Television as God.............................................................................................216
Figure 24. A selection from Superobjects for Superpeople...............................................223
Figure 25. Komar and Melamid as Stalin and Lenin (1973).............................................232
Figure 26. Komar and Melamid as Pioneers (1982-3)......................................................232
Figure 27. Kosolapov’s Lenin Coca-Cola (1981).............................................................233
Figure 28. Hamilton’s collage..........................................................................................234
Figure 29. Ideal Document, stage 1..................................................................................236
Figure 30. Ideal Document, stage 3..................................................................................236
Figure 31. A TransState advertisement..........................................................................238
Figure 32. From We Buy and Sell Souls (1978)...............................................................240
Figure 33. A Mit’ki group portrait....................................................................................244
Figure 34. Prigov as Mitiok..............................................................................................244
Figure 35. Liosha’s “real” body........................................................................................253
Figure 36. Liosha’s reflection in the mirror/screen..........................................................253
Figure 37. The Prince of Persia game, with “body scissors” and torches.........................260
Figure 38. Prigov’s public face, reproduced.....................................................................265
Introduction

We are Waiting for Changes (Мы Ждём Перемен)\(^1\)

Right now I put my hope in a phantasmagoric art, with hypothesis instead of a purpose, an art in which the grotesque will replace realistic descriptions of ordinary life. Such an art would correspond best to the spirit of our time.

Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky) (1959)\(^2\)

…if we consider the grotesque image in its extreme aspect, it never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body. It is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception… the life of one body is born from the preceding, older one.

Mikhail Bakhtin\(^3\)

When Bakhtin wrote that in grotesque imagery, a new body is born from a former body, he might easily have been reporting on the artistic situation in the Soviet Union.

On the eve of Bakhtin's death in 1975, a new art was being conceived from the dying

---

\(^1\) Kino’s rock anthem, “We are Waiting for Changes,” (1987) was a demand for the freedoms promised by glasnost. It is featured at the conclusion of Sergei Solovev’s 1987 film Assa, (Acca) and Sergei Loban’s 2005 independent film Dust (Пыль), which I discuss in chapter 3.


\(^3\) Bakhtin, Rabelais, 318. Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais was submitted as a thesis in 1940, and, after much difficulty, first published in Russian in 1965. For details on Bakhtin’s life and work, see the Prologue of the Indiana University Press edition; Mikhail Bakhtin by Clark and Holquist; and Emerson, The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin.
body of Socialist Realist art. Just one year previously, in 1974, the Soviet authorities had tried to protect Socialist Realism from the nascent nonconformist art by smothering the latter in its crib. On September 15 of that year, a group of unofficial artists held an informal showing in Beliaevskoe Park on the outskirts of Moscow to which they invited friends, relatives and foreign journalists. The gathering was crushed, quite literally, by authorities who sent bulldozers and street cleaners to drive through the exhibition. They confiscated and destroyed several works of art, and assaulted a number of attendees, including members of the press (Wren). In response to international outrage at reports of the incident, the authorities claimed that the disruption had not been officially sanctioned, but was rather the spontaneous response of forest workers whose proletarian sensibilities were offended by the “degenerate” art.

In reaction to international pressure, participants in what eventually came to be known as the “Bulldozer Exhibition” were granted an open public exhibition in Izmailovskii Park a month later. Among those participants were Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, the pioneers of sots-art—the Soviet equivalent of pop art—whose series of paintings featuring official Soviet slogans and parodying socialist realist imagery were completed two years earlier. In its deconstruction of official language and imagery, their work precipitated a cultural shift that would further the development of

---

4 For information on the history and significance of “The Bulldozer Exhibition” exhibition, see Gambrell, “The Post Bulldozer Generations;” Wren; and Fiks, Hoptman, and Pospiszyl 69-78.

5 Komar and Melamid’s early works took the form of red banners emblazoned with copied Soviet slogans, such as “Glory to Labor!” or “Onward to Communism!” (Figure 6) signed by the artists, subverting the collective voice of the original pronouncements. In the US Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger employed similar ironic uses of text, including advertising slogans, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s.
grotesque imagery in art in precisely the direction that Sinyavsky had imagined. For these postmodernists, the grotesque image of the open body provided an avatar for their investigations of language and images.

Russian postmodernism would not bring about the grotesque imagery of renewal that Bakhtin discussed, but rather something resembling the carnivalesque in appearance. In postmodern art and literature, human bodies are shown in a variety of guises, which, like carnival masks, suspend everyday reality in favor of a world open to change. Bodies combine human and animal features, male and female attributes, and suspend the rules of life and death. Like carnival, postmodernism subverts the control of official culture through play with the symbols and iconography of power. In Russian postmodernist discourse, the body is a medium for the interplay of concepts. I argue that the image of the body in flux is part of the postmodern attack on authoritarian language—a language characterized by widespread public exposure and acceptance, repetition, and ideological conformity, including the language of Soviet and US propaganda, art, media, and advertising.

This dissertation investigates the representation of the human body in postmodern Russian literature and visual art, including painting, sculpture, performance, theater, and film. Socialist realism—while never as unified and static as critics have suggested—produced many iconic images of the body in its heyday, while in contrast the past three

---

6 Sinyavsky, who advocated the use of grotesque imagery, preferred the aesthetics of “metarealism” (Epstein) or “neo-baroque” (Lipovetsky) to conceptualism (see below for more on these distinctions). He wrote that what he saw in conceptualism was a dead end and an empty game (“The Golden Lace,” 78).
decades have seen an increasing emphasis on the body as an object in flux. Bodies expand, multiply, and transcend boundaries. Figures blur the lines between male and female, single and multiple, partial and whole, human and animal, human and machine, and subhuman and superhuman. In this study, I explore the many ways in which bodies transform in postmodern Russian literature and visual culture. I examine literature in conjunction with visual culture in part because many of my subjects work as both artists and as writers, and because the artists and writers are part of the same milieu. Indeed, for those who combine text and image, such as Prigov, such distinctions are difficult to make, and even arbitrary. My intent is not to give a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of the transforming body, but rather to explore the scope and use of the imagery of transformation in recent literature and art and its significance in relation to language and power.

This study poses postmodern attitudes toward the body and its mutability against the background of the historic treatment of the body in Russia. I cover three major aspects of the body in transformation: mortality (violence, death, and resurrection), hybridity (combinations of human and animal elements), and technology (the body as data). What follows in this introduction is a broad outline of how the body has been viewed historically and how it will be treated in this project. In viewing each aspect of

---

7 See Dobrenko, *Political Economy* for his rethinking of socialism as the product of socialist realism, including a discussion of the body in socialist realism. See Kaganovsky; and Borenstein *Men Without Women* for discussions which complicate the image of the socialist realist body.

8 These artists attended apartment exhibitions and poetry readings together in the 1970s and 80s, Tolstaya interviewed Kulik on her television talk show, Kulik collaborated with Sorokin on his *Deep into Russia* project, Prigov drew Sorokin and Kulik as creatures in his *Bestiary*, Prigov was inducted as an honorary member of the Mit’ki, and visited Kabakov’s installations; Kabakov is referenced in Narbikova’s fiction… the list of collaborations and connections could go on and on.

9 See Nicholas, 30, citing a statement by Prigov to this effect. Art and literature, according to Prigov, are “одна каша” (Nicholas 17).
bodily transformation, I focus on the history of the image, its application in Russian postmodernism, and the theoretical and critical discussion and surrounding it. While discussions of Russian postmodernism are wide-ranging and diverse in their analysis, my study engages this scholarship more specifically towards a reading of the body in transformation.\textsuperscript{10} Such a reading will yield a better understanding of postmodern aesthetics and political engagement.

\textit{A Rogue’s Gallery}

The artists and writers featured in this dissertation were part of a single creative milieu, connected through publications, exhibitions, and collaborations. They are also linked by their common use of the image of the human body as an object in flux. The subjects of this study represent at least two trends in Russian postmodernism (conceptualism and neo-baroque), and two Russian cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg). Each holds a personal collection of passports with an individual history that complicates their designation as strictly “Russian,” as national borders shifted, governments transformed, and their own citizenship status changed. Many remained in Russia while Komar, Melamid, and Kabakov, whose Soviet passports listed their nationality as “Jewish,” emigrated to the United States.\textsuperscript{11} Sokolov, born in Ottowa, Canada, lived in

\textsuperscript{10} Mark Lipovetsky’s \textit{Paralogii} conducts a similarly broad survey of Russian postmodernism, but does not focus strictly on the aesthetics of the body.

\textsuperscript{11} The fifth line of a Soviet passport, and many other official documents listed nationality. Possible entries included “Russian,” “Jewish,” “Tadzhik,” “German,” etc. Those holding passports designating non-Russian nationalities often suffered discrimination. Komar and Melamid’s \textit{TransState} project imagines a new mode of citizenship with a new type of passport, separate from nationality. Horton and Brashinsky discuss the passport in glasnost-era cinema (219-24). Komar and Melamid were part of one of several waves of emigration from the Soviet Union. For a cultural history of the movement to assist Jews with emigration, see Beckerman; for statistical data, see http://www.ncsj.org/stats.shtml
Russia as a young man, and later emigrated to the US, and now divides his time between several countries. Kulik, born in Ukraine, once part of the Soviet Union, has chosen to live in Moscow. Others, such as Prigov and Tolstaya, traveled widely and worked abroad, but never emigrated. Meanwhile, place names changed—for instance, Petersburg’s Mit’ki group was established in Leningrad. Despite such complications, these artists and writers are all participants in a continuum of activities that can be broadly defined as Russian postmodernism, beginning in Moscow and Leningrad, and branching out through space and time across the globe. This section situates each subject within the context of Russian postmodernism as it came up from the underground and became part of the international art scene, and provides a brief introduction to each artist’s biography, aesthetics, and recent activity.12

Ilya Kabakov (1933-) worked officially as an illustrator of children’s books beginning in the 1950s until he was expelled from the Artists’ Union in 1965 for showing part of his “Shower” series in an Italian exhibition.13 In the 1970s, he began producing albums of illustrated narratives, which he performed for private audiences. These mostly focused on individual characters who experienced fantastic events or unique points of view.14 Kabakov also created installations for apartment exhibitions, such as “The Man who Flew into Space,” a room featuring an abandoned cot and man-sized slingshot, lined with Soviet propaganda posters. He gained notoriety abroad, developing an idea that he

12 For more general biographical and historical information, see Rich and Scherr.
13 The “Shower” series showed a man under a showerhead, untouched by water. Kabakov comments on this series in an interview with David Ross in the monograph Ilya Kabakov (15-16). The book also includes samples of his children’s illustrations. While Wallach comments that his success as an illustrator depended on “mediocrity”—creating drawings that looked like everyone else’s, some of Kabakov’s children’s illustrations include anthropomorphic animals similar to those that appear in his later work (Wallach 82).
14 Excerpts are available online at http://www.ilya-emilia-kabakov.com/index.php/albums
calls the “total installation,” wherein the museum space must be transformed through lighting, sound, or construction, in order to fully convey the sensory experience of the installation. An opinionated commentator on Russian postmodernism, Kabakov defines Russian conceptualism as distinct from Western conceptualism in that, “while in Western conceptualism one ‘thing’ is substituted with another ‘thing’ or even with the verbal description of a ‘thing,’ that is, its idea, in Russian conceptualism a ‘thing’ is substituted not with another ‘thing’ and not with its description (possessing some definite meaning), but with nothingness” (Lipovetsky, “Literary Postmodernism”33). According to Lipovetsky, this emptiness is related to the “Soviet overproduction of simulacra” which produced illusions without foundation (33). Kabakov has thrived in the post-Soviet context, with installations in museums around the world.

Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov (1940-2007), a key figure of Moscow Conceptualism, also got his start working officially as a painter and sculptor during the 60s and 70s. He began to develop his poetry at this time, and organized unofficial readings, sometimes performing in Kabakov’s studio (Grazhdane 10). Admitted to the Artists’ Union as a sculptor in 1975, he began to experiment with various formats and found materials such as empty cans, typewritten text, and pages of the newspaper Pravda, creating a kind of Arte Povera with a focus on conceptual elements after the

---

15 See Kabakov, Total Installation for his manifesto on the total installation.
16 Kabakov’s definition seems to explicitly reference the work of Joseph Kosuth (1945-), an American conceptualist artist whose most famous work, One and Three Chairs (1965) includes a chair placed in front of a full scale photograph of the chair, and a plate with a dictionary definition of the word “chair,” thus the object, in Kabakov’s formulation, is substituted both by another thing, and by its description.
17 Several catalogues have been published on Kabakov’s exhibitions, including Kabakov and Grois, Kabakov; Jackson, Experimental Group; Kabakov and Wallach Man who Never, and 1969-; Kabakov, Limited Edition; and Kabakov and Petzinger, among others. Kabakov has also published memoirs covering the 60s and 70s.
authorities removed him from his studio in the late 70s (Yurchak, *Forever* 266).\(^\text{18}\) He
arranged typewritten words on pages to form images in his “Stikhogrammy,” and created
text drawings, in which the main subject of the visual work was a block of text (such as
“Glasnost,” “PRiGOV,” or “Malevich’s Square”). Prigov became known as a visual and
performance artist as well as a poet, and his works in all genres frequently focused on
language. Prigov’s poems have been described as: “pastiches of language…Soviet
political slogans, language of Russian patriotism and imperialism, philosophy, and
allusions to Russian literary classics. They are a “warehouse” of different languages, in
which expressions of incompatible ideologies appear next to each other (Popovic 629).
Well-known for performing different personae, particularly the policeman
(“милицанер”) who performed poems in the tradition of the civic poet, Prigov was
committed to a mental institution by authorities in 1986 after he distributed poems on the
street as part of an action (he was soon released). He became a cult figure, and even
appeared in the 1990 film *Taxi Blues*. His popularity and fame grew both at home and
abroad, and he traveled and exhibited internationally, with retrospective exhibitions
beginning in 1995 (*Grazhdane* 11). He was extremely prolific, producing over 36,000
poems and hundreds of drawings, installations, performances, audio recordings, videos,
and digital animations before his death from a heart attack in 2007.\(^\text{19}\)

Sasha Sokolov (1943-) was born in Canada, while his father was working at the
Soviet embassy. After attending Moscow State University, where he studied journalism,

\(^\text{18}\) Access to art materials was restricted mostly to students and to those with Union membership. Prigov’s
choice of everyday materials is partly aesthetic choice, partly political subversion, using the pages of
*Pravda*, the communist party newspaper, as a medium for nonconformist art.

\(^\text{19}\) Prigov’s oeuvre is enormous, and many of his poems are only now being published. A few collections
have come out, as well as criticism and retrospective catalogs. He also published two novels.
Sokolov published his first novel, *A School for Fools* (Школа для дураков) with Ardis in 1976, and emigrated to the US shortly thereafter. He published *Between Dog and Wolf* (Между собакой и волком) in 1980, and *Palisandriia* (Палисандрия) in 1985. His prose is characterized by virtuosic play with language, layered literary references, and lush ornamentation. In *Palisandriia*, he creates an alternative history of the Soviet Union which at once mythologizes and deconstructs the myths of that system. While living outside of Russia, he has continued to compose in Russian and to explore the Russian context; he stopped publishing his writing until recently, when he again began to publish his poetry in the contemporary literary magazine *Zerkalo* (Зеркало).²⁰

Vitaly Komar (1943-) and Alexander Melamid (1945-) are the pioneers of sots-art, a Soviet version of pop art, exploiting the imagery of Communist propaganda instead of that of capitalist advertising and media. Their early collaborations, beginning in the late 1960s, included copying Soviet slogans onto red banners and signing them, performing an action in which they prepared to consume the ideological content of the newspaper *Pravda* by grinding it into a pulp through a meat grinder, and reinterpreting the Soviet constitution as a secret code on canvas, with its letters and numbers designated by colored dots. Their international profile rose after some of their works were smuggled out of the country by friends in the mid-70s. This exposure, in addition to the official opposition they met due to their participation in the “Bulldozer Exhibition” in 1974, led to their emigration to New York via Israel in 1977, where they began work on their “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” series, mimicking the style of socialist realism with an ironic edge. Émigré life has provided them with ample material beyond the language and

²⁰ [http://magazines.russ.ru/authors/s/sasokolov/](http://magazines.russ.ru/authors/s/sasokolov/)
imagery of socialism. Their work targets multiple authoritative discourses, including statistical science, medicine, art, technology, and US patriotism. Their success in the international marketplace of the art world has given them the freedom to approach authoritative language in a unique way. Their project is not to destroy the images of authority completely, but to encourage engagement with paradigms of power and control on a popular level. In 1992, they began a campaign to save monuments threatened with destruction during the collapse of the Soviet Union by altering them, and encouraging public discussion surrounding the discredited symbols. By reclaiming the images, the people acknowledge their collective responsibility for them. Komar and Melamid ended their collaboration in 2005, but their individual work feeds off themes of fame and symbolism that they worked on as a team. Komar explores the symbols of religion, mysticism, and politics in his recent work, while Melamid paints portraits of famous hip-hop artists.

Victor Erofeyev (1947–), son of a Soviet diplomat, studied literature and worked as a literary critic before he became embroiled in the Metropol’ scandal when the underground literary journal was published in samizdat in 1979. His participation led to a ban from the Writers’ Union until the late 1980s. He is best known for his novella Life with an Idiot (Жизнь с идиотом) (1980), a brutal satire casting Lenin as a violent and deranged lunatic that was turned into an opera by composer Al’fred Schnittke, and for his scandalous novel Russian Beauty (Русская красавица) (1990), which features a heroine who has countless affairs and engages in an odyssey of activities violating Soviet

---

21 See Komar, Melamid, Monumental Propaganda; and Merewether.
22 For information on Komar’s recent work, and Melamid’s portraits, see komarandmelamid.org; and Kino.
taboos. The novel, which made a splash at the 1989 Frankfurt Book Fair even before it was first published, aimed to bring together high art and pornography, Christian martyrdom and pseudo-lesbian love. The "shock value" was both ideological and erotic, attempting to fight Soviet official literary and artistic norms on a number of levels simultaneously. Erofeyev currently resides in Moscow, publishes literary criticism, essays, and stories in Russian and English, and makes periodic television appearances.

Tatyana Tolstaya (1951-), great-grandniece of Leo Tolstoy and granddaughter of Soviet writer Aleksei Tolstoy, published her first story, “On the Golden Porch,” ("На золотом крыльце сидели...") in the journal Aurora (Аврора) in 1983. Known for rich, ornamental prose and fantastical themes, Tolstaya does not claim debt or allegiance to postmodern aesthetics. Instead, she affirms her membership in the traditional Russian intelligentsia, defending the legacy of Russian literary tradition by arguing against the deification of its poets in her essay “Pushkin’s Children.” Because she is an outspoken champion of Russia’s literary and cultural heritage, Tolstaya’s use of postmodern techniques and strategies such as quotation, pastiche, self-reflexivity, and verbal play become that much more interesting. Tolstaya has stated that politics should not interfere with art, and her essays, opinionated treatises on contemporary culture, society, and politics, are a separate endeavor from her verbally rich, fantastic, and politically ambiguous fiction. Tolstaya has traveled and published broadly and has occasionally lived and taught in the US. She currently lives in Moscow and is co-host of an interview-based talk-show called “School for Slander” (“Школа Злословия”). A broad range of

23 Andrew Wachtel discusses the adaptation of the novella into a play in “Banality Transformed.”
24 For more on the novel and its reception at the book fair, see Cohen.
25 Tolstaya has published a number of collections of stories and critical works. She has also, it seems, started to blog on the popular Russian site Livejournal at http://tanyant.livejournal.com/.
politicians, intellectuals, and artists, including Dmitrii Prigov and Oleg Kulik, have appeared as guests on the program, which aims to produce critical debate and commentary regarding current cultural and political issues.

Vladimir Sorokin (1955-), known as one of Russia’s most controversial authors at home and abroad, particularly in Germany, the UK and the US, started out as a visual artist affiliated with the Moscow Conceptualist movement. His work with the conceptualist movement heavily influenced his writing and developed into his own specific techniques of quotation and mimicry of literary forms. In a 1987 interview, Sorokin explained: “In principle the conceptual artist doesn’t have his own language—he uses only the language of others, as Andy Warhol, for example, used the language of cliché, mass language… for me, the only kind of freedom there is, is the freedom to choose different languages, make use of them, and remain an outsider in the process” (Sorokin, qtd in Laird 149). Sorokin’s early successes include The Norm (Норма) (1983, published 1994) and The Queue (Очередь, 1983), both of which play with form, the first relying on an arabesque narrative structure, and the second, dialogue without narrative or exposition. In several of his works, Sorokin mixes potboiler narration (mimicking the stylistic markers of socialist realist prose, crime novels, and memoir, for example) with the graphic sex and violence of late and post-Soviet chernukha and bespredel. Sorokin enjoys the status of an enfant terrible of Russian literature, and has caused scandal and calls for censorship, particularly with the publication of his novel Blue Lard (Голубое Сало, 1999). He is also the author of libretti, film scripts, and plays.

---

26 For surveys of Moscow Conceptualism, see Tamruchi; Grois History; and Jackson, Experimental Group.
27 Dark, violent, and sometimes salacious depictions of crime and violence on television and in pulp literature. For more on chernukha and bespredel, see Borenstein, Overkill, and Alaniz, Necrorama.
Valreiia Narbikova (1958-) is a painter and writer best known for her novellas *Day Equals Night* (Равновесие света дневных и ночных звезд) (1990) and *In the Here and There* (Около эколо) (1992). Her dense prose features circular logic, a strong emphasis on language and verbal play, layered intertextuality, and frank eroticism. She is often referred to as an exemplar of “Alternative Prose,” or “Other Prose,” (“Другая проза”), terms that attempted to describe the emerging post-glasnost literature, unified only by eclecticism, graphic sexuality and violence, and the use of verbal obscenities. In her work, she references Ilya Kabakov and other members of the Soviet unofficial art scene. She continues to publish articles, and to exhibit her paintings.

Olga Florenskaya (1960-) and her husband Alexander Florensky (1960-) are members of the Mit’ki group, a contingent of St Petersburg-based artists named for Dmitrii (“Mitiok”) Shagin (1957-), who founded the collective in the early 1980s. The Mit’ki took on a collective identity as part of their work, and in so doing, engaged in an alternative politics of a sort by performing the collective identity of hard-drinking misfit loafers assigned to them as unofficial artists by the state. They adopted a language of quotation, using and inverting dialogue from Soviet films and propaganda. Their diverse range of production includes literature, paintings, film, and musical compositions. The Mit’ki insert themselves into Russia’s literary and cultural history by drawing themselves drinking with Pushkin, or composing a letter to an oligarch in imitation of Il’ia Repin’s

---

28 These are the only two works of Narbikova’s to appear in English so far, no doubt due to the complexity of translation. Her work also includes План первого лица. И второго. (1989), and Ад как да /— да как ада. (1991).
29 Sergei Chuprinin used the term “other prose” to explain the emerging aesthetic in a 1989 article, and Robert Porter wrote a book highlighting a number of its practitioners in 1994. Because of its language and subject matter, it was also known as “zhestkaia proza” (coarse prose), and one disapproving critic dubbed it “plokhaia proza” (bad prose) (Porter 2; Chuprinin; Urnov).
famed cossacks (Graudt). Their project is based in an ironic, self-reflexive myth-creation which both participates in and deconstructs the cultural myths upon which it draws.\textsuperscript{30} Once the targets of police raids, the Mit’ki were evicted from their studio by real estate developers following a saga of threats and intimidation in 2005 (“Mitki Eviction”). They have become popular representatives of cultural authority, enjoying a series of retrospective exhibitions, honors, and television appearances. Olga Florenskaya, one of the few women associated with the group, has created a body of work outside of the group context, often in collaboration with her husband, Aleksandr. Their joint work focuses on banal, found and recycled materials, usually household objects made of metal and wood, which they transform into architectural models and sculptures of animals. Florenskaya’s primary subjects are stylized animals which embody cultural myths. She also directs films and animations.\textsuperscript{31}

Oleg Kulik (1961-), born in Kiev, Ukraine, is best known for appearing in public as a dog, walking on all fours, barking, howling, and even biting onlookers. A photograph of him and his pet dog reading the book *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga’s 1938 study of play as an important element of human culture, does much to explain Kulik’s approach to art. For Kulik, as with many of his contemporaries, the practice of making art is a game. Like his friend and collaborator Vladimir Sorokin, Kulik, who now lives and works in Moscow, pushes the boundaries of taste, using explicitly violent and sexual imagery to shock his audience. He often works with animals and animal imagery, speaking as a hybrid being on behalf of the rights of animals, and once running a mock

\textsuperscript{30} The Mit’ki myth was codified in Vladimir Shinkarev’s 1983 collection of stories, “Mit’ki”.
\textsuperscript{31} Florenskaya’s films and animations are archived online, at http://www.animator.ru/db/?p=show_person&pid=5114, and a treatise on fonts is available at: http://samizdat.zaraz.org/info/font.html#p1_13
presidential campaign as the horned and hoofed candidate of the “Animal Party.” His artistic concerns extend far beyond animal rights, and, indeed his primary concern is with art and culture. In his performances as a dog, Kulik, claiming to be a protector of artistic values, gets between the viewer and the art in order to force the viewer to confront his or her aesthetic expectations, and the boundary between public and private. Kulik began his career in the late 1980s as a curator, and his earliest works include abstract panes of glass with geometric shapes cut out of their centers. Among the artists in this study, Kulik is the first post-glasnost, and even post-Soviet artist. Instead of performing in remote or private locations to avoid arrest, Kulik makes his work a public spectacle, facing arrest not in Moscow, but in Zurich and Stockholm. His work includes a broad range of activity, including sculpture, performance, and installation. He works and exhibits internationally, and has recently produced a multimedia version of Handel’s Messiah at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris (Ellison).

Viktor Pelevin (1962-) is part of this younger generation of postmodern writers, who rose to fame after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and who became popular for his hip prose appealing to young readers. His earliest works focus on the Soviet context, including his acclaimed 1993 novella The Yellow Arrow (Жёлтая стрела), an existential critique of Soviet society metaphorically realized as a train moving inexorably towards a broken bridge, and Omon Ra (Омон Ра) (1992) which tells the story of an aspiring cosmonaut who discovers that the Soviet space program was a sham. Pelevin’s prose is omnivorous, referencing pop culture, Buddhist philosophy, ancient myth, 

32 Most of Kulik’s work is documented in his monograph, and videos are available on the youtube channels MrKulikOleg, and Oleg Kulik Studio.
literature, and history and mixing these elements into his layered plots. His novel of the rise of post-Soviet media and advertising, *Generation P (Generation II)* spawned phrases which have become part of the vernacular, and a feature film, released in 2011. Pelevin’s characters are often capable of transformation, and some of his recent novels feature werewolves and vampires.

The artists and writers profiled in this dissertation represent diverse modes of artistic practices over a period of roughly 40 years of political and social change. Their work is united in its challenge to authoritative discourse through the image of the body in flux. Work this diverse, spanning so much time, inevitably engages myriad intertexts, resonates with multiple theories, and provokes a range of critical responses. Below, I discuss how my study is organized with regard to theory and criticism.

*Theories of the Body*

In the course of this project, I approach the subjects within the framework of global postmodernism, placing them in both an international and a specifically Russian context. The artists and writers in this study are participants in artistic activity and postmodern thinking that transcend the boundaries of Russia, some living and working abroad, some adopting other countries as their own. Nonetheless, in approaching their work from a Russian context, each mines Russian history and culture for sources and intertexts. Komar and Melamid’s sots-art, for example, looks different from pop art, because of the aesthetic baggage attached to it.\(^{33}\) This "Russian" aspect of the aesthetics

\(^{33}\) “Postmodernism is about packaging,” writes Sally Dalton Brown, meaning that postmodern texts rely precisely on the cultural material that they quote, and so come to resemble it ("Ludic Nonchalance" 217).
and production of postmodernism is one of the main topics I will explore in the dissertation.\textsuperscript{34}

At the genesis of this discussion is Jean Baudrillard’s definition of the simulacrum, wherein illusion takes precedence over reality.\textsuperscript{35} Critic Mikhail Epstein casts Russia as the ideal setting for simulacra, with its history of grand illusions, from Potemkin villages to the city of St. Petersburg.\textsuperscript{36} The work of Russian postmodernists destabilizes the illusions of Soviet and post-Soviet culture, viewing the field of simulacra with a postmodern mix of irony, parody, and metatextuality. I consult Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of postmodern politics, parody, and her discussion of complicitous critique. Indeed, the artists and writers in this study share in creating and perpetuating the myths that they set out to destabilize. For a variation on critique and complicity from a Russian perspective, I turn to Mark Lipovetsky, who argues that there are two modes of Russian postmodernism—conceptualism, which de-mythologizes (or critiques) authoritative discourse, and neo-baroque, which re-mythologizes it, (or acts as its complicit witness).\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{flushleft}
\underline{Notably, one of Komar and Melamid’s earliest projects was the creation of “post-art,” a series of imitation pop-art canvases by US artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol, made to look as if they had been destroyed by age or by fire. The series was entitled “Pictures from the future.”}

\textsuperscript{34} While Russian postmodernism has much in common with Western postmodernism, Russian scholars of postmodernism have attempted to establish the uniqueness of Russian postmodernism. For a look at the distinctive characteristics of Russian postmodernism, see Epstein, \textit{After the Future}; Lipovetsky, \textit{Dialogue with Chaos}; and “Literary Postmodernism”; and Epstein, Genis, and Vladiv-Glover. My understanding of global postmodernism is also informed by the following texts: Baudrillard, \textit{Simulacra}; Hutcheon, \textit{Politics}, and \textit{Parody}; Lyotard, \textit{Condition}; Nichol; \textit{Contemporary Novel}; Jameson, \textit{Cultural Logic}; Best and Kellner, \textit{Postmodern Turn}, and \textit{Postmodern Theory}. In addition, Foucault’s concept of “discourse,” Butler and Austin’s discussion of speech acts, and Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” are central to my discussion.

\textsuperscript{35} Baudrillard’s \textit{Simulacres et Simulation} (1981) is a major work of postmodern philosophy, establishing the postmodern view of images as simulacra.

\textsuperscript{36} Epstein, in \textit{After the Future} (1995) establishes Russia’s unique relationship with illusion, even going so far as to claim that Russians invented postmodernism with socialist realism. I discuss this claim in chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Lipovetsky borrows the term “neo-baroque” from Omar Calabrese. See Calabrese for his use of the term. Lipovetsky’s division is useful, if perhaps too clear-cut. His categorization follows a similar attempt by
\end{flushleft}
According to Lipovetsky, conceptualism (exemplified by Prigov, Komar and Melamid, Kabakov, and Sorokin) focuses on deconstructing simulacra through cliché and quotation, whereas neo-baroque (practiced by Narbikova, Sokolov, Tolstaya, and Pelevin) emphasizes excess, circularity, repetition, and fragmentation, and constructs a new mythology through its formal complexity.³⁸

The artistic practice of Russian postmodernist artists, writers, and critics is deeply rooted in the Russian Formalists’ theories of art and artistic production. Thus my study aims to draw the connection between the theories of Russian formalism and contemporary postmodern theory explicitly, incorporating Russian formalist discourse along with approaches of contemporary postmodern theory. It is not merely in the area of theory, though, that we see connections between these two periods. The shock tactics of certain Russian postmodernists, for example, owe a debt to the actions and theories of the Futurists such as Vladimir Maiakovskii and David Burliuk. Another clear connection is the technique of ostranenie, or defamiliarization—delineated by Viktor Shklovskii in his essay “Art as Device”—the process of enhancing perception by presenting an ordinary object in an unusual way, which is still very much in use by the postmodernists.

Postmodern writers are as fond of pushing the boundaries of the banal as they are keen on the technique of defamiliarization. Most notably, Vladimir Sorokin renders shocking images banal through repetition and cliché. For insight into banality, I turn to Svetlana Boym’s Common Places, a memoir and cultural history describing the place of the ordinary and banal in Russian culture. Boym’s The Future of Nostalgia, similarly

³⁸ Quotation is an essential aspect of postmodern aesthetics, but Russian literature and art have a long history of quotation and citation, used as tribute, and in satire and parody.
informs my understanding of nostalgia, as does Frederic Jameson’s discussion of
nostalgia in film.\textsuperscript{39}

Alexei Yurchak’s work on late Soviet culture, \textit{Everything was Forever, Until it
was no More}, further discusses the effects of Soviet control of language and citizens’
responses to it. Yurchak’s discussion of authoritative discourse is central to my
investigation. His analysis continues a conversation started by Bakhtin, who formulated
the idea of authoritative discourse as a master code to which all other codes are subject.\textsuperscript{40}
Michel Foucault similarly used the term “discourse” to describe language as a tool of
power, which specifically restricts the human body. It is “ideology embodied in language
and accompanied by codes specifying how, when, where, and by whom this language can
be used” (Popovic 629). These tools and theories will help illuminate the work of the
artists in this dissertation.

At the center of my project lies Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of carnival, which
encompasses nearly every aspect of the body in transformation. In particular, Bakhtin
examines images of violence and animal-human hybridity. In Bakhtin’s view, the festival
of Carnival was a time during which the common, disenfranchised folk (in Russian, the
more evocative \textit{narod}) could express their democratic impulses and irreverent attitude
toward those in power. The carnival festivities, during which people wore masks and
costumes, allowed the people to express their true feelings beneath the shield of play.

Critics suggest that in formulating his ideas about Carnival, Bakhtin was not just writing

\textsuperscript{39} Jameson’s influential book, \textit{The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism} provides a view of postmodernism
from a Marxist perspective. His work identified nostalgia as a stylized revision of the past and as a
characteristic of postmodernism.

\textsuperscript{40} See Yurchak, \textit{Forever} Yurchak’s explanation of this term. “Authoritative” discourse may also be
described variously as “authoritarian,” “totalitarian,” “hegemonic,” “official,” or “Soviet” discourse,
depending on the specific context.
about the medieval period, but was expressing his own adversarial feelings toward the Soviet regime.⁴¹

According to Bakhtin, carnival violence is symbolic. When the carnival king is mocked and abused, and his effigy is burned or torn asunder at the end of the festival, the violence is aimed at the real king. He claims that carnival violence is always conducted in the name of laughter, and never produces real harm or damage. This carnival laughter is meant to bring about a renewal, and to place all parties on the same level, but critics point out that laughter, mockery, and carnivalesque stagecraft were often aspects of the real violence of public executions. For Bakhtin, the destructive violence of the carnival which closes the festival in a bonfire symbolizing world conflagration holds the promise of renewal. Thus, it informs my discussion of death and resurrection. While within itself Carnival holds the possibility of resurrection, in a more apocalyptic world culture, Russian postmodernists provide images of world conflagration, but do not hold out the promise of rebirth or resurrection.

In his discussion of Carnival, Bakhtin also treats the image of the human body as it appears in combination with other animals. Through the carnival tradition of donning masks, humans are able to embody other creatures. In postmodern imagery, they merge with them. Russian postmodern art works to disrupt traditional boundaries between human and animal, and its violation of the "national" border to seek inspiration in Western bestiary tradition demonstrates another way in which it sought to become an international, and widely recognized, artistic phenomenon.

⁴¹ See the chapter on Carnival in Caryl Emerson’s The First Hundred Years of Bakhtin for a discussion of how Bakhtin’s work has been read by critics.
In investigating the intervention of media and technology in determining the shape of the body, I will consider Donna Haraway’s vision of the cyborg. While the cyborg as she envisioned it has been replaced by the popular image of the screen-bound or technologically implanted human, the concept of cyborg identity as cybernetically linked is important for understanding how data and technology function in relation to the body. Developments in cybernetic technology are essential to this discussion, wherein the body is perceived as a data center. So-called "posthuman thought" provides new possibilities for the expansion, transformation, or annihilation of the human body.

**Reading the Body**

Russian postmodernist discourse treats the image of the body as a text, subject to editing and manipulation as a signifier, devoid of real substance. Yet the image of the human body as an object in flux is hardly a recent phenomenon. The body has historically been viewed as vulnerable to change—through death, violence, hybridization or technological shift. In Russia, the image of the body has been influenced by folk tradition, Orthodox Christianity, and scientific study, as well as international developments in art and literature. The concept of immortality is common to all three: in folk tales and folk belief, resurrection is often a threat, while religion and Soviet science offer it as a promise of life after death, or the victory of science over death. In both religious and scientific discourse, humans are seen as superior to animals, thus hybridization with animal features is viewed as a threat or deficiency, while folk imagery reverses human and animal roles for comic effect. Technological interventions on the
body are more recent phenomena with roots in cybernetic thought. Below, I review some historic developments of the image of the body in Russia and connect them to postmodern literature and visual culture.

The written history of Russia begins with the Orthodox Church, whose manuscripts, icons, and relics provide fodder for postmodern play. The Christian idea of the human body as the reflection of God’s image was preceded in Rus’ by pagan beliefs which carried over into Orthodox practice. The Christian image-concept presents the human body as both the ideal, inviolable, unified host of the immortal soul, and, at the same time as profane, sinful, and mortal. This dual nature was reflected in the promise of life after death as heavenly rapture or eternal torment. In the history of Western art, images of the last judgment show grotesque and tormented bodies in the throes of damnation beset by horned demons or physically altered through suffering, and in Orthodox icons, sinners are swallowed by an enormous dragon. Death, the banal version of these dynamic scenes, while inevitable, was hardly permanent. While the resurrection of Jesus is rarely depicted in art (in favor of crucifixion, entombment, and ascension), the story of the event is a central tenet of belief, and the tombs and bodily remains of saints hold special significance. The lives of the saints describe holy figures as having incorruptible bodies that did not decompose upon death, and the relics of saints were often kept and preserved in church reliquaries.\(^\text{42}\) However, bodies that failed to decompose were also viewed as suspect, their failure to decompose a possible symptom

\[^{42}\text{Some catacombs built in caves under churches maintain the temperature and air quality needed to preserve bodies for decades.}\]
of vampirism or demonic possession. This fascination with the body, and with specific bodies, was most vividly expressed in the Soviet era through the cult of the Bolshevik leader, and Komar and Melamid investigate the preserved remains of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin as holy relics with a hint of demonic threat, awaiting resurrection.

Mikhail Bakhtin tied resurrection to the harvest, and described the popular image of pregnant death, the image of a pregnant elderly woman or crone as the embodiment of the harvest. Sasha Sokolov uses the character of Majorette to complicate this image in *Palisandria*, in which she appears in the guise of Fortuna bearing not a cornucopia, but a scythe. In Russian *lubok* prints, death sometimes appears as a walking skeleton, most likely an influence from Western Europe, where skeletons and skulls were used as *memento mori*, reminders of the brevity of life on earth and the vanity of earthly pleasures. In a series of photographs featuring close-up shots of taxidermied monkeys, Kulik references this tradition, and challenges the notion that humans are superior to other animals.

In challenging the view of humans as the master species, Kulik breaks from centuries of tradition. The Bestiary, a Western European Christian zoological record and intertext for two of the artists addressed in this dissertation, presents the human being as superior to all other creatures. Some show Adam naming the other animals, an act replicated in the Bestiary’s attempt to document the names and functions of the animals. Bestiaries featuring both real and fantastic animals such as griffins,

---

43 See Verdery for a discussion of controversy surrounding burial methods in the post-Soviet period. While the discussion rests primarily on controversy in the Balkans, she places contemporary reburial in the context of history and popular belief.
44 See Bakhtin, *Rabelais* for more on his theory of carnival, and his discussion of the open body.
45 Likewise, Adam is shown as superior to Eve and, by extension, men superior to women in this context.
manticores, and cynocephali, provided a record of the natural world with an allegorical interpretation of each creature. Fantastic creatures were sometimes depicted in church decorations or graffiti, and also appear in illuminated manuscripts and church icons. In the Orthodox tradition, icons sometimes depicted St. Christopher with a dog’s head, and the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are sometimes depicted as an angel, lion, ox and eagle, respectively, in reference to creatures which appear in biblical passages, including Revelations.\textsuperscript{46}

Figure 1. St. Christopher Cynocephalus\textsuperscript{47}

Figure 2. Hl. Christophoros Kynokephalos, 19\textsuperscript{th} C. Russia\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} See Goldsmith for a discussion of the four evangelists in art.
\textsuperscript{47} Byzantine Museum, Athens
\textsuperscript{48} Ikonen-Museum der Stadt Frankfurt
In Russian postmodernism, icons, bestiaries and hagiographical writings provide intertexts for the exploration of the human body. Dmitrii Prigov’s *Bestiary* is an alternative portrait gallery of famous figures as hybrid creatures, incorporating formal elements of the Orthodox icon, while Olga Florenskaya’s *Bestiary in the Summer Garden* is made up of fanciful sculptures in place of an open-air cabinet of curiosities. Florenskaya based these sculptures on the cultural associations surrounding each animal. Her stylized creatures recall the imagery of *lubok* prints, inexpensive, and often humorous or satirical woodcut or copper plate prints that were sold in the marketplace, intended as decorations in the home, and subject to the censor’s approval. They depicted characters from folk tales and popular stories, religious subjects, literary characters, current events, sideshow attractions, sensational news stories, and urban legends, along with didactic subjects.

Among the most well-known images are depictions of a whiskered cat thought to represent Peter I. In one popular print called “The Mice Bury the Cat,” (Figure 3), a cat, often viewed by critics as a reference to Tsar Peter the Great, is carried to the grave by celebratory mice in a funeral procession.

---

49 For additional information on *lubok* prints, see: Sytova; Ovsiannikov, *Lubok*; and Alaniz, *Komiks.*
As in this image, where the weak triumph over the powerful, *lubok* images often show the “world turned upside-down,” with an inverted hierarchical structure which mocks authority. The use of Aesopian language, disguising a leader as a cat or cockroach, for instance, was widespread in Russia during the Soviet period. The imagery of popular folk tales and lubok prints figures prominently in Tatyana Tolstaya’s *The Slynx*, which describes a post-apocalyptic society, medieval in its cultural and technological development, made up of grotesque citizens with human and animal features who use fellow humans as cart horses. The social structure mirrors the inverted hierarchy of the carnival.

Tolstaya’s carnival seems all the more grotesque against a background of anthropocentric scientific and philosophical discourse, which Russian society and culture embraced throughout the modern period, placing human beings above other animals.
Russian thought was influenced by Rene Descartes, among others, who held that human beings alone had a soul, separate from the body (located in the pineal gland). In Descartes's mechanistic view of the world, the body operated as a machine at the behest of the soul. In both science and art, the relationship between human, animal, and machine has been the subject of exploration for centuries. For example, automata—mechanical figures built to resemble humans or animals and to conduct tasks such as eating, drawing, or writing—became popular touring amusements during the 18th century, and provided fodder for fiction, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story “The Sandman” (1816) about an automaton who is mistaken for a real woman. This relationship—between the real and the imagined, the natural and the created—forms a foundation for the exploration of the body.

Indeed, the 17th century saw a rise in the popularity of anatomical theaters in Western Europe. Scientists dissected and preserved human and animal specimens in an attempt to understand and to demonstrate knowledge of the natural world. Surgeries were conducted in these theaters, where spectators and students alike watched the procedures. Such theaters helped to popularize advances in medicine, and were often connected to universities and anatomical collections. Peter the Great’s Kunstkamera, founded in 1727 in St. Petersburg, was modeled after Western cabinets of curiosities. The Kunstkamera included preserved remains of bodies, skeletons, taxidermied creatures, medical instruments, and technological inventions, and it was deliberately located in close proximity to an anatomical theater as well as the Academy of Sciences. Exploration and education went hand in hand with display of artifacts.
According to Tony Anemone, Peter was particularly interested in collecting teratological specimens (as were many other collectors of the period), although he was not always able to distinguish between real and fake specimens. Peter’s collection included the skeleton of Siamese twins and the skeleton of a giant. In what can only be seen as a burst of efficiency, Peter's Kunstkamera featured living people with birth defects who could be "displayed" while doubling as museum workers. The museum, like many of Peter’s projects, was a source of some trepidation for most citizens. Anemone writes,

While the increasingly rationalist Christian culture of Western Europe justified, and eventually even encouraged, scientific inquiry into the functioning of the human body as a way of appreciating God's unfathomable glory, in Russia all versions of scientific thinking continued to be associated with potentially dangerous and even heretical challenges to theological orthodoxy (Anemone 588).

For Russians, dead bodies were not fodder for display, but should rather find proper burial in the earth. Indeed, as Anemone points out, folk belief emphasized that improper burial was not merely disrespectful, it could be downright dangerous, with the possibility that such bodies could rise from the dead as vampires or troubled spirits.

Even as a scientific view of the body gained a foothold, the fantastic and the grotesque were strongly represented in Russian and European literature, particularly in the Romantic period of late 18th - early 19th century. Pushkin and Gogol, and their German and American counterparts (from Goethe to E.T.A. Hoffmann to Poe, all immensely popular in Russia), reemphasized the fantastic elements of the body in their
works. Pushkin’s coffin maker dreams of a party to which he invites his deceased clients, Pushkin’s bronze horseman, a statue of Peter the Great, provoked by an angry citizen, comes to life and chases an ordinary man through the streets of his city, and Pushkin’s Tatiana dreams of a band of unruly hybrid houseguests. In Gogol’s prose, a nose disappears from a man’s face and tries to leave town, having attained a higher rank than the person to whom it was formerly attached. For Russians of the era, stories by Goethe, Hoffmann, and Poe seemed contiguous to the fantastic creatures and sensational events they read about in the newspapers.

By the second half of the 19th century, Romanticism gave way to a more scientific view of the surrounding world. Turgenev’s Bazarov, a character modeled on Russia’s Raznochintsy—an emerging middle class of educated people-- dissected frogs to find out more about humans, explaining that similarities in anatomical structure allowed him to learn about human anatomy and diseases from frogs. However, the promises of science were sometimes no less fantastical than their literary counterparts as subsequent generations tied science to utopian thinking. Soviet science pledged to discover the means to immortality, and heralded the coming of the new Soviet man who would not die.

In the early 20th century, artists envisioned the body in geometric forms, according to the principles of cubism, futurism, suprematism, or rayonism. Russian futurists wanted to create a new art which would reflect the time and painted their faces to reflect the art of the moment, using their bodies as canvases.\[^{50}\] The artistic climate was

\[^{50}\] See Zdanevich and Larionov in Kolocotroni, Vassiliki, Goldman, and Taxidou. In contemporary art, Rimma and Valerii Gerlovin revive this practice.
dynamic and collaborative. Experiments in artistic form were matched by innovations in linguistic and literary form. Poets created neologisms, redefined line structure, and wrote transsence (zaum) verses, breaking language into component parts, as visual artists broke up the shapes and contours of the body. The work of Kazimir Malevich is a particularly significant influence on Russian postmodernists, who sometimes reference him in their work, painting or writing variations on Malevich’s Black Square.\(^5\)

In Parisian artistic circles, dada and surrealist painting pushed against bourgeois taste and rationalism by combining linguistic and visual forms to appeal to the unconscious. The exquisite corpse—a game of composite drawing using, for instance, a collage of body parts to create a figure, or word elements to create text—is a close ancestor of Russian conceptualism. Prigov’s mixing of body parts in his Bestiary series similarly disrupts the image of the body as a unified whole. Rene Magritte’s use of substitution and demonstrates that the image is not equivalent to the object with his painting The Treachery of Images, and Duchamp’s use of readymades prefigured strategies adopted by Russian postmodernists, including substitution, defamiliarization, and the use of text. Indeed, Russian postmodernism relies heavily upon a strong current of estrangement. Visual representations of the body became more vivid with the advent of a new artistic genre – film. Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali’s film Un Chien Andalou (1929) broke the strictures of realism, creating bodily openness and transformation through violence, animal imagery, and technical manipulation. A surrealist masterpiece, the film features shocking and disjointed imagery that decades later would become the

\(^5\) A 2007 exhibition, “Adventures of the Black Square” (Приключения черного квадрата), included dozens of artists’ renditions of the black square, a mere sampling of artistic responses to the piece.
postmodernists’ stock-in-trade. However, while the surrealists used the imagery of dreams to probe the unconscious, the postmodernists have no such goal in mind.

During the Soviet period, the grotesque had to go underground, as it had no place in a state-sponsored, state-controlled art. Communism promised to create a new Soviet man on the strength of medical, physical, and social reform, and artists were called to participate in that process. In 1934, the state adopted Socialist realism as the principal form of visual and literary expression, thus forcing artists and writers to adhere to a realist aesthetic featuring scenes from everyday life. While the stereotypical socialist realist work shows a simple worker with a strong, unified body and solid socialist principles triumphing over the lazy, decadent, or counterrevolutionary forces around him, scholars have pointed out that this was not always the case. Nevertheless, such images provided fodder for Russian postmodernists who mined collective memory for images of the strong, determined worker or peasant, or the immortal Lenin in their work.

After the revolution, those who worked in a grotesque vein slowly became part of the underground or made work only “for the drawer” from the beginning of the 20th century until the 70s, 80s or even 90s. In the early years of Soviet power, literature featuring grotesque imagery was still occasionally published, including work by Kharms, Platonov, and Bulgakov. For instance Bulgakov’s story *Heart of a Dog*, (*Собачье сердце*) published in 1925, told the story of a dog who becomes human after he receives a human pineal gland transplant (possibly a barb at Descartes). Bulgakov’s story

---

52 The film is also intertext for Oleg Kulik, best known for his performances as a dog, who—in his own human form—has lectured on the theme of the Andalusian dog.
53 Damaged, injured, scarred, and effeminized male bodies also appear as the heroic centers of their respective texts. For studies which complicate the Soviet image of the body, see Hellebust; Kaganovsky; and Borenstein, *Men*. 

31
references Ivan Pavlov’s experiments with dogs and conditioned responses, which began in the 1890s. In these experiments, Pavlov surgically fitted his dogs with apparatus for collecting saliva and measuring responses to stimuli. In his 1996 performance, *Pavlov’s Dog*, Kulik references both Pavlov’s research and Bulgakov’s story. During the course of the action, he lived as a dog, and underwent a series of pseudoscientific experiments (though none of them required surgery).

Bulgakov was not the only writer of his era to explore the human body and its relationship to the physical world. Daniil Kharms, an absurdist writer and founding member of the *Oberiu* (Society for Real Art), wrote experimental miniatures that he called “incidences” (*sluchai*), some of which were published in the 1920s. In these short texts, language takes precedence over identity, and unmotivated violence reigns. Characters disappear through verbal description, and old ladies plummet out of windows to their deaths one after another. Half a century later, Moscow conceptualists drew on Kharms, including Sorokin (who peppers his work with violent images) and Prigov. Prior to his untimely death in 2007, Prigov was planning a performance dedicated to Kharms in which he would ride up the stairs of Moscow State University on top of a wardrobe—a favorite stage conveyance of Kharms—declaiming poetry all the way.\(^\text{54}\) We can see Kharms as one source of the postmodernists’ idea that the body may be treated as an object, and that violence may occur without cause or effect. Kharms’s bodies do not suffer, feel, or contemplate the meaninglessness of earthly vanities—they simply fall.

\(^{54}\) On Kharms, see Cornwell in *Incidences*, on Prigov’s planned final performance, see Shedd, and Prigov at www.prigov.ru.
plummet, or disappear, becoming purely physical beings whose lives lack metaphysical meaning.

That idea was more than just an artistic and literary phenomenon. Beneath Kharms’s absurdism, of course, is a hint of the real violence of daily life in the Soviet Union in the 1930s: after all, the above statements ("the body may be treated as an object"; "violence may occur without cause") sound less metaliterary than purely descriptive. Kharms himself was evicted from the world of literature; no longer permitted to publish his work, he was eventually incarcerated in the psychiatric ward of a prison hospital, where he died from starvation during the blockade of Leningrad.

Against the background of a unique history of violence—including the purges, collectivization, war, the gulag, and the iron curtain—works of avant-garde, nonconformist, grotesque and censored art were preserved and distributed in multiple ways, including official publishers, *samizdat* (self-publishing), and *tamizdat* (publishing abroad). Official publishers sporadically printed the ideologically uneven work of pro-communist writer Andrei Platonov, which incorporated grotesque and fantastic elements, and which was revived during the 1960’s. Authors who could not be published officially distributed their work through *samizdat*, using hand- or typewritten manuscripts produced in small numbers and distributed secretly. The works of émigré writers such as Vladimir Nabokov were distributed through the similar process of *tamizdat* through which a text published abroad would be smuggled into the country and disseminated.

---

55 See Komaromi. For more on the development of *samizdat*, see Gerlovins, *Russian Samizdat Art*, and Bowlt, *Samizdat*. 
covertly. Sinyavsky likewise published abroad under the pseudonym Abram Tertz, writing his famous treatise On Socialist Realism in 1959, in the midst of Khrushchev’s thaw. He was imprisoned in 1965, as the thaw came to a close (he was allowed to emigrate following his release). That Sinyavsky’s use of grotesque imagery was further developed by the postmodernists is certain. Alexander Genis even called Sinyavsky’s style “Archaic Postmodernism” (Genis, “Archaic”). Another influence on the postmodern use of grotesque imagery was Bakhtin’s study Rabelais and his World, which was also published in 1965, after a delay of some twenty years. This survey of the carnivalesque in art and literature had a growing influence in intellectual circles of artists and writers. The revival of the grotesque in the art and literature of the late Soviet period was born out of a tradition that, while hidden, never completely disappeared. The distribution of unofficial literature from the early 20th century formed the basis for nonconformist art at the close of the century. In the next section, I will discuss how the brief relaxation of censorship during the thaw paved the way for the development of nonconformist and postmodern art and literature.

Unofficial Art and Russian Postmodernism from Thaw to Ice

In 1962, Khrushchev visited an exhibit of modern art in Moscow’s Manezh, and famously declared the work “dog shit.” While visiting the exhibit, the leader engaged in a protracted debate with Manezh artist Ernst Neizvestnyi, objecting to the work primarily

---

56 Nabokov was published by Ardis, among others. A collection of such illicit texts was on display at the Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg as of spring 2007. See http://www.nabokovmuseum.org/books.html
57 See Booker and Juraga for a discussion of the connection between postmodernism and carnival.
58 Izvestnii would later sculpt the headstone for Khrushchev’s grave in Moscow’s Novodevichii cemetery.
for stylistic, rather than political reasons.\textsuperscript{59} The artists were stripped of their Artist’s Union memberships and otherwise marginalized (without union affiliation, it was difficult to obtain artist’s materials). Prior to the Manezh, there was some hope for open modern art exhibitions in the Soviet Union, but the reaction of the authorities raised fear among artists such as Ilya Kabakov. Kabakov himself had not exhibited at the Manezh, but as a friend of many Manezh artists, he like others in the avant-garde took note of the authorities' reaction.\textsuperscript{60} The Manezh incident closed the question of official exhibition of modern art. Instead, the artists gave apartment exhibitions, performances in out-of-the-way locales, and presented work briefly in clubs and cafes. On the surface, official language held sway.

According to Alexei Yurchak, after the 1950s, official language and visual representation became more and more standardized. In the arena of official art, artists stuck to painting a limited set of formulaic variations on Lenin’s image. Each painter composed variations on Lenin smiling, working in his office, or giving a speech, in the same way, and even referred to the variations by number.\textsuperscript{61} Much like icons, these images were easily identifiable, repeatable, and anonymous—artists copied elements of previously created works in order to create new ones. Both artists and writers adhered to formulas to produce work that was ideologically correct. Yurchak calls this formulaic

\textsuperscript{59} Several of the Manezh artists painted in an impressionist style, which the authorities decried as “cezannism.” A number of sources report on the Manezh incident, and Khrushchev’s famous pronouncement. See McMillan for an analysis of Khrushchev’s policies towards art from the perspective of the 1960s, and Taubman for an entertaining description of Khrushchev’s artistic policies as they fit into a pattern of erratic behavior toward the end of his time in office.

\textsuperscript{60} For more on Kabakov’s circle of artists, see Jackson.

\textsuperscript{61} Yurchak, \textit{Everything}, 55-6. See also Yurchak, “Soviet Hegemony of Form.”
language, made up prefabricated statements which could be rearranged without distorting the meaning of the overall text, “block writing.” He explains that,

throughout the 1960s, official Party speeches and documents became subjected to increasingly meticulous and publicly invisible editing with the goal of producing texts without ‘a single step sideways from the norm.’ …in the context of Soviet discourse, ideological literacy increasingly became seen as a technical skill of reproducing prefabricated "blocks" of discourse, with predetermined and context-independent "literal meanings" attached to them ("Hegemony" 490).

With the rise of “block language,” form became more significant than content. Postmodern play with form is, in part, a reaction to this formulaic approach to official art. Through quotation and substitution of familiar elements, postmodernists disrupt the viewer or reader’s automatized reception of a text, defamiliarizing it, and causing the viewer or reader to see the structure behind the work and to question the official formulae.

For artists of the period under study, official formulae and socialist realist norms drove them underground, away from the status quo and into the past in search of other ways of engaging and representing the physical and political world around them. The artists and writers explored in this dissertation studied the Russian avant-garde heritage through exhibitions at the Maiakovskii museum throughout the 1960s and through smuggled books (Jackson 55-6). Almost all of them have referenced or parodied the work of the Russian avant-garde, particularly Malevich and his Black Square, at some
point in their career. The formal experiments of the avant-garde served as models for subverting official language, and avant-garde strategies became part of postmodern artistic practice.

Leading up to the Bulldozer exhibition, unofficial artists exhibited secretly and published in *samizdat*. In a way, the international outcry over state suppression of the arts in the wake of the Bulldozer event brought those unofficial artists back into the open. The exhibition organized at Izmailovskii Park was only the beginning: suddenly, the Russian art world began to open up. One vivid and memorable instance of Russians on the international scene occurred in 1977, when the Gerlovins attended the Venice biennale and performed *Zoo*, a piece in which they sat naked for a day in a cage labeled “Homo sapiens – Male and Female (Figure 4).” Their action removed their bodies from the physical space and context of the viewer, thereby creating a shift in perspective, and also referencing the isolation of Russian artists behind the iron curtain. They became objects to be observed and studied, specimens on a level with zoo animals. Their work belongs to the theme of “bodies in transition,” establishing the flexibility of the body in shifting context.

---

62 Kulik, Prigov, Pelevin, Gerlovins, Kabakov, Tolstaya, all directly or indirectly reference the black square in their work. See Karasik for a survey of how artists have reinterpreted the *Black Square* throughout the 20th century.

63 Of the artists in this study, Komar and Melamid were part of the Bulldozer exhibition, and Valerii Gerlov in was represented at the Izmailovskii Park exhibition. It should be noted that the Izmailovskii Park exhibition did not end official aggression against nonconformist artists. A few of the artists in the Izmailovskii Park exhibition were drafted, placed in mental institutions, or threatened with arrest, and several were exiled or emigrated (Hoptman, Pospiszyl, and Braun 71). Raids on artists’ studios, surveillance, and police harassment continued into the 1980s, and even persist today (see “mitki Eviction”).

37
Another way in which the Russian art world "opened up" was through emigration and publication abroad ("tamizdat"). Starting in the 1970s, artists and writers such as Komar and Melamid, Ilya Kabakov, and Sasha Sokolov emigrated to the United States and continued their work abroad, and some, including Sokolov, began to publish outside the Soviet context. In 1978, the Ann Arbor, Michigan-based Ardis publishing house published Andrei Bitov’s novel *Pushkin House*, considered by some to be the first postmodern Russian novel (other contenders for that title include Venedikt Erofeev’s

The traffic went both ways. Soviet Russians read postmodern theory, brought in from the West, and postmodernist critics such as Mikhail Epstein began writing about conceptualism and other related movements. In 1979, the son of a Soviet Russian diplomat, Victor Erofeyev, and his collaborators created a scandal with the distribution of the underground literary magazine *Metropol’* in samizdat—an edition which they “insured” by sending one of twelve copies produced to Ardis publishers, who brought it out in the West.

While the early 1980s still seemed like the height of the Brezhnev stagnation, there was movement among writers and artists toward breaking norms and violating taboos. Tolstaya published her first story “On the Golden Porch” in Leningrad, in 1983, and Sorokin published his first novels, *The Queue* and *The Norm*, along with several stories, in Paris in 1985. Prigov was institutionalized for distributing poems in public in 1986, but was released following protests from fellow writers, and was soon allowed to exhibit and publish officially. With the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev and his policies of liberalization and glasnost on the Soviet political scene, “the ice moved” (as writers I'lf and Petrov’s famous conman Ostap Bender would have said): the Moscow Southbeby’s

---

64 With samizdat and tamizdat, we run into very specific problems of dating the work. In some cases, composition predates publication by a significant margin, as with Sokolov’s *Palisandriia*, which he claims was complete in 1971.

65 See Gambrell, “Bulldozer” for a discussion of how Soviet readers reacted to postmodern theory. Epstein and Lipovetsky have each published extensively on Russian postmodernism. For selected bibliographic information, see http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/Index.html (Epstein).

66 For Erofeyev’s report of the scandal, see Rougle and Rich (71). Robert Porter also provides a brief analysis of the almanac’s history (26-30).
auction in 1988 demonstrated international interest in unofficial Soviet art, and unofficial artists and writers began to exhibit and publish in official venues.

The Politics of Russian Postmodernism

The system of underground publishing and exhibition, stories of arrest, KGB surveillance, and emigration difficulties raise the question of the artists' political position with regard to the state. Russia has a strong tradition of artists and writers speaking out against the state, and the Soviet period produced famous dissident voices such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov. However, unofficial artists occupied a place outside of official political discourse. The work of Russian postmodernists was typically not explicitly political; indeed, it frequently engaged the very language and imagery of Soviet literature and art that it purported to reject. Nonetheless, speaking outside of official discourse constituted a political act in itself—one of disavowal. Yurchak describes this activity as “alternative politics.” He writes:

In a situation in which the sovereign state held exclusive control over what language and what actions were seen as legal and “political,” this alternative politics included, paradoxically, a refusal to see oneself in political terms. Instead of challenging the state by occupying an oppositional subject position, these people carved out a subject position that the state could not recognize in “political” terms and therefore could not easily define, understand, and control. This was a challenge to the state’s sovereign powers of defining and imposing political subjectivities. Therefore it should be recognized as subversive and
political—acknowledging that it could exist only if it refused to identify itself as such. (“Necro-Utopia” 200)

Yurchak draws a connection between Soviet “alternative politics” and philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life”—human existence on the biological level, cut off from political status. Yurchak explains that,

Having political life suspended reduces the person, from the perspective of the state, to the status of bare life. Such persons inhabit the state’s zone of indistinction, a political vacuum in which the state no longer distinguishes them through its politicojuridical topology as full political subjects—that is, no longer sees them as either good citizens or bad citizens, either legal or illegal, either supporters or dissidents. In extreme cases, the location of these people in the zone of indistinction reduces them to the status of less than human, making them altogether disposable. (Necro-Utopia 212)

This term, “bare life,” can be expanded to encompass citizens who sought extrapolitical (or subpolitical) status such as the necrorealists. While the artists participate in daily life, inhabiting the public spaces available to enfranchised citizens, they avoid “the political subjectivity of the citizen” (“Necro-Utopia” 212). Yurchak calls the choice to renounce political subjectivity the “politics of indistinction” (“Necro-Utopia” 212).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became much easier for artists to exhibit and for writers to publish. Whereas in the past, readers had limited access to publications, after 1991 the publishing industry boomed, offering inexpensive editions of

---

67 For Agamben’s formulation of “bare life” see Agamben, Giorgio *The Open: Man and Animal.*

68 In addition to Yurchak, other critics have proposed terminology to describe the postmodernists’ particular attitude toward the political, including a “postmodernism of reaction” rather than a “postmodernism of resistance.” See also Popovic.
anything consumers were willing to buy. With increased freedoms came increased calls
for censorship, and as the economy stabilized under Putin’s leadership, the state regained
control of some media outlets. Putin’s own cult of personality, evidenced by glowing
press articles, flattering statues, a party youth group, a comic book, and pop song in
praise of him, is countered by controversy over the murders of journalists such as Anna
Politkovskaya who criticized Kremlin policies. In 2006, Vladimir Sorokin published a
critique of the Putin administration, warning of a return to authoritarianism, along with a
relatively straightforward satire, *The Day of The Oprichnik*. In an interview with *Der
Spiegel*, he stated,

> The citizen lives in each of us. In the days of Brezhnev, Andropov,
> Gorbachev and Yeltsin, I was constantly trying to suppress the responsible
citizen in me. I told myself that I was, after all, an artist. As a storyteller I
was influenced by the Moscow underground, where it was common to be
apolitical…. I held fast to that principle until I was 50. Now the citizen in
me has come to life (Sultan).69

Sorokin’s claim that he has become an active citizen signals an end to his participation in
the politics of indistinction, and, for him at any rate, an end to the postmodern body in
transition. The atmosphere of flux and change from the Thaw to the publication of
Vladimir Sorokin’s novel *Ice* in 2002 fostered the development of the image of the body

---

69 The original German reads, “Der Staatsbürger lebt in jedem von uns. In der Zeit von Breschnew,
Andropow, Gorbatschow und Jelzin versuchte ich ständig, den mündigen Bürger in mir zu verdrängen. Ich
sagte mir, ich bin doch Künstler. Als Erzähler war ich durch den Moskauer Untergrund geprägt. Dort war
es üblich, unpoltisch zu sein… Das habe ich so gehalten, bis ich 50 wurde. Nun ist der Bürger in mir
erwacht.” It is posted online at: http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-50343993.html
Translation by Christopher Sultan, available at:
http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,463860-2,00.html
in flux in postmodern art and literature. This dissertation will attempt to show the various permutations of the body and to uncover the motivations and meanings behind the shifting image of the body.

Chapter one of the dissertation explores the linked imagery of violence, death, and immortality. I begin with violence because the imagery associated with it most clearly establishes the destruction of the sign in Russian postmodernist discourse—a phenomenon that is significant throughout the course of my investigation. In fiction, characters’ bodies are subjected to gruesome demonstrations of violence—they are pierced with metal tubes, hammered on the chest until they bleed, burned, tortured, and executed—but to no effect. Through repetition, excessive and repulsive details become banal. This violence is directed at language and imagery itself, revealing the mechanics behind a work’s creation, and destabilizing cultural myths. The “immortal” figure of Lenin and the deified images of Stalin are removed from context to reveal the cultural myths that have become part of their legacies. The theme of resurrection, bringing new life from death, succeeds only in coming halfway, through the illusion of life provided by taxidermy, or the appearance of resurrection with no new beginning. In exploring the imagery of violence, death, and resurrection, postmodernists uncouple the relationship of sign and signified. The image of the body, once deconstructed is free to undergo all manner of transformation.

The combination of human and animal features further demonstrates the flexibility of the body in postmodern Russian culture. The medieval Bestiary, a book naming the animals—real and fantastical—on the earth inspired more than one work in this investigation. The second chapter of the dissertation becomes a bestiary of its own,
providing descriptions and explanations of many of the fantastic creatures that appear in Russian postmodernist art and literature. These include animal-human hybrids, animals taking on human roles, and shapeshifters, both in literary and visual representations and in performance art, where a man becomes an animal through the process of embodiment. This chapter will attempt to uncover the implications of each artist’s use of hybrid animal and human features.

The third chapter of the dissertation investigates the relationship between media, technology, and the body. In this chapter, the concept of the body as essential to human existence is challenged, as human identity is reduced to code, documentation, and impersonated or replaced through television. In other cases, the body is enhanced and expanded through wearable technology, improving the user’s sense of smell or ability to speak the truth. In one case, the human attacks his mediated self.

Interest in the body and its permutations is not limited to Russia, but is a feature in postmodern art and literature across the globe. As such, my study will attempt to identify interests specific to Russian artists and writers against the background of international trends. Russian postmodernists break down the boundaries of possibility, pushing the limits of taste, challenging assumptions, confronting both Soviet ideology and the legacy of the Russian avant-garde.

The intent of this dissertation is to reach across disciplines, to draw contrasts between cultures, and to bring into focus the significance of the body in postmodern Russian culture. While every artist and writer has a unique approach to the subject, each investigates the fragmentation of identity and the flexible expression of the physical human body. It is my assertion that by looking across fields of representation, we will
gain a more complete picture of Russian postmodernism and its treatment of the body. The images of bodies in flux, with their shifting boundaries and ever-changing forms match the political transitions and social changes during the late 20th century, while referencing the experimentation of the avant-garde. Ultimately, the image of the multiple, unfinished, and hybrid postmodern body is a challenge to authoritative discourse, deconstructing fixed cultural myths in favor of irony, pastiche, and contradiction.
Chapter 1: Nothing’s Shocking: Violence, Death, and Resurrection

Poetry is violence practiced on ordinary speech.\(^{70}\)

Why did he die?
… he was born after the revolution, wasn’t he?
Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*

Russian postmodernism has a reputation for provoking controversy through violent, macabre, and sexually explicit imagery. Referencing Charles Baudelaire’s volume of poems on death and sexuality, Victor Erofeyev called Russian postmodernist writers Russia’s *fleurs du mal*.\(^{71}\) His comparison is an apt acknowledgment of shared thematic material, and also points to similar public reception of the work. Parts of Baudelaire’s work were censored, and Russian postmodernists have caused public outcry, experienced calls for censorship, and faced government suppression.\(^{72}\) On one hand, these reactions are natural responses to a literature designed to shock, but, as critics have pointed out, the violence in postmodern art and literature is itself a response to a

---

\(^{70}\) Michael Holquist’s paraphrase of Roman Jakobson in the introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, xxix.

\(^{71}\) Erofeyev, “*Fleurs*” ix-xxx.

\(^{72}\) For example, Vladimir Sorokin’s work has been protested with book burnings and public demonstrations. The pro-Putin youth group “Moving Together” brought a lawsuit against him for his novel *Blue Lard*, which features a long and explicit sex scene between clones of Stalin and Khrushchev. For reports on the development of the controversy, see Volkov; Noskovich, Chalikov, and Glikin; and Murav.
history of violence and control. The postmodernists’ use of violence is a means of subverting the control of authoritative discourse, a closed system of signs that restricts the body’s freedom through its control of language. In keeping with the postmodernist reliance on intertextuality, and complicitous critique, the imagery of violence, death, and rebirth in these works is borrowed from a rich supply of such images in Russian culture.

In using violent imagery, Russian postmodernists attack authoritative language itself, destroying the existing system of signs from within in order to break down the systems of control inherent in language and image. It is violence in quotation marks.

In this chapter, I argue that postmodern violence, while destructive, is ultimately generative. It does not create new language of its own, but frees language from assigned meanings and revives it. Postmodern literature and art is ultimately about language, and the violence in it is a gesture directed against authoritative discourse. Thus, the period that Alexei Yurchak calls “late socialism” resembles Bakhtin’s carnival in its leveling thrust. As the carnival represented the death of the king in order to collapse hierarchical structures and to bring about a spirit of renewal, postmodern violence places all signs on one level, making them interchangeable. The shocking violence and destruction of fixed ideas surrounding language allow for the revival of play with language and grotesque imagery—the bodily transformations that are a hallmark of Russian postmodernism.

Russian culture is filled with images of violence, death, and rebirth in its history, art, and literature. Violence is written in the lives of martyred saints, and depicted in their

---

73 Laird, “Voices” 144; Lipovetsky “Transformation” 372.
74 I use “authoritative discourse” as a general term to describe any hegemonic system of language and imagery, to encompass what Foucault described simply as “discourse,” and what others have termed “authoritarian,” or “totalitarian” discourse. For more on Foucault’s understanding of discourse, see Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in Young, Untying the Text.
75 Yurchak, “Hegemony” 480.
icons. Martyrs such as Boris and Gleb, who according to the Primary Chronicle were killed at the command of their brother Sviatoslav, enshrined the Russian value of nonresistance to violence, while icons of St. George slaying the dragon valorized violence against foreign enemies. The history of Russian rulers is filled with coups, assassinations, massacres, and the subjugation of the populace through terror, with infamous despots from Ivan IV to Stalin.  

Peter I put bodily remains on display in his Kunstkamer for the edification of the public, and Russia’s history of public torture and execution continues to be on display in history and art museums.  

The 19th century turned out to be no less violent than those that preceded it. The hanging of the Decembrists in 1825, became a cultural touchstone for a generation. The following decades saw the loss of Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov in the ritual violence of the duel (reflecting the literary deaths of their heroes). The death mask of Pushkin is on display at his estate, and monuments ensure his immortality. The canon of 19th century Russian literature includes Bazarov’s death from typhus, Dostoevsky’s “murder novels,” and Anna Karenina’s suicide, not to mention the suicides of mistreated girls. The imagery of resurrection includes rusalki (the spirits of drowned maidens) brought back to life to lure men into chilly rivers with their songs, the statue of Peter I chasing a man through the streets of St. Petersburg, Akakii Akakievich’s return

---

76 Kevin Platt discusses the myths surrounding the two rulers in Terror and Greatness.
77 There are even paintings of cherubs holding instruments of torture on the ceiling of the church in St. Petersburg’s Peter and Paul fortress, perhaps to encourage a sense of spirituality in those whose job it was to torture and to execute.
78 Along with the self-made monument of his poetry (see his poem “Exegi Monumentum,” quoted on page 124).
79 The imagery of violence and death in Russia is fertile ground. For more on the history of violent imagery in Russia, see Levitt and Novikov, Times of Trouble.
from the grave to steal overcoats, and spiritual rebirths in Siberian prisons in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and in Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*.

Whereas the latter works used the imagery of resurrection to guide the reader to their own spiritual revelation and rebirth, in postmodern literature, violence and death may lead to metamorphosis, but they rarely offer new life. Rather, resurrections challenge the power of signs, by temporarily reviving dead or discarded images and shifting their meaning through quotation. The primary cultural images of immortality and resurrection include monuments to Soviet leaders, Stalin’s portrait, and Lenin’s preserved corpse lying under glass in his mausoleum—museum objects. Their images were dismantled and discredited, in part due to the attacks of writers and artists against totalitarian language and images. The postmodern version of resurrection offers only the simulacrum of new life, made up of reused and recycled images.

In his book, *Everything was Forever, until it Was no More*, Alexei Yurchak proposes that the prefabricated images and language of Soviet official culture were part of the texture of everyday life, so prevalent that they went without notice. Komar and Melamid’s *Ideal Slogan* (1972) (Figure 5), and *Quotation* (1972) (Figure 6), satirized the red banners bearing slogans that were part of public demonstrations, replacing the letters with white squares. These paintings demonstrate the emptiness and invisibility of official language. Yurchak also describes the process of writing official speeches by committee, editing to the point of standardization, wherein meaning was subservient to ideological correctness. He explains that Soviet citizens participated in politics without conviction, engaging in elections and demonstrations as a performative act (*Everything* 19-26).

While the citizens of the Soviet Union, on the whole, ignored the clichés and slogans of
official culture, postmodernists took advantage of prefabricated language and imagery, quoting and reusing the language and imagery of Soviet life, and shifting their meanings by changing the context. Thus, Komar and Melamid’s act of signing their names to the anonymous Soviet slogans transferred the collective voice to the individual, displacing readymade meaning with an ironic gesture. 

Figure 5. *Ideal Slogan* (1972)

Figure 6. *Onward to the Victory of Communism!* (1972)

Komar and Melamid’s act of signing or erasing Soviet slogans enacts violence against official speech by exposing its emptiness; an act which prefigures the frequent juxtaposition of prefabricated words and images with violent imagery in Russian postmodernism. Such substitutions and juxtapositions violate the viewer/reader’s

---

80 See Tupitsyn, “Round Dance.”
expectations, and disrupt the automatized reception of language and images. The Russian postmodernists’ strategy of using violent imagery to disrupt automatization hearkens back to their predecessors in the early 20th century. The futurist poet Vladimir Maiakovskii took the same approach when he wrote, in his short cycle “I” (“Я”) (1913) (“I love to watch children dying” Я люблю смотреть, как умирают дети”, Maiakovskii 58). The poem mixes violent words (blood, crucifixion, a noose, screams), vivid word combinations, and ordinary objects. Verbal innovations, jarring images, and novel juxtapositions are typical of Maiakovskii’s oeuvre. In Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia, Svetlana Boym notes that Maiakovskii’s use of shocking imagery was intended to surprise and to awaken the reader to life (Boym, Common Places 14). The use of violent imagery in both Futurist and postmodernist literature is a means of estrangement as delineated by Viktor Shklovskii in his essay “Art as Technique.” Shklovskii proposed that becoming accustomed to an image caused the viewer to cease perceiving it, and that art was meant to revive the audience’s sense of perception. Familiarization makes an individual cease to see objects for what they are, and cease to experience life. He wrote:

Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic and in itself

---

81 For a discussion of automatization see page 5-6, and Shklovskii “Art as Device” (“Искусство как приём”)
and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object itself is not important (Shklovskii 12).

The use of shocking imagery, then, is directed not at the object itself, but at the reader, and, indeed at language. The futurists’ violent imagery and disruptive public behavior was meant to be a “slap in the face of public taste,” a direct attack against bourgeois sensibilities and the clichés and commonplaces of everyday life. The futurists and their fellow artists wanted to create a new language and a new art for the 20th century, and they experimented with the forms of language and art, as epitomized by Velimir Khlebnikov’s “transsense” (заум) poetry, in which he played with the component sounds and structures of words, and Kazimir Malevich’s theory of “suprematism” (супрематизм) in which he reduced images to their most basic geometric forms. The innovations of the early 20th century were displaced by the doctrine of socialist realism, which, however, provided much raw material for Russian postmodernist art and literature.

Russian postmodernist discourse exists within the authoritative discourse of socialist culture, but also undermines it. I use discourse to refer to the lexicon of Socialism, but also to any system in which the production of language is closed. Postmodern art breaks open the system through violent language, novel juxtapositions, and conceptualist transposition. In other words, artists and writers reuse the cultural material of socialist realism and Russian popular culture to create new work. Sally Laird

---

82 “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” was the title of an early futurist manifesto written by Maiakovskii, David Burliuk, and others. See excerpts from original texts in Kolocotroni, Vassiliki, Goldman, and Taxidou.

83 Several versions of the painting exist. The work influenced postmodernists’ use of the square as a template, the painting as concept, serialized art, and quotation. Malevich’s suprematist images of the body, rendered in geometric forms, provide a basis for the body-as-object.
explains that, during the Soviet period, “culture was inescapable: the writer or artist had no language of his own, but [had to] operate within the prevailing system of ‘signs’. At the same time, his attitude to these ‘signs’ was remote and estranged” (Laird 143). Thus, postmodernism developed a literature of quotation.

Postmodernists attempt to make language their own by breaking it apart, directing violence against language itself. In doing so, they destroy the existing system of signs, bringing about the dedoxification of preconceptions surrounding an idea and the notions regarding art and literature. As Linda Hutcheon notes in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, “While the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political action, it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique… postmodernism works to ‘dedoxify’ our cultural representations and their undeniable political import” (Hutcheon 3). While the artists and writers in this study do not engage overtly in political action, and in some cases seem to strive to escape the political altogether, the very act of creating apolitical work constituted a kind of political move in a system in which their artistic methods were considered bourgeois, decadent, and cosmopolitan. The artists and writers in this study cast doubt on the efficacy of political systems altogether, but their work is not apolitical. Postmodernist art does not choose a political platform, seeing the danger of totalitarian language in all

---

84 Those who emigrated continued to approach the sign systems they encountered outside of Russia with the same distance, as those who remained attacked emerging signs during and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

85 Indeed, the work of some postmodernists engages explicitly in political language as parody. Oleg Kulik ran for president as a hybrid animal, representing the “Animal Party” in 1995; Sorokin, Pelevin, Komar and Melamid use the images of political leaders; and Tolstaya makes a mockery of a tyrant in *The Slynx*. Even the Mit’ki’s performance of drunken social disengagement is a kind of transpolitical protest. Standing outside of the politically-dictated tenets of socialist realism by creating work without political content was a political statement of its own. I discuss the postmodern “politics of indistinction” further below, and in my introduction.
political programs. Rather, it works to challenge cultural and political myths and make the reader or viewer aware of their complicity in the creation of such myths.

For postmodernist artists and writers, the work of creating art is in large part a metatextual game of signs. Literature and art, often in the guise of realism, are set apart from reality to reveal the constructed ideas and expectations that make up their component parts. Setting, plot, characterization, and style are all elements subject to postmodern play in literature, while line, color, and composition are parodied in visual art. Literature exposes the author behind the characters in a text, and art emphasizes the subject as a quotation. In this postmodern mode, violence is enacted on bodies—they are damaged, injured, tortured, disfigured, and transformed—but in the end, there is nobody there. Writer Vladimir Sorokin argues that the body exists only outside of literature: “There’s no problem for me about morality in literature because morality ends outside the limits of our body, it ends so to speak where our hand ends. There another space begins. Literature itself is inanimate. It’s just paper. It can’t do anything to you” (Laird, *Voices* 159). Sorokin and other postmodernists reveal the mechanisms behind the construction of their work, exposing the image as a system of signs. Sorokin makes it clear that his works are fictional. No actual damage is done, nobody dies, and no resurrection can take place.

---

86 Of course, Sorokin exaggerates here. Real people have been killed often enough for writing, distributing, or even commenting on literature, and paper carries out the speech act that sentences a person to death, as the judge in Butler’s purview, may, in effect, kill a person through the speaking the death sentence (*Excitable Speech*). That Sorokin felt free to publish and to comment testifies to the relative openness of Russian culture in the late 1990s. Ten years later, Sorokin was put on trial for pornography charges, a sure demonstration of paper’s power to hurt, given Russia’s history of exile and execution as punishments for adversarial speech. Though Sorokin was not convicted, the case serves as a reminder of the history of censorship in Russia, in the name of which imprisonment, exile, and executions did take place.
In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the use of repeated violence as it becomes banal through repetition to expose the system of signs underlying literature. I consider the concept of the performative utterance as treated by J.L. Austin, and, later Judith Butler in her *Excitable Speech*. Austin argues that, in some cases, speech is action. Butler complicates that idea, arguing that while words are capable of inflicting injury, they do not always perform what they say (except, for example, in the case of a judge sentencing a prisoner to death), but quotations of violent speech do, however, retain the intent of the original speech. I also consider Mark Lipovetsky’s claim that postmodernist art, specifically what he refers to as “neo-baroque” remythologizes what it seeks to critique. I focus on the artists’ attempts to emphasize the conceptual and metatextual in their work.

The second section of this chapter examines the imagery of death and immortality as artists and writers consider Soviet claims to immortality. As Irene Masing-Delic writes in her book *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature*, Soviet scientists claimed that death would come to an end with the victory of Soviet science. The new Soviet man held the promise of immortality. The Platonov quote that serves as my epigraph underscores the widespread acceptance of this idea, and Lenin’s mausoleum, housing his mummified body, served as a promise of this goal. In preserving Lenin, his embalmers established his immortality. His tomb served as a reliquary, a replacement for religious belief, and an emblem of the future victory over death. I address art about immortality, including images of Lenin’s mausoleum, the cult of the dictator in Komar and Melamid’s paintings, and the concept of time and immortality in Sasha Sokolov’s *Palisandria*.  

55
The chapter concludes with a focus on rebirth and postmodern play with the concept of resurrection. Postmodern resurrections are, by and large, failures. They either only simulate new life, or fail to bring about genuine change. I will discuss the failed resurrections in Tatyana Tolstaya’s novel *The Slynx*, in the works of Oleg Kulik, in the playful taxidermy of Olga Florenskaya, and in Victor Erofeyev’s story “The Parakeet.” I contrast these visions of non-resurrection with Bakhtin’s concept of world conflagration—all consuming death that brings about new life.

**50 Drops of Blood: On Violence**

While Maiakovskii uses shocking imagery in order to provoke a response from his listener or reader, to defamiliarize the ordinary and wake his audience from the fog of banality and bourgeois comforts, Vladimir Sorokin reestablishes banality after an initial shock. In his 1992 story, "A Meeting of the Factory Committee" ("Заседание завкома," 1992), Sorokin imitates socialist realist prose, writing according to the rules of an established sign system, and breaks with it abruptly, creating a second reality which operates according to an unfamiliar set of rules governed by unmotivated language and linguistic breakdown.  

Unlike Maiakovskii, Sorokin is not known as an innovator of language. Rather, he imitates the style of socialist realism very closely. He claims not to have a style of his own, but to be recognizable only by his devices (Laird, *Voices* 161). One such device, the degeneration of language, produces some interesting neologisms, but these do not

---

engender the same refreshing sense of novelty as they do in Maiakovskii, partly because they are repeated over and over. Sorokin’s work dovetails with Maiakovskii’s primarily in its use of violent imagery against the background of the everyday.

Many critics have commented on Sorokin’s use of violence and its connection to language.\(^{88}\) David Gillespie describes Sorokin’s use of violence as an attack on language, and relates Sorokin’s faceless characters (made so through their description as typical socialist realist types, the inevitable victims of violence) to the OBERIUTy who used violent imagery as an absurdist strategy, often to comic effect.\(^{89}\) However, the effect of Sorokin’s work is banality rather than humor. While the OBERIUTy described violence, they did so with great efficiency. Sorokin extends his descriptions over many pages, belaboring the reader’s exposure to violent imagery, thus reestablishing a sense of automatization. The violence becomes as repetitive, and as anticipated, as the formulaic narration that came before.

Sally Laird argues that Sorokin’s work ‘reenacts’ the violent history of Russian culture, in which Russia’s claims to moral superiority contrast with brutal violence, writing, “in such a society, language itself gets abused, becoming an instrument of control and denial instead of a means of communication. Violence is done to meaning as well as to human lives” (Laird 144). Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson mention that the violence in Russian history is not restricted to government repression, but was also omnipresent in war and natural disasters, the circumstances of which were often

---

\(^{88}\) Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover writes that Sorokin’s use of graphic imagery is related to Georges Bataille’s “excremental poetics” – including the idea that art must sometimes include ugly or unpleasant imagery in order to reflect reality. This assessment also ties Sorokin to surrealist ideas and strategies, which resonate strongly with Russian postmodernism (Vladiv-Glover, “Heterogeneity”).

\(^{89}\) See Gillespie for a reading of how violence functions in some of Sorokin’s stories.
exacerbated by government action or inaction (Costlow, Other 9). In a society of government control, the bureaucratic is the natural element of violence.

Sorokin’s story begins with a typical factory committee meeting wherein the protagonist is reprimanded by the official organ, in the official manner. Sorokin, a mimic of literary styles, employs the language of the socialist realist production novel and the intricacies of meeting protocols. Stock phrases, ideological correctness, and conventions make up the bulk of the narration, what Yurchak would call “block writing” (Yurchak “Hegemony”). Ideologically correct statements are linked together to form a coherent, predictable, and ultimately meaningless whole. The hero, Viktor Piskunov, is established as such by the focus of the narration on his movements and the way the other factory workers speak to him with respect. In contrast to the usual productive factory worker hero, Piskunov is an unproductive lathe worker. He is brought before the factory committee for absenteeism and drunkenness.

As the meeting on factory incentives drags on, the narration becomes predictable, lulling the reader into a state of automatization. The setting, too, is typical—the meeting takes place on the stage of a factory club under a large portrait of Lenin. Letters of complaint from foremen are read aloud, and stock characters appear to denounce Piskunov—a cleaning lady, a coworker, and a militiaman.90 The story retains its proper

---

90 The cleaning lady (Putzfrau) and militiaman (“militsaner”) are important characters in Prigov’s work as well. For more on these tropes, see Prigov, Nekanonicheskii Klassik; and Kuritsyn. The documentary film The Russian Concept features a brief video of Prigov reading as the Militsaner. A portfolio of images of the Putzfrau held at the Manhattan branch of the Museum of Modern art Library features images of the cleaning lady in various imagined installations, Kabakov. One such installation was on view in the new Tretiakov gallery in Moscow as of July 2007, an image of which can be viewed on their website at: http://www.tretjakovgallery.ru/en/collection/_show/image/_id/2314. She also appears in some of the “phantom installations” on Prigov’s personal website, at http://www.prigov.ru/images/inst.php.
socialist realist tone. A sample of the speech in the beginning of the story is characteristic:

The machine-assembling shop never fulfills its plan, it always lets the factory down. The forge shop and the smelting shop give one hundred and ten percent, and then the assemblers put the brakes on everything (Reynolds, “Agenda” 323).

...механо-сборочный никогда план не выполняет, всегда завод подводит. Кузнецкий с литейным поднажмут, а сборщики все на тормозах спустят (Sorokin, “Zavkoma”). 91

As the story wears on, the language holds few surprises, but continues beyond the point of interest. Put bluntly, the story becomes boring and predictable.

At the threshold of boredom, Sorokin breaks the pattern by writing unexpected and graphic violence into the text. This violent language mimics the block writing of official language. It is as arbitrary and modular as the ideologically correct language that came before it. Upon hearing that the committee wishes to execute Piskunov by firing squad, the militiaman laughs nervously and exits, cello case in hand. As soon as he leaves, he returns, initiating a sequence of events in which the characters commit violent acts, incapable of controlling their own movements. Sorokin writes:

… the militiaman burst into the hall with a wild, inhuman roar. Pressing his case to his chest, he knocked the cleaner off her feet and on half-bent legs ran towards the stage, his head thrown back… ‘Pene… pene… penetenter… penetenter…’ he roared, shaking his head and opening his mouth wide. (Reynolds, “Agenda” 338)

91. Translated by Andrew Reynolds.
...милиционер ворвался в зал с диким, нечеловеческим ревом. Прижимая футляр к груди, он сбил уборщицу с ног и на полусогнутых ногах побежал к сцене, откинув назад голову.— Про... про... прорубоно... прорубоно... — ревел он, тряся головой и широко открывая рот. (Sorokin, “Zavkoma”)92

Two characters attack themselves as if involuntarily, both causing injuries to their faces which render them unrecognizable: “Zvyagintseva… dug her nails into her face and scraped her hands downwards, leaving bloody furrows the whole length of her face… Starukhin… smashed his face against the table” (“Звягинцева… вцепилась себе ногтями в лицо и потянула руки вниз, разрывая лицо до крови… Старухин… ударился лицом о стол”; Reynolds, “Agenda 338-9; Sorokin, “Zavkoma”). This literalized defacement is a fully realized metaphor, reducing characters established by literary conventions and expectations to faceless puppets, unable to control their actions or speech. The gesture mocks the regulation of speech by committee as well as the standardization of official discourse.

The injured characters continue to spout recited stock phrases mixed with nonsense words as if they are robots with failing circuitry: “Urgan… came up to the cleaner, muttering, ‘Well if it’s a case of the technology penetenter, citizen foremen, they never provided high-voltage supports or added bitumen oxidizers, when the polishing

92 The nonsense word прорубоно (translated by Andrew Reynolds as penetenter) clearly suggests the verb прорубать (to cut or hack through) or прорубь (ice-hole) (Oxford Russian Dictionary) and the Latin phrase pro bono publico (for the public good). The word “penetenter,” then, should be taken as a play on the word “penetrate” based on the Latin root penet (and, possibly “enter” or simply a Latin ending). The complete word-concept, then, “to hack through for the public good” plays with the violence in the text as well as the ambitions of Socialist Realist discourse, and perhaps suggests that Sorokin is doing the reader a service by destroying false illusions. Other involuntary exclamations also hint at the violence in the text, including "убийство" (slang for killer (adj.) from the word убой (slaughter), and вытягено (from extract (vb.)).
process is essential…” (“Урган… подошел к уборщице, бормоча: — Если говорить о технологи прорубоно, граждане десятники, они никогда не ставили высоковольтных опор и добавляли битумные окислители, когда процесс шлифования необходим..."; Reynolds 340; Sorokin, “Zavkoma”). The factory committee members work together with Piskunov and the militiaman to strip the cleaner and place her on the table. Piskunov and Chernogaev find a sledgehammer and some metal pipes, along with a rotting, worm-infested piece of flesh, in the militiaman’s cello case. They drive the short pipes into the cleaner’s back, one by one.93 The description of the violence is bloodless and repetitive. For each of the five pipes, the text reads, “Piskunov took the… pipe and positioned it on the cleaner’s back. Chernogaev hit the butt of the pipe with the sledgehammer. The pipe went clean through the cleaner’s body and came to rest in the table with a thud” (Пискунов взял… трубу и приставил к спине уборщицы. Черногаев ударил по торцу трубы кувалдой. Труба прошла сквозь тело уборщицы и ударила в стол"; Reynolds, “Agenda” 341-2; "Sorokin “Zavkoma”). They then reverse the procedure, pulling the pipes out of the body and throwing them on the floor one by one. At this point, blood flows from the wounds and several characters fill the cavities in the body with worms. Thereafter, the characters scatter. Some collect the pipes while another makes an announcement, and Comrade Zvyagintseva retrieves a pistol from her handbag and shoots herself in the head. The remaining characters head for the exits. By this point, the chaos and violence have attained the same rhythm and predictability of the factory meeting. At first, the imagery is shocking and even produces

93 The use of sledgehammers as a weapon prefigures the use of ice hammers in Sorokin’s 2002 novel Ice, which I discuss below.
an exhilarating feeling of refreshment from the routine pace of the meeting. As the body
of the cleaner is dismembered in the text, the protocols and expectations of typical
socialist realist literature are dismantled. The text replaces the rigid predictability of
block language with destructive incoherence and unmotivated, senseless violence.

When the story was first published, it was part of an emerging vocabulary of
violence shared by writers, artists, and filmmakers such as the St. Petersburg
necrorealists.94 The necrorealist aesthetic featured graphic sexual encounters and physical
violence. Their work spliced together scenes of idyllic Soviet life borrowed from official
productions, and the group’s actions, inserting zombie attacks, experiments in which
human beings were genetically spliced with trees, and scenes of self-mutilation into the
heroic Soviet everyday. Like the work of the necrorealists, Sorokin’s fiction relies upon
surrealist and absurdist strategies to remove the frame of “reality” from violent scenarios.
In “A Meeting of the Factory Committee,” the militiaman’s re-entry into the scene
creates a break from rote realism and establishes an alternate reality wherein the
characters speak nonsense phrases and conduct violent rituals mechanically.

While the violence is part of a second reality, Sorokin retains the same narrative
rhythm in the violent scenes as in the description of the meeting. Violence and death are
presented with the same matter-of-factness and repetition as everyday events. The
murder of the cleaner is performed as if according to protocol, while Zvyagintseva’s
suicide is unmotivated and inconsequential. None of the other characters take notice of it

94 For more on the necrorealists and their strategies, see Berry and Miller-Pogacar; Yurchak, “Suspending
the Political”; Yurchak, “Necro-Utopia”; and Alaniz, Necrorama. A MoMA website features a small
despite the blood spatter on their faces. The tone and repetition with which each event is
treated strips bare the narrative and reveals the constructed nature of the text. There is no
remorse, no report of pain, and no appeal to the reader's sympathy.

Sorokin’s text treats the characters as objects, turning them inside out in a
metatextual move to show that they are made, not of flesh and blood, but of word and
concept. The murdered cleaner is marked as a fictional character. She bleeds only after it
is clear that her body is empty of any real substance, as if according to protocol (the pipes
pass clean through), and she does not express pain. Her death reveals her status as an
object—she is simply a puppet. Sorokin presents a clue to his intent early in the text by
setting the action on the stage of a factory club. The characters are all puppets, incapable
of controlling their words or actions regardless of what happens in the text. Sorokin holds
the strings. His use of setting, placing the meeting on a stage emphasizes the fictional, as
the stage creates a space for suspended reality. Sorokin exaggerates the characters’
involuntary movements and removes their motivation to demonstrate that the characters
are, in fact, fictional, always subject to the author’s whims and desires. The violence
behind the image of broken and damaged bodies is directed toward the reader’s
expectations of writer, character, and text. By setting the scene on stage, Sorokin reveals
the fictional status of the text.

Sorokin’s use of Socialist realist strategies lulls the reader into a sense of security,
wherein the reader expects the text to continue in the way that the reader has been trained
to anticipate. Laird writes that “narrative conventions… exert a ritualistic power over our
will to believe” (Laird 145). For Sorokin, Foucault’s notion of the totalitarian nature of
any discourse is significant, because such discourse is capable of paralyzing and claiming
power over a person (Lipovetsky “Cruelty” 170). The reader’s expectations of socialist realist writing are reinforced by Sorokin’s careful imitation of stylistic markers and his use of stock characters. Sorokin attacks the reader’s sense of security by interrupting the narrative with sudden and unmotivated violence. In addition, the opposition between Piskunov and the committee is undermined by the group’s collaboration. Sorokin’s broken dichotomy reveals the arbitrariness of oppositions within shifting and meaningless language. As Serafima Roll writes, “Sorokin's deconstruction of meaningful discourse to the point of showing its nonsensical nature is a way of pointing out to the reader the absurdity of the all-pervading power of ideology in people's life” (Roll, “Stripping” 73). Sorokin’s violence, then, is directed not towards the characters in the story, but towards the authoritative discourse of socialist realism from which their archetypes were borrowed.

Systematic violence is also an important part of Sorokin's *Ice* trilogy, particularly the eponymous central section. Broadly speaking, *Ice* is a utopian novel in which an enlightened race of the "awakened" – a people characterized by blond hair, blue eyes, and the ability to speak with their hearts in a 23-word heart language once awakened – search among the benighted masses (pejoratively referred to in the series as “empties,” (“пустышки”),“gasbags,” (“пустозвоны”) or "meat machines" (“мясные машины”)) for their lost brethren. The group believes that once they find all 23,000 missing people, the world will end, and the chosen will be transformed into rays of light for eternity.

95 *Ice* is the middle section of a trilogy. Following its publication, Sorokin released a prequel entitled *Bro’s Way* (*Путь Бро*), detailing the early days of the awakened sect, and *23,000*, which tells of the successful search for 23,000 brethren and their efforts to bring about the end of the world. While the other parts develop the mock grand narrative of creation and apocalypse initiated in *Ice*, the plot of the whole is centered around the events in *Ice*, the first book of the series to be published, and the middle book in terms of the story’s *fabula*. My discussion focuses primarily on *Ice* because it makes up the core of Sorokin’s created myth.
correcting the mistake of creation (Sorokin *Ice* 188-9). The awakened abduct blond-haired, blue-eyed people, tie them up, bare their chests, and strike them on the breastbone with a hammer, the head of which is made of ice collected from the site of the Tunguska meteor explosion in Siberia, until the candidate dies, or until his or her heart speaks their true name. If the captive's heart "speaks their true name," they are cared for and released following a chaste ecstatic embrace with members of the group. If the captive's heart does not speak, they are dismissed as "empties," and left to die. That language is key to awakening is significant—recruits escape from the restrictions of verbal language, only to find themselves limited to the 23 words of the heart language. Violence is carried out in the name of language (in search of those that can speak their “true name” from the heart), but the awakened ones’ transformation is limited—again, their language is finite, limited to a small set of possible utterances, and their activities are focused on bringing about the end of the world. The trilogy ends in a failed apocalypse, a mockery of utopian projects, the grand narratives that surround them, and the violence that sometimes accompanies them, in a fictional re-presentation of the Bolshevik revolution and its long aftermath.

---

96 Sorokin’s story begins with the “Tunguska event” a real, and devastating explosion that took place in Siberia in 1908, possibly caused by a meteor. The event has been the center of much debate and speculation. In *Put’ Bro*, Sorokin creates a fictionalized account of an expedition to the site led by Leonid Kulik in 1927. Sorokin situates his text within the context of real events, complicating the division between the real and the fictional.

97 At the end of the trilogy, the group, having successfully gathered 23,000 brethren, meet and act out the ritual meant to destroy life on earth. While the 23,000 are annihilated, two “meat machines”—a man and a woman—remain alive, either because, as the text implies, the procedure destroyed only the 23,000, or, possibly, as a resurrected post-apocalyptic Adam and Eve. In either case, the project to end the world ends in failure.

98 Keith Livers points out that *Ice* is one of several apocalyptic novels with a conspiratorial subtext that have come out in recent years. See Livers, “Labyrinth.” He also points out that 23,000, the third in the *Ice* trilogy uses a socialist “grand style,” which it leaves intact, making Sorokin’s destruction of discourse
As the novel begins, we are introduced to three group members and two captives. The awakened ones are treated as movie script heroes, presented with short, pointed descriptions in broad strokes. They tie the captives to the posts of an abandoned warehouse and beat the first man to death. The first hammering sets the stage for the rest: “‘Speak!’ Gorbovets roared and hit him. The man’s body jerked. It hung feebly from the ropes… Bang. Bang. Chips of ice flew out from the hammer. Bones cracked. Blood began dripping from the fat man’s nose” (Отзовися! — проревел Горбовец и ударил. Тело мужчины дернулось. Бессильно повисло на веревках… Бил. Бил. Бил. От молота полетели куски льда. Треснули кости. Из носа толстяка закапала кровь”;

Gambrell, Ice 3; Sorokin, Led 12). The incident, with its description of cracking bones and drops of blood, is shocking even within the context of the project to awaken brothers and sisters, but the shock wears off over the course of the novel as the ritual is repeated. The first man to die in the text is reported as the sixteenth “empty” that the group has recently hammered to death. Nearly everything in the novel seems scripted, quoting from a variety of literary, film, and television genres, including memoir, crime dramas, advertisements, and metaphysical treatises. The novel borrows material from sensational headlines, including reports on prostitution, a popular media topic. The sexual violence and criminal slang in the text are reminiscent of hardboiled crime novels.

incomplete. For more on the trilogy’s grand narrative, see Lipovetsky, Paralogii. For information on apocalypse narratives in 19th and 20th century Russian literature, see Bethea.

99 English translation by Jamey Gambrell.
100 Chernukha – a glasnost-era term often translated as “black stuff,” ranging from gritty art-house films criticizing the quality of life in the Soviet Union to sensationalized television and tabloid newspaper reports of rape, prostitution, and violence. Eliot Borenstein discusses chernukha and its cousin bespredel (“beyond the limit,” the representation of extreme violence) in Overkill, and Jose Alaniz presents an analysis of death imagery in Post Soviet Russian culture in his dissertation, Necrorama.
Each abduction throughout the novel takes place in nearly the same way. Characters are bound, undressed and beaten on the chest until their hearts speak, or until they die. With the same scenario repeated many times, the violence begins to become banal, especially when treated as a stable element in multiple narratives with different generic markers. Ice consists of four formal parts, with generic interruptions such as a foray into an Internet chat room and several dream sequences. The novel’s intentionally convoluted and fragmented structure includes a quest narrative, a memoir (itself detailing the life of a Nazi concentration camp prisoner turned MGB officer, and then Gulag zek), a sales brochure, and a childhood reverie.¹⁰¹ The topsy-turvy switch from one role to another within the memoir mirrors real-world changes in circumstance. The text leaps from genre to genre, the initial apparent "grand narrative" of the quest for lost hearts disintegrating, only to be revisited in the next section.¹⁰² With each change, the violence becomes more banal. In the first section, the quest for lost hearts is repetitive, but each abduction is unique, as are the consequences that follow. We follow each of the four characters in the aftermath of their initial awakening through potboiler scenes of drug abuse, prostitution, sexual abuse, and alcohol abuse, and parodies of contemporary Russia, including racist conspiracy theories and the lifestyles of the new Russians.

The second part brings in elements of terror, removing the setting from contemporary Russia to Poland and Germany during the Holocaust, and then to Russia's MGB offices and the Gulag. The violence of the search for the 23,000 is treated as a banal aspect of everyday work against the background of historic atrocity. The text, set

¹⁰¹ MGB was, at the time, the acronym for what once was the NKVD, later the KGB, and now the FSB
¹⁰² Lyotard discusses the idea of the “grand narrative” in his “The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge” (1979). He argues that postmodernism constitutes a breakdown of grand narratives – all-encompassing thought systems that explain existence and society such as religion and science.
against the backdrop of death and violence on a massive scale, brings to mind Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil. The idea that great atrocities are committed by ordinary people on an individual level, and are not exclusively the work of a few powerful leaders, is reflected in Sorokin’s work. As the matriarch of the group, Mair, claims, “We aren’t a totalitarian sect. We’re simply free people” ("Мы не тоталитарная секта. Мы просто свободные люди"; Gambrell Ice 22; Sorokin Led 32). Rather, the members believe themselves to be free, superior beings. The characters who participate in the project to find the 23,000 hearts fall under the influence of an ideological mythology as suspect as any totalitarian scheme. The awakened ones claim to be morally superior to their “empty” counterparts, but engage in violent acts alongside them.

Mair and the other “brethren” perform roles of important people in society, infiltrating high posts in the MGB as a cover for an operation in which the brethren find lost brothers and sisters by arresting residents on false charges and hammering them in the basement of the Lubianka. The scenes described here are redolent of memoirs or recreations of the Stalinist campaigns against ordinary citizens, as in the 1992 film The Chekist which shows row after row of prisoners stripped, lined up, shot, and piled onto carts to be buried with the efficiency of an assembly line. The number of victims and the efficiency of the operation in Ice call to mind these images of the purges, though this portion of Ice is meant to take place after the height of the terror. The flow of human bodies becomes redundant and banal—mere quotation.

Mair soon discovers that she is unable to see reproductions of people or objects such as paintings, photographs, or films. She responds to two visual staples of Soviet

103 See Boym, “Banality”; and Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism.
life—Joseph Stalin and Vasilii Chapaev—without being able to identify them.\textsuperscript{104} She attends a screening of \textit{Chapaev}, but sees only blurry shapes on the screen (she can read the intertitles without difficulty). Mair’s superhuman vision acts as a filter for ideological and artistic emptiness. Her failure to see Chapaev doubles as an attack on political and artistic myths. The film, \textit{Chapaev}, an oft-parodied and oft-quoted Soviet film honoring military hero Vasilii Chapaev and his exploits, helped to create and support the Soviet heroic narrative. Mair's vision reveals another level of Sorokin's metafictional view. Part of Sorokin's project is to tear down the myth of the artist as a prophet and medium of truths while also destroying the idea of the writer as a uniquely gifted individual blessed by the muses, by imitating and quoting from a variety of genres and texts. The artist can only quote within the system of authoritarian discourse, thus \textit{Chapaev} is a double fiction, both artistic and ideological.

Mair describes her experience of the film as blurry and out of focus. She explains, “when the first scenes began and people appeared on the sheet they used as a screen, I couldn’t really see them. They were kind of gray spots, flickering appearances, sputters of light and shadow” ("...когда пошли первые кадры и на простыне появились люди, я не смогла их разглядеть. Это были какие-то серые пятна, мелькание, всполохи света и тени"; Gambrell, \textit{Ice} 210; Sorokin, \textit{Led} 239)]. The blurriness of the shapes on the screen reveals the emptiness behind the signs, represented as heroic archetypes, on the screen. The idea of ideological emptiness extends to literature as well. Sorokin's violence strips away illusions and exposes the emptiness behind his fiction, and, in turn, behind totalitarian mythology.

\textsuperscript{104} Incidentally, \textit{Chapaev} was a favorite film of Stalin’s.
In the hotel, Mair does not recognize Stalin, whose portrait oversees the operations at the front desk. Stalin's portrait was virtually compulsory décor for Soviet homes and public establishments, and, as Svetlana Boym suggests, his portrait appeared as a fatherly, watchful figure in representations of Soviet life (Boym, *Common Places* 7). Mair's inability to see the most famous political figures in the Soviet Union is an assault on political myths. There is, in her vision, no substance to Stalin. As in Komar and Melamid’s *Ideal Slogan*, there is no substance to the “ideal” leader, thus his image appears empty.

Mair sees through the falsehood of the ordinary people in the text who behave. When looking at people who have not been awakened, she sees through their skin. Her enhanced, superhuman vision makes the term “meat machines” literal. In place of people, she sees automata made of flesh and bone, uncanny “mechanical dolls” (*Ice* 212, 217). The grotesque everyday people, submissive to the control of authoritarian language, and set patterns of behavior, are empty constructs devoid of free will. Mair sees through the mechanistic patterns of human behavior once she is able to speak in a language beyond words, with her heart. However, her vision is false—she is a fictional character thinking about fiction in a fictional work, and her actions are subject to the author’s control. Mair is unable to recognize her own reflection in the mirror because she herself is fictional, an empty construct. Mair’s vision screens and dismisses the bodies that do not fit into her own discourse as machines, and reveals the emptiness behind kitsch and cliché images, including the falseness of her own mythologizing discourse.
Mair’s piercing vision functions on both a narrative and metatextual level. It provides reasoning for the violence to be treated as normal and even justifiable. The characters who are not awakened are mere automatons – uncanny, soulless simulacra. Indeed, these "meat machines" are puppets in Sorokin's play. The violence exercised upon them is meaningless, because they are only automata. The lack of individual detail reduces the “meat machines” to flesh, bone, and sinew. The reader, seeing through Mair’s eyes, is captive to her perspective, and must see the meat machines as automata as well. This strategy recalls the one used in Bret Easton Ellis’ controversial novel *American Psycho* (1991). As Laura Tanner has written, in the novel, the bodies of rape and murder victims are described in conventional terms, reducing human beings to commodities. Tanner writes:

> as [the psycho’s] acts of violence reduce human will and subjectivity to material that he is free to manipulate, the narrative representation of his victims authorizes the very manipulation that it would appear to criticize. The ability of the body to speak to the reader… is gradually decreased… by the continual rendering of body parts in purely conventional terms (Tanner, *Intimate Violence* 98).

The victims are empty quotations of marketplace desires. We can see another parallel in Yurchak’s reading of Agamben’s “bare life,” in which it is the separation between “spiritual” life and “bare life” that allows society to rationalize the torture and extermination of a population. The awakened brethren make the same rationalization by viewing their victims as soulless “empties.”

The third section of *Ice* presents the violent search for brethren hearts as a commercial venture, reinvented for the post-Soviet consumer marketplace. Recruits
receive a kit, marketed as the “ICE” Health Improvement System (оздоровительная система "ЛЕД") in the mail. It includes a video helmet, breast plate with striking mechanism, mini-freezer with 23 individually wrapped pieces of ice, and a computer. Users are instructed to find a quiet place to sit, bare their chest, place the striking arm loaded with a piece of ice against their breastbone, securing it with the included straps, then to put on the video helmet, and turn on the computer. The VR helmet functions as another metatextual device, revealing the simulated aspect of the user’s experience as similar to the reader’s experience of the book. The reader participates in simulation much as the selected participants do. The torture described in earlier chapters has now been automated, sanitized, and commercialized. Moreover, the consumer of the ICE system is invited to obtain more ice from authorized retailers, in effect continuing the torture. This may be a joke at the reader’s expense. Ice, after all, is the first novel in a trilogy. By purchasing additional volumes, the reader subjects him or herself to more of Sorokin’s repetitious violence.

Here, the text switches from memoir to product testimonial (mimicking book reviews with positive and negative reactions). A brochure with the comments of satisfied consumers demonstrates a variety of reactions with a common, transcendent, experience without mention of violence. The unwitting consumers scarcely recognize that they have been tricked into participating in a conspiracy. The third novel reveals that the ICE system comes packaged with blocks of ice made of ordinary water, not the magical “Tungus” ice.

The final part of the "novel" is itself a variation on a childhood tale in the manner of Tolstoy. A boy plays with a piece of ice that he finds, and it interacts with his action
figure. Sorokin's treatment of the ice as a toy through the boy's eyes again reveals
Sorokin's attitude toward the text. Writing is a game, and the violence written in the text
is as real as are the imagined exploits of the action figure. The boy is in the same position
as the author, manipulating the action figure and piece of ice much as Sorokin
manipulates his characters.

In *Ice* and “A Meeting of the Factory Committee,” repetition of the image is part
of a strategy to emphasize the constructed nature of the image through repetition. It is a
strategy linked to the conceptualist movement with which Sorokin is associated, and in
which he was particularly active early in his career. Mikhail Epstein offers a description
of conceptualism, which he calls "a system of linguistic gestures" (Epstein, “Catalog”
209). He writes,

> Official slogans and clichés proliferate to the point of absurdity, exposing a gulf
> between the sign and its signified content; a naked concept, the conceptual
> nucleus, is all that remains. This is a poetry of emptied ideologisms, akin to what
> in painting goes by the name of soc [sots] art. (Epstein, “Catalog” 209)

In conceptualism, the use of repetition and quotation is not restricted to play with official
language. Instead, these works of art may quote any text, and use any image.
Conceptualist art uses popular images, advertising, children’s literature, the avant-garde,
found objects, memories, film quotes, literary classics, and many other sources. The
conceptualist strategy is to remove an image from context, often focusing on the signifier
rather than the signified, treating word as object.

---

105 Epstein’s “A Catalog of the New Poeties,” in the book *Reentering the Sign* (1995) is an attempt to
categorize the various poetic techniques under the umbrella of postmodernism. It serves as an addendum to
his earlier (1983) dichotomy of conceptualism vs. metarealism (“Theses”). For more on conceptualism,
see introduction and notes.
Sorokin’s conceptualist colleague, artist and poet Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, composed a series of poems wherein the image of a drop of blood is repeated throughout alongside quotations and clichés. Violence is only suggested and the image becomes diffused through repetition. Prigov's cycle *Fifty Drops of Blood* (Пятьдесят капелек крови) (1993) is a powerful demonstration of the conceptualist strategy of focusing on the connection between word and object. For Prigov, words and images are bound up with one another, and much of his work combines the two.

Prigov worked in a variety of styles, quoting from existing texts in order to create his own work. Boris Groys writes of his poetry:

> It is a question not of living voices, which may polemicize among themselves, but of dead text-objects, which form a certain virtual library, or even, more precisely, a warehouse, in relation to which the poet himself performs in the capacity of librarian/inventory taker ("Ready-Made," Endquote, 41).

The use of “ready-made” text mimics the “block writing” of official discourse. In *Fifty Drops of Blood*, Prigov mixes images from a variety of sources. Their juxtaposition is on one level arbitrary, a still-life arrangement of “dead text-objects,” but their proximity is evocative.

In *Fifty Drops of Blood*, Prigov repeats the image of the drop of blood as an object, a suggestion of violence without description, threat, or affect. The image of blood only hints at violence. Without a body, the drop of blood is abstracted, and takes on a meditative aspect. A line from one poem serves as a summary: "A drop of blood on a drop of blood." (“Капелька крови на капельке крови”; Mattison 45; Prigov, “50” 44). Over the course of the cycle, the drops of blood accumulate through repetition. Through
duplication, the image of a drop of blood loses its potency, and becomes an empty concept which can be easily substituted with another image.

The image is repeated over and over and, in the end, one can find 50 drops of blood in the 44 poems, some repeated or reflected in a mirror. Indeed, the reader takes a cue from the title and is compelled to count the drops of blood in the poems, thus the image of the drops of blood takes on a more global significance in the poetry than each unique drop of blood in each individual poem. The poems are ludic in that they place the drop of blood in a new context each time. The strategy of placing variations on the phrase “drop of blood” in different contexts mimics Prigov’s process in his Pushkin’s 
Eugene Onegin (Евгений Онегин Пушкина) (1992), in which he substitutes words with variations on the word “безумный” (insane or crazy—a self-reflexive joke, referencing his own brief stay in a mental institution, to which he was sent for distributing poems in the street in 1986). The first poem places the drop of blood in a nursery room context, hinting at how innocuous the drop of blood may become through repetition.106

Frost patterns on the window
A drop of blood on a boy’s finger
dressed in an elegant
marine guard uniform
A bashful first grader at the chalkboard:
Mama washed the pane
with her tears (Mattison 9)107

Морозный узор на стекле
Капелька крови на пальце мальчика,
одетого в изящный
лейб-гвардейский морской мундир
Робкий первоклассник у черной доски:

106 For more on Prigov’s poetic strategies and methods, see Victoria Richter’s review of the Wiener Slawistischer Almanach publication of Prigov’s Sobranie Stikhov.
107 Translated by Christopher Mattison.
Мама мыла раму
Слезами (Prigov, Fifty 8)

In this poem, images of childhood have the potential to be trite or maudlin. Some are quotations from well-known texts. A possible attempt at shock or sentimentalism appears in the image of blood on a boy's finger. But here the drop of blood is only one among a series of objects on the same ontological level as a chalkboard, a window, and a marine guard uniform. The poem points to the drop of blood as both object and concept, an image in quotation marks. The drop of blood becomes a quotation of itself, repeated throughout the cycle, alongside other quoted images. The other images in the text evoke well-worn poetic concepts or quote directly. Frost patterns appear in the poetry of Pasternak and Pushkin; a first grader in a marine guard uniform evokes Tsarevich Aleksei and his hemophilia (especially when placed next to the image of blood); and the phrase "Mama washed the pane with her tears" is taken directly from a children's nursery rhyme. It also references a 1987 cycle by poet Lev Rubinstein, a friend and colleague of Prigov's.108

The singular surprising or shocking image, a drop of blood on a boy's finger, potentially disruptive in its suggestion of violence toward the innocent boy, is weakened by the next poem in which the image is extrapolated and repeated.

Pattering footsteps upon the roof
A drop of blood on a kitten’s paw
The fate of the poet in Russia
Miraculous transformations from terror
into triumph and back

108 Rubinstein, a conceptualist poet, is known for his poems on index cards in which words and phrases can be shuffled, within certain parameters, to create multiple variations on the poem. For an introduction to Rubinstein’s strategies see Janecek. For a brief comparison between Prigov and Rubinstein, see Henry.
The text draws a connection between the kitten and the young boy, between paw and finger. The link between the kitten and the boy demonstrates the conceptualist idea that any object or image may be substituted for another, noun for noun, verb for verb. The imagery in this poem has its own connotations, beginning with the footsteps on the roof, which recall a children's tongue twister "Тише, мыши! Кот на крыше." (Quiet, mice! The cat is on the roof.”) The footsteps evoke the terror of the mice, hushing at the sound of an approaching, mouse-hunting cat. In context, the image of the cat conjures up the image of Stalin, who was often referred to in Aesopian terms as a cat.

Lev Losev points out in *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* that the mustache became synonymous with Stalin, and was often used as a stand-in for Stalin in satirical work. Kornei Chukovskii’s fairy tale “The Cockroach,” (“Тараканище”) a story of a tyrannical, whiskered cockroach, also came to be associated with Stalin (Losev 199). The idea of mustache and whiskers has additional ties to Peter the Great, as depicted in *Lubok* prints, such as the “Kazan Cat” and “The Mice Bury the Cat” (Figure 3). In these Aesopian works, artists mock or subtly deride a powerful leader, destabilizing the power of the monarch or dictator. Prigov cites the historic conflict between the poet and the state in his reference to the “fate of the poet

---

109 The word “uzhas” is one of several key words often used in Prigov’s graphic works. Prigov uses the word “horror” rather than “terror” in his drawings.
in Russia.” Historically, poets from Pushkin to Prigov have been in conflict with the state which censors and controls the poet’s work. In the popular imagination, poets are expected to speak truth to power, to resist state control, and are fated to die tragically (like Pushkin) or to live in exile, or even to leave the country (like Pushkin, Brodsky and many others). Prigov writes about the traditional mantle of the nation’s poetic conscience in some of his works, but asks, jokingly, how he can be the nation’s conscience if he himself doesn’t have one. Prigov discusses the position of the poet as a prophet in an interview, stating that the position of the poet is not that of a prophet, but of a cultural mediator (Prigov, “Russkii Pisatel’ 230-1).

The cat appears again in a later poem which features a window pane as in the first poem.

A velvety sugar ration card
Materialized in the form of a large
gray cat, a metaphysical
drop of blood
Vague from tears streaming
vertically down the pane, a line
of native horizon (Mattison 57)

Бархатистый толончик на сахар
Материализовавшаяся в большого
серого кота метафизическая
капелька крови
Смутная от стекающей вертикально
по стеклу слезы линия
отечественного горизонта (Prigov, Fifty 56)

110 For a history of the conflict between poet and state, with an emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries, see Parthe, Opasnie.
111 “See also Boym, “Russian Soul”; Prigov also sometimes embodies the voices of other poets – see: Wesling, “The Speaking Subject”; Balashova, Hejnian, and Parshchikov, “New Poetry”; and Prigov, "Conceptualism and the West."
Here, the cat appears as a to a drop of blood, albeit metaphysical, and as a sugar ration card. The “cat” can materialize freely, because it, the ration card, and the drop of blood are all signs, without inherent value. These are images in quotation marks. Prigov reuses and remixes images throughout the cycle, placing them in a variety of contexts. Separate from meaning and context, Prigov’s images are capable of transformation, disappearing and reappearing, bringing with them the reader’s personal associations in colorful juxtapositions without a set interpretation. The windowpane from the first poem, cleaned and defrosted, serves as a surface for the image of melting frost, tears, and blood to merge.

Tears are a significant image for Prigov, appearing in both his visual art and poetry. Notably, Prigov frequently uses the image of an eye with a drop of blood trickling from the corner in place of a tear. This symbol is a kind of signature for Prigov and appears in the English edition of *Fifty Drops of Blood*. As Mary Nicholas writes:

> Prigov remembers his own tears after Stalin's death, which he describes as shared…. His attempts to understand their origin or continued meaning are not entirely successful, but he is clear about their price, which he describes as monstrous…. and about his own personal relationship to them. "I cried and I feel responsible for those tears… in the sense that they were really tears and in the sense that for someone, perhaps not directly but indirectly, they turned into blood" (Nicholas 28).

The image of tears, then, for Prigov is tied up with violence. In conjunction with the text of *Fifty Drops of Blood*, the eye gives the impression of omnivision, and mourning for violence, pain and death. Prigov poses as the conscience of the people.
The image here reinforces the idea of Stalinist terror, violence, loss, and fear. At the same time, Prigov's eye oversees mundane scenes – a bust of Mozart, or a series of installations featuring a washerwoman elevated to the heroic status of a metaphysical icon, the *putzfrau* bowing before the eye, as well as his “phantom installations” which included wine glasses, a park bench, and/or a teddy bear (Figure 7). These objects, like the images in his poetry, were placed in various arrangements, creating a cycle of installations with common images. The eye is but one symbol in Prigov's arsenal of imagery.

Figure 7. Prigov’s eye, with washerwoman (New Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow)
While his installations feature objects as symbols, Prigov’s text drawings focus on words as concepts, removing the named subject of the image in favor of the name itself. Drawn in heavy charcoal or pen on the pages of the newspaper Pravda, his drawings feature words, for instance (STALIN) or (PERESTROIKA) in the negative space left by his pen. Prigov’s use of newspaper, and at times cans or other found objects, is an indication of recycling (both of material and content) and of the limited access to materials granted to artists. Prigov’s Arte Povera—his use of humble materials, found objects and readymade materials such as tin cans and newsprint—was part of his artistic strategy.  

In his drawing “Stalin,” the image of the dictator is represented by the name alone. Letterpress, sans-serif consonants stand in relief against a circle of stylized leaves in dark graphite, charcoal, or ink laid over newspaper, in this case a headline which reads, “the fight for missiles” (Figure 8). The name Stalin appears with the vowels removed and suspended above in handwritten red (reading CT^aЛi^H), calling to mind both the Orthodox religious tradition or removing vowels from holy names in icon painting and illuminated manuscripts, but also blood and violence as the vowels “a” and “i” are written in red. The stylization of the leaves also suggests the tradition of the illuminated manuscript, which often featured stylized flora and ornate lettering. The removal of vowels makes “Stalin” a holy name in the Orthodox tradition, as if is unspeakable or unwritable.

112 See Condee and Padunov for a discussion of Soviet imagery recycled into kitsch and art objects during Glasnost, and makulatura, the practice of recycling paper products, particularly newsprint, in exchange for material products such as books.
In his word-icons, Prigov disrupts the conventions of portraiture. Here, he positions Stalin as the central subject, but there is no information other than the name that identifies him specifically. Portraiture typically presents the subject with characteristics and accessories that help to identify the person and their character. Peter I is pictured with ships, Pushkin near a lyre. The name Stalin is not tied to anything here—it could be substituted with any other name, but would, of course, provoke a different reaction. Most significantly, the subject has no body, here. The identification of the subject is based on reading the name itself, disposing of the image altogether, emphasizing the concept of Stalin, rather than the person.

Figure 8. Prigov’s Stalin (1998)
That the name is readable as both icon and symbol of violence, and places the viewer in the position of creating meaning around the word (the name), itself a construction (from the word for “steel”—Stalin’s given surname was Dzhugashvili), part of Stalin's own myth-creation. Epstein writes:

conceptual art problematizes not only the linguistic bias of philosophy but also the visual bias of the arts. The basis of conceptualism is a critique of pure representation, in the Kantian sense. For Kant, an intelligible essence does not belong to the thing-in-itself but is imposed on it through the a priori schemes of consciousness. Similarly, the visual element in art can be understood as only a projection of constructive imagination – an interpretation that regards the visual realm generally as an extension of a concept, while the concept itself can supplement or substitute for a picture or an image. (“Philosophical Implications” 66)

Prigov does not depict Stalin himself, allowing the reader to supply his or her own image of Stalin. Indeed, the viewer must reconstruct both the fragmented name, and Stalin’s image, drawing on associations and memory to create a composite portrait. This exercise forces a confrontation with Stalin’s myth, which deconstructs his image even as it recreates it. David Remnick reports a conversation in which Prigov described the conceptualist project thus: “Our position was to deconstruct any attempt to create a myth or any grand theory. We were out to deconstruct the figure of Lenin, but also the figure of Solzhenitsyn. They can all be responded to as pop figures” (Remnick 230). Stalin, too
is a pop object, constructed only of words and images. Prigov’s project reveals the fragmented and contradictory subject behind the myth.

Sorokin and Prigov created their artworks within the context of Soviet and post-Soviet life. In contrast, the art team Komar and Melamid began their work in the Soviet context and continued in the West. This change of scene may very well have contributed both to the distance they were able to maintain in their work on Soviet topics and to their engaging more international discourses. In the next section, we will explore their work in detail and draw contrasts with the more Russia-bound content of Sorokin and Prigov.

Death and Immortality

For Komar and Melamid, the lasting images surrounding political myths and grand narratives provide the central material for their work. Like Prigov, they approach the images of artists and politicians as popular illusions surrounded by myths worthy of deconstruction. Their cycle, Death Poems (Стихи о смерти) (1999) is made up of revised quotations on the meaning of politics and art. The “poems,” like many of the duo’s paintings, revive “dead” concepts and images that have lost their meaning through repetition by inserting unexpected elements. Komar and Melamid defamiliarize the quotations by substituting selected words with others, sometimes fundamentally transforming the intent of the original statement. The cover of the Russian edition of Death Poems illustrates the artists’ intent to deconstruct “dead” images. It shows two stylized skulls in profile, one superimposed upon the other on a red, square background.
At first glance, the painting reads as a parody of the ubiquitous popular images of Lenin and Stalin (or Marx and Engels), which showed the pair in profile. The title page features a photograph of the artists in profile, a move which simultaneously mythologizes and delegitimizes the artists themselves (Figure 10). The image of a pair of skulls in profile mimicking images of famous leaders challenges the practice of depicting political and artistic figures as heroic or immortal beings, and opens these images to substitution. Without ideological context, the faces are interchangeable. As one discourse replaces another, one image is substituted for the last. In Komar and Melamid’s revision of the formula, Komar and Melamid = Lenin and Stalin = Marx and Engels.

---

113 This image is a detail from Double Self Portrait, 1985-6 from the Anarchistic Synthesism series where it interacts with a stylized gray hammer on a black ground, and the figure of a human torso, in shadow, with an expressionist red hand covering the face.

114 See also their earlier Double Self Portrait (1973), (figure 25) a painting with a similar composition, and one of their signature images.

115 See Bonnell for a discussion of how the Bolsheviks replaced monarchist and religious imagery with communist imagery.
The “poems” that the book contains similarly undermine the stability of images, slogans and common places, particularly those that lay claim to power or immortality. In inserting unexpected and meaning-shifting words into the text, Komar and Melamid insert irony into singularly non-ironic slogans. The cycle is prefaced with a black square against a white background (the rest of the poems are printed in white, sans-serif letters against this template). This gesture refers to Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* – a landmark masterpiece of avant-garde art. The black surface provides a fitting background for the death poems because of the painting’s association with the concept of the void and death. While the painting is an iconoclastic statement posing a challenge to fixed notions about art, Malevich has become a figure of artistic authority with near-mythic
status.\textsuperscript{116} In this case, Mark Lipovetsky’s comment that postmodern critique remythologizes its target rings true, even in the case of “conceptualist artists” (Komar and Melamid) invoking the formalist experiments of the avant-garde (Malevich).\textsuperscript{117} Komar and Melamid’s repetition of the black square throughout the book is as much a tribute and footnote as a critique. In fact, the artists acknowledge their debt to avant-garde and socialist realist discourses, writing “We are children of socialist realism and the grandchildren of the avant-garde” (“Мы дети социализма и внуки авангарда”; 55). Here, the pair recognizes the significant impact that both avant-garde and socialist realist art have had on their own work and that of their contemporaries, with an ironic eye to a Soviet-era commonplace that declared, “we are the children of Lenin.” Such claims were empty, but Komar and Melamid’s variant holds a grain of truth—they reuse socialist realist material while relying on avant-garde strategies. By acknowledging both influences, Komar and Melamid resist dismissing one while placing the other on a pedestal, in contrast to official culture which dismissed the avant-garde, or more recent counter-discourses which discredit socialist realism. As Margarita Tupitsyn notes, their work instead established a dialogic relationship between codes of official art and dissident art (Tupitsyn, “Round Dance” 149-50). For Komar and Melamid, both socialist realism and the avant-garde present systems of signs without inherent value.

\textsuperscript{116} Malevich’s \textit{Black Square} was not merely iconoclastic, but represented Malevich’s own, alternative system—suprematism.

\textsuperscript{117} Larissa Rudova places Komar and Melamid in the category of sots-art rather than conceptualism. She attempts to parse the difference between sots and conceptualism in “Paradigms of Postmodernism,” arguing that the difference is that Sots remythologizes, because it features the “dual optic.” Her categorization is similar to Epstein’s distinction between metarealism and conceptualism, and Lipovetsky’s neobaroque and conceptualism.
Recognizing the authoritative potential of any system, Komar and Melamid describe their own project—the creation of a style they termed “eclecticism”—in ironic terms: “A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of eclecticism” (“Призрак бродит по Европе, призрак эклектизма”; 5). The phrase is a parody of the famous opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto*, and suggests that Komar and Melamid’s artistic system is on par with communism, a new system of organizing society, spreading throughout the world. However, eclecticism itself resists becoming authoritative in its embrace of contradiction, and pastiche. Eclecticism quotes from diverse sources, mingles high and low art, and exposes signs that once had meaning as kitsch. One of the poems comments, “Kitsch and parody of it are all that is left. All that is not parody is kitsch” (“Остались только "китч" и пародия на него. Все, что не пародия, – есть китч”; 13). Through repetition, quotations such as those Komar and Melamid parody, become kitsch, a kind of conceptual death. Constant exposure to clichés, slogans and propaganda rendered the messages of Soviet official language invisible. By altering familiar quotations and commonplaces, Komar and Melamid make them visible again in order to expose them.

Komar and Melamid also attack artistic clichés, and view art as complicit in supporting cultural and political myths. At the same time, art itself is illusion, and the idea that one kind of art is better or stronger than another, false (Komar and Melamid, “Diary” 35). One death poem reads, “the strength of art is in illusion. The illusion of God’s existence (the icon), the illusion of 3-dimensionality (realism), the illusion of light (impressionism), the illusion of strength (expressionism) etc., et al.” (“Сила искусства в иллюзии. Иллюзии божественного присутствия (икона), иллюзии трехмерности (реализм), иллюзии света (импрессионизм), иллюзии силы (экспрессионизм) и т.д.
Each historical moment in art history, then, supports its own illusions. In this statement, Komar and Melamid reject criticism that makes art into authoritative discourse by asserting its artistic “truth” on the basis of certain attributes (strength, use of light, 3-dimensionality, etc.). Moreover, they reject the use of art in the service of other discourses, such as political propaganda.

In their paintings of leaders and dictators, Komar and Melamid address the role of art in mythmaking, including slogans, official art, and the images of leaders, including Winston Churchill, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and George Washington. Komar and Melamid appropriate not only the image but the artistic style associated with a dictator (they deconstruct both political and artistic myths). As Boris Groys points out, their works parodying socialist realism are not entirely true to socialist realist style, but bring in elements of classical and genre painting to emphasize the constructed mythology surrounding the subject (Groys, “Other Gaze” 61). Their reuse of Soviet images is, in part, an act of counter-memory, a term used by Foucault to describe resistance to the narrative of history as truth through parody among other strategies.

For fellow artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, "the past must be infused with the present to create a critical history" (Merewether 188). He argues that monuments should be transformed into a reflection of historical change. He explains, “countermemory would unveil or expose the initial events of the construction of monumental history and its subsequent effects; it involves breaking the claim of permanence by giving voice to, and somehow

---

118 Marcel Duchamp occasionally appears as the specter of artistic authority in the Western context.
119 For more on counter-memory, see Foucault, Countermemory, particularly the chapter “Intellectuals and Power.”
120 Wodiczko is a Polish artist who projects images onto buildings and monuments in order to encourage public discussion in public space. For more on his “Public Projections,” see Wodiczko.
embodying, historical change. The problem with monumental history is that it confuses the past with the future” (Merewether189). Komar and Melamid embody this problem by placing Stalin in the context of the mythological past.

For example, a pair of paintings depicts Stalin amid mythological beings—specifically muses.\footnote{For more on classical mythology in postmodern Russian art, see Bernstock.} In *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (1982-3) (Figure 11), a muse traces Stalin’s profile onto the wall. In *Stalin and the Muses* (1981-2) (Figure 12), Clio, the muse of history, presents Stalin with a book—a nod to Stalin’s nominal authorship of the *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course (История Всесоюзной Коммунистической Партии (Большевиков)- Краткий Курс)*, a history book which was required reading for Soviet schoolchildren.\footnote{See Platt and Brandenberger for a discussion of Stalin’s revision of history.} Stalin’s control of the content of the *Short Course* allowed him to influence the culture’s understanding of history, and Stalin’s role in building communism. Public art solidified his image. In the painting, another muse holds a painter’s palette and brushes, and a third a hammer, representing painting and monumental sculpture.\footnote{The nine muses do not include personifications of painting or sculpture, so it is unclear which muses these are meant to be, perhaps part of Komar and Melamid’s joke—Stalin is capable of changing even ancient history. The muses, daughters of Mnemosone and Zeus, are an apt choice for a nostalgia painting, as Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory.} The hammer is forged in the shape of a blacksmith’s cross pein hammer, as shown on the Soviet flag. The four muses provide Stalin mastery over history and the creation of his own image, ensuring his immortality in the form of his image. Stalin stands in profile, in a pose familiar from propaganda posters. He is bathed in light and dressed in his white military overcoat and trousers, the wind picking up the hem of his coat to reveal a light blue lining, a shade associated with happiness in Russian culture. He stands in front of a desk laden with books and
blueprints marking his status as the “Architect of Communism,” in a restrained temple with high archways looking out to a landscape at dusk. *The Origin of Socialist Realism* shows Stalin seated, dressed in white, holding his pipe, while a lightly draped woman with flowing golden hair traces his profile on a wall. The title explicitly references Hannah Arendt’s 1951 study of the rise of Naziism and Stalinism, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*. Carter Ratcliff notes that the painting is a reinterpretation of the myth of the origin of portraiture. The myth says that the art of portraiture began when a young woman traced her lover’s profile on a wall. Stalin’s face in this painting is borrowed from the same official portrait that appears in *The New Apartment*, the hotel in *Ice*, and in many of Komar and Melamid’s paintings. The woman, nearly nude, draped in shimmering, flowing blue fabric is more muse than mortal (Ratcliff draws a link between her and Joseph Wright of Derby’s more earthly Corinthian Maid (1782-4)) (95). These paintings – rich with draperies and neoclassical ornamentation emphasize the construction of Stalin's image and present the man as creator and father figure rather than destroyer. His image in this context places him in a pantheon of gods as an icon. The violence and death associated with the man is only implied, supplied by the viewer.
Stalin’s image is, in a sense, immortal, preserved by memory and nostalgia. Nostalgia, as described by Fredric Jameson, does not seek a return to the past, but reconstructs its image through stylization (Jameson xvii). Svetlana Boym notes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, “Postmodernists rehabilitated nostalgia together with popular culture, but nostalgia remained restrained within quotation marks, reduced to an element of historic style; it was not a quest for temporality…” (Boym 30). For Komar and Melamid, paintings of Stalin are an act of memory, reinterpreted through stylized imitation of visual representation, including the dark tones and smooth brushstrokes of socialist realist art, and the careful use of neoclassical composition, incorporating
balanced proportions, use of indoor and outdoor space, and props to represent personal attributes.

Karen Ryan argues that Komar and Melamid’s paintings of Stalin not only deconstruct Stalin’s cult of personality, but also question the idea of Stalin as the devil or Antichrist. She explains that their work responds to the visual and literary representations in which Stalin is demonized and rejected as alien to Russian culture. She writes, “by focusing ironically on the grandiosity, the mystery, the surety of Stalinism, they compel the reader or viewer to confront the possibility that Stalin is indeed svoi, an organic product of Soviet culture” (Ryan 87). Stalin is a product of Russian culture, and, while citizens cheered the burial of his corpse and the delegitimitization of Stalinism, they are complicit in the creation of his image and legacy. Komar and Melamid’s work reveals the viewer’s collaboration in the process of creating an image. Ryan continues, “Komar and Melamid are concerned with commenting on Socialist Realism precisely as a system of generating myth… Even as the viewer is given entre into Stalin's demonic essence, however, he or she is confronted with the deconstruction of this myth. The ludicrous juxtaposition of the caricatured, heroic figure of Stalin with that of the classical maiden dispels the myth of the tyrant's demonic otherness” (Ryan 87). The painting distances the image of Stalin from the historical figure, locating him in an imagined and mythologized past. This transposition underscores the constructed nature of Stalin’s image, a process in which the viewer inevitably plays a role.

124 For a social history of the reevaluation of Stalinism in literature, see: Ziolkowski; Victor Erofeyev also reconsiders Stalinist and anti-Stalinist culture in a short article and novel about his father, a Soviet diplomat, both entitled “The Good Stalin.”
Komar and Melamid argue that the viewer always collaborates in establishing meaning. A vivid illustration of this idea took place in Brooklyn when a man slashed the pair’s portrait of Hitler, a complex layering of references to Nazi portraiture, popular Soviet images of the *führer’s* downfall, Gilbert Stuart’s Lansdowne portrait of George Washington, and, for the painters themselves a personal reckoning with their own Jewish identities. The attack recalls a similar assault against Repin’s painting of Ivan IV and his mortally wounded son, and underscores the point that each viewer views a work of art differently. Komar and Melamid did not repair the painting, but asked the attacker to come forward as a co-collaborator. They argue that every viewer collaborates in creating meaning, and that the meaning of art changes over time.

Their belief in the viewer’s collaboration in creating artistic meaning led to their project to save Soviet monuments from destruction after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1992, they issued an open letter to Russian president Boris Yeltsin, asking to preserve the monuments that were being destroyed in Russia. While Russian citizens tore down and destroyed the images of the past in order to forget it, Komar and Melamid argued that the images should be preserved in order that the past should be remembered. They solicited submissions for a collaborative project that would preserve the memory of the past while acknowledging the changed circumstances. The project achieves a balance between preserving and destroying the once immortal images of Soviet leaders. In particular, Komar and Melamid proposed installing a scrolling LED board on Lenin’s mausoleum, to be placed over the name Lenin, who, they argued, should be buried.

---

125 I will not go into detail regarding these images here. For more information on these paintings, see Ratcliff; and Komar and Melamid. Also, see Levitt and Novikov for information on Repin’s slashed painting of Ivan IV.
according to his own wish (Figure 13). The LED board would display an ever-changing rotation of words and phrases such as “Mama,” or “Et Cetera,” or newsheadlines—replacing the eternal (Lenin) with the immediate (news).

![Figure 13: Komar and Melamid’s revision of the mausoleum](image)

Among the national myths of the Soviet Union, Komar and Melamid interrogate the promise of immortality in their work. Lenin's embalmed body, in the mausoleum on Red Square, is the embodiment of this promise. The book, *Lenin's Embalmers*, a memoir
by Ilya Zbarsky, the second-generation biochemist responsible for preserving Lenin’s body, explains that the project to preserve Lenin’s body was overseen by the “Committee for the Immortalization of Lenin’s Memory.” Lenin’s body in the mausoleum takes the place of saintly relics in the cathedral. The unspoiled body resonates with the lives of the saints who often appeared alive after death. Some “unspoiled” remains survive in the catacombs at the Kiev caves monastery. Stalin’s body, once preserved and placed next to Lenin’s, was buried under the Kremlin wall in 1961, as if in the hope of destroying and forgetting his image.

Komar and Melamid have created several works based on the theme of Lenin’s tomb. Their painting Lenin Lived, Lives, Lenin Will Live! (1982) shows the figure of Lenin on a high plinth, draped in red cloth which cascades down the graduated pedestal beneath him (mimicking the architecture of the mausoleum) to a nude female figure of mourning, draped in sheer white cloth, below. Ratcliff notes that, she looks like a descendant of the sensual nymphs and dryads of such mannered classicizers as John Flaxman and Henry Fuseli—emotion reduced to an emblem… On the highest step of the platform stands a glass retort borrowed from Jacques-Louis David’s portrait of the chemist Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and his wife, in the collection of the Metropolitan. Lavoisier died beneath the guillotine during the Terror. Komar and Melamid’s revisionist history painting uses a piece

---

126 Some designs for the mausoleum even resembled Orthodox churches (Zbarsky and Hutchinson).
127 The title of this piece refers to a line from Maiakovskii’s elegy for Lenin, and is often a target of parodists. For instance, artist Sergei Bugaev (Afrika) made a poster in homage to a fellow artist – Anufriev Lived, Anufriev Lives, Anufriev will live (Afrika).
128 British painters working at the turn of the 19th century. Flaxman 1755-1826, Fuseli 1741-1825.
of his laboratory equipment of intellect’s fate in revolutionary times. (Ratcliff 130)

The glass still also emphasizes that Lenin’s body is embalmed. A metal pipe with a valve runs from Lenin’s platform and terminates in the still’s collected fluid, indicating that Lenin’s body is preserved by chemical means. Ratcliff treats Lenin as the product of a “horror-movie lab” and describes his hands as “greenish,” noting that “According to Komar, Russians believe that every so often a particularly well-trusted Soviet artist undertakes the nocturnal task of entering the tomb to paint out the green that seeps into Lenin’s skin” (Ratcliff 130). The urban legend of the artist retouching the corpse is indicative of a broad suspicion of official artists as collaborators in the creation and perpetuation of Soviet myths. Other rumors suggest that the body is incomplete, some of it having deteriorated beyond repair, and that the body is really a wax dummy (Zbarsky 85). Komar and Melamid made their own wax dummy of the body and exhibited in the Palladium disco in New York in 1984 (or 1986, per Ratcliff). The photodocumentation for this piece shows a shadow of Lenin standing against a red curtain in an oratorical pose familiar from statues and propaganda posters—an ideological resurrection and immortal presence. The juxtaposition of the dead dummy and lively speaker makes it appear that Lenin has risen from the dead, a parody of Christian resurrection imagery.

Themes of death, illusion, and immortality play a role in Sasha Sokolov's novel *Palisandria* (1985) as well. A complicated and deliberately opaque novel, with layers of references and linguistic play, the novel rejects linear time, emphasizing the eternal, a

---

129 A number of reviews and critical discussions on *Palisandria* focus on the mythologizing content of the novel, including: Johnson, “Review”; Ziolkowski, “Review”; Johnson, “Twilight Cosmos”, Johnson, Comment: "Sasha Sokolov's Palisandria"; Kopeikin; Matich, "History and Myth."
travesty of Soviet pretensions. The novel takes the form of a self-conscious mock memoir, with notes to a future biographer, from the “eternal pen” (вечное перо) of Palisandr Dal'berg, an orphan, hermaphrodite, and immortal being, heir apparent to Russia’s highest post. He is a member of the “Watchmen,” a secret elite class who are the real rulers behind Russia’s heads of state. They control time and the Kremlin clocks. Because the novel is too expansive to describe in detail, I will only focus on the aspects of the novel most closely related to the theme of death and immortality here.

To be sure, death and immortality are persistent themes throughout the novel. Palisandr is a graduate of the Funereal Division of the Kremlin Trade School for Noble Orphans, is addressed by his subjects as “Your Eternity” (Ваша Вечность). He treats immortality as the birthright of the true communist, as if, to quote Yurchak, everything was forever. Palisandr’s memoirs recall the “Timelessness,” (“Безвременье»), a period of political instability and unrest in the late 20th century, beginning with the suicide of Palisandr’s uncle Lavrentii Beria (Chief of the NKVD under Stalin) who has hanged himself on the hands of a Kremlin clock. Palisandr comes from a long line of suicides, but his lineage does not sway his certainty in his immortality. He explains, “as long as death belongs to somebody else, you think in fact it doesn’t exist, you put it in a category of pure abstraction, as something ersatz or absurd” (Heim 53). During this time of troubles, Palisandr is called upon by Yurii Andropov (General Secretary of the Soviet Union from 1982-84) to assassinate Leonid Brezhnev (General Secretary from 1964-1982). He follows through with the plan, tracking and

---

130 The term “vechnoe pero” has the double meaning, “eternal pen” and “fountain pen.”
131 There are also Armory and Timepiece divisions
132 C.f. Platonov in Chevengur “Why did he die, huh? He was a communist, wasn’t he?”
133 Palisandr writes and rules in the 21st century. He references the date 2044 as the time of his writing.
shooting Brezhnev as he rides along a parade route in an open car, only to discover that Andropov has set him up: the Brezhnev he shoots is a wax decoy.\footnote{134}

The fact that the ersatz Brezhnev appears in the place of the real head of state suggests, to some extent, that the entire government is a sham. According to Palisandr, the wax decoy was created by the same man who was responsible for embalming Lenin, a hint that Lenin’s tomb may hold a wax figure. The line from Lenin to Brezhnev constitutes an attack on the values of the system, suggesting that the entire revolution and its ideals are false. The Soviet Union, one might surmise, operates on the basis of nothing more than simulacra.

Palisandr is exiled following the assassination attempt. While abroad, he discovers that he is not the teenager he thought himself to be, but an old man. A fear of mirrors has allowed him to avoid the truth and to live outside of time. His is a case of multiple identity—he is at once a young man, a hermaphrodite, an old man, and a timeless being. He is reincarnated time and time again, and his identities are superimposed on one another. He experiences the past and remembers the future. His identity is fully fabricated and performed, and he composes his narrative as a way of constructing his identity. David Gillespie explains, “autobiographical narrative is written retrospectively as an attempt to understand the self through the reconstruction of experience. It is above all an account of self-development, realization and fulfillment. Recollection becomes a creative act” (Gillespie, “First Person” 621). Palisandria is a parody of memoir, and, in fact, reproduces its mechanics. Palisandr’s creative act of remembering also reproduces

\footnote{134 The shooting references Andrei Bely’s assassination novel, Petersburg. For further analysis of this connection, see Matich 421-22.}
Soviet mythology. Larissa Rudova suggests that *Palisandriia* uses the “dual optic” characteristic of sots-art, a point of view that recreates Soviet mythology while it deconstructs it. *Palisandriia* reconstructs Soviet ideology by creating an alternative narrative of Soviet history, ‘remythologizing’ the utopian myth of totalitarian Russia under Stalin, as well as 'demythologizing' it."\(^{135}\)

Larissa Rudova writes that *Palisandriia*, much like conceptualist and sots-art, uses quotation to undermine totalitarian language. She writes, “the sots-artistic orientation of Sokolov's novel is manifested in its use of "prefab" elements of Soviet culture-formulaic phrases, slogans, characters of popular fiction, quotations from mass literature, and other linguistic constructs. Endless textual inter-play creates a highly eclectic and stylized language that provides a critical reading of Soviet culture” (Rudova “Paradigms” 63). Rudova writes that, “in creating Palisandr, Sokolov focuses on the "estranged man" (Dobrenko 170),\(^{136}\) a man who has lost his authenticity and been turned into a "quotation" from one of the official Soviet myths. In one of the numerous addresses to his biographer, Palisandr in fact refers to himself as a "myth" that will appear in his future biography "as exalted and monumental as I may have been in life" (Heim 87). By portraying himself larger than life, Palisandr manipulates and recontextualizes the Soviet myth of the "positive hero" and the “new Soviet man.” (Rudova, “Paradigms 69). According to Rudova,

\[\text{Palisandr's belief that history and biography are not organic, but need to be constructed reflects the essence of Soviet ideology… [which] created an artificial}\]

\(^{135}\) See Rudova, “Paradigms” 68.
\(^{136}\) Dobrenko, "Preodolenieideologii"
reality lacking any authenticity. Lack of authenticity was felt in all spheres of public life, where official language was saturated with clichés and quotations from approved sources. Soviet reality represented by this official discourse was a kind of verbal "Potemkin village" obscuring the decaying social, economic, infrastructural, and other realities underneath. In creating Palisandr, Sokolov focuses on … a man who has lost his authenticity and been turned into a "quotation" from one of the official Soviet myths. (Rudova, “Paradigms” 66)

This idea of quotation is characteristic of postmodern texts. By placing Soviet ideology in quotation marks, like painters reusing an existing image of Lenin, Sokolov attains an ironic distance from it, while underscoring his and the reader's part in constructing Soviet myth.

Palisandr's belief in his immortality is tied to the claims of Soviet Science that human dominion of nature would soon bring physical immortality. He is the embodiment of the new Soviet man. Palisandr's belief in his immortality, and his place in the Soviet pantheon suggests that for Palisandr, Soviet scientific claims of immortality are taken as an aspiration already achieved. The immortal plane of the narrative is mixed with the trivial details of Kremlin life. This mixture of high and low is a typical postmodern strategy, placing all discourse on the same level. Olga Matich notes the disorienting effect that this gesture has in the novel. She writes,

Instead of tales of terror and perfidy, which we have come to expect from dissident literature, Sokolov depicts the imaginary domestic and sex lives of the Kremlin leaders. The evils of Soviet history are either trivialized or carnivalized,
which is meant to shock politically engaged and morally righteous Russian and Western readers” (Matich, “Myth” 426).

Matich notes that Sokolov does not rely on some of the linguistic games of his fellow postmodernists. While he does use pornographic language, he does not invert Soviet clichés or use extensive obscenities. She writes,

The language seems to be self-consciously pre-Soviet. Arcane and stylized in accordance with the novel's chivalric tone and medieval realia, it is reminiscent of Silver Age preciousness and refinement. Sokolov's aestheticism is the obvious explanation for such linguistic purism, although his mannered language also spoofs the pristine and saccharine style of old emigre literature. There may be a philosophical motive as well: if we assume that language defines reality, the absence of Sovietese and crude sexual expletives and their replacement by a courtly and exalted discourse alter the world that is depicted in the novel. As if by some magic, the commonly experienced Soviet past is ennobled. (Matich, “Myth” 417)

Sokolov also brings in elements of ancient mythology, lending to the timeless mythological space of the narrative. In Palisandr’s mythologizing retelling, an elderly female figure who he calls “Fortuna,” oversees Beriia’s suicide, scythe in hand. As D. Barton Johnson notes, Fortuna, the Roman goddess of fortune, is usually shown with a cornucopia, a symbol of fertility. Johnson notes that sex and death are connected images in Sokolov’s text, merged in the figure of Palisandr’s incestuous aunt, Majorette, whom he refers to as “that woman from Amsterdam” (in Russian, the more sonorous pun та дама из амстердама). In general, the ever-youthful Palisandr prefers older women as
sexual partners. The image of the bountiful Fortuna with a scythe is similar to Bakhtin’s description of “pregnant death”—a pregnant old woman, in that it presents the idea of death and rebirth. As Johnson points out, “death is commonplace in Sokolov’s novels, but it is never terminal” (Johnson, “Twilight” 645).

The body in Sokolov’s Palisandria is in constant transition between life and death, male and female, mortal and immortal, real and false. The image of Brezhnev's dummy hearkens back to Lenin's body in state. The preserved body lying in state is more than a reliquary, but confers upon the body an element of life, immortality, and hope for resurrection. The image of Lenin in his tomb is on the border between death and immortality: mixing the arts of mummification, reliquary, taxidermy, and waxworks, it awaits resurrection. At the end of the novel Palisandr returns to Russia in a sealed train, bearing the exhumed bodies of dead émigrés. His return from the kingdom of the dead, according to Matich, symbolizes the resurrection of Russia (“Myth” 424-5). The bodies include the remains of Bunin, Berdiaev, and Herzen, among others. Palisandr’s resurrection of Russia promises to restore the intellectual life of the country.

**Resurrection**

Lenin’s tomb, with his preserved body, is a symbol of Soviet ideas surrounding death and immortality, and, for postmodernists, the quintessence of ideological emptiness and decay (the now-faded body appears stuffed, dead, and false). Tatyana Tolstaya reports that the post-Soviet generation viewed it as “junk” (Gambrell, “Children” 130). Earlier, it doubled as a sign of resurrection or its potential. As empty as Maiakovskii’s

---

137 Tolstaya, “Pushkin’s Children,” Translated by Jamey Gambrell.
words have become through repetition and parody, the phrase "Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live" holds the promise of resurrection. His preserved body, an object for display and contemplation is similar in its function to taxidermied animals, who are preserved in lively postures as if returned to life. The practice of taxidermy frequently presents preserved animals in states of frozen action like *tableaux vivants* in reverse—dead creatures playing out action scenes. They are museum pieces for the purpose of edifying the public by demonstrating scientific knowledge, or trophies that provide an opportunity to observe nature closely in a controlled environment.

Oleg Kulik, an artist known for his performances as a dog explores the resurrection of both animals and humans through taxidermy. In his series of photos of monkeys, *Dead Monkeys, or Memento Mori* (Мертвые обезьяны, или Мементо мори) (1998), taxidermied monkeys, housed in the Zoological Museum, confront the viewer with glass eyes. The photographs are larger than life, each about 40 by 30 inches, in black and white. The close-up photographs of the monkeys’ faces show the techniques and mechanisms in taxidermy in minute detail. One monkey has a bit of sawdust showing in the corner of its mouth, while another has stitches across its cheek. These mechanisms serve to maintain the appearance of life, even as they reveal the evidence of the animal’s death. Kulik uses the image of the monkey, once a particularly prized acquisition for scientific collections or cabinets of curiosities such as Peter the Great's
Kunstkamera to disrupt the border between animal and human as well as the border between life and death.\textsuperscript{138}

Kulik's monkeys raise the question of the divide between human and animal, as does much of his work. The monkeys, while dead, meet the viewer's gaze and appear sentient. That the museum display case might also be the fate of *Homo sapiens* is the subject of Kulik's series of wax figures in *Museum* (2002-3) (*Музей*) (sometimes referred to as the *Museum of Culture* or *Installation Museum*) series including *Actress*, *Tennis Player*, and *Cosmonaut* (Актриса, Теннисистка, Космонавт).\textsuperscript{139} The three sculptures represent lifelike humans in active poses. They appear to be ordinary wax figures meant to impersonate well-known or famous people. However, these figures are distorted by evidence of the taxidermist's craft. The most subtle is a cosmonaut wearing a helmet emblazoned with the letters USSR suspended above the gallery. The Soviet hero smiles down upon the gallery visitors from the ceiling (many images show him under the dome of the Palazzo Zenobio in Venice, painted to represent the angel-filled heavens *sotto in su* (from below)). This juxtaposition reinforces the idea of the famous cosmonaut as an otherworldly being. His smile is distorted by stitches, revealing the hand of the taxidermist (Bredikhina, *Nihil* 277). Kulik, ever the advocate for dogs, since he performs in public as one himself, seems to reference Soviet space missions in which dogs travelled to space—for instance, the Sputnik 2 mission in which Laika perished; and Sputnik 5, from which Belka and Strelka successfully returned after a day in space. The

\textsuperscript{138} Taxidermy is also part of Soviet popular imagery. The Zoological Museum is the setting for the perestroika-era comedy *Garage* with an ape wearing a taxi driver's cap as the film's most recognized image. The film revolves around a dispute during a meeting of the taxi drivers' union.

\textsuperscript{139} According to Kulik's collaborator Mila Bredikhina, a figure of the singer Madonna also exists as part of the series.
dogs' taxidermied remains now appear in the space museum at VDNKh in Moscow. Kulik’s work seems to suggest equal treatment for humans. The embalming of famous figures creates a mythological space for them, mimicking Lenin’s entombment.

Another of Kulik's wax models, the *Actress*, resembles the singer Björk. She appears at the conclusion of the Lars Van Trier movie *Dancer in the Dark*, a musical in which her character is sentenced to death by hanging. Here, Björk's wax double hangs from a noose in an overwhelming pink crepe dress in place of the simple blue dress she wears in the film. Her arms are constricted and feet supported by a collapse board (a device to keep unstable prisoners upright to facilitate hanging). The trapdoor above her head is merely part of her display case. She has an uncanny smile on her face, mirrored by the line of the rope against her neck and jaw. She is transformed into a creature hovering between two states, both alive and dead. The film scene, meant to evoke an emotional response to the injustice perpetrated against Selma, Björk's arguably innocent character, and to spur a political outcry against the use of the death penalty, is out of context in wax. Set apart from reality in quotation marks, Björk's simulacrum is a sideshow and horror show in one, brought back to life, dead and smiling.

Kulik's *Tennis Player* is less gruesome at first glance. Anna Kournikova is frozen in a midair leap, her mouth open wide, and arms stretched in preparation to return a serve. Her dynamic pose simulates motion. She is airborne; beads of sweat are visible on her forehead. Her braid floats above her head as if caught in the air. She looks very much alive and in action. Closer inspection reveals twisted scars on her arms, on the backs of her legs, and on her partly exposed abdomen. These stitches, like the stitches on the monkeys' faces, reveal that she is not really alive, but they also suggest that she once
was. It is as if the wax model in the case is actually the preserved remains of a human being. That Kulik chooses living, famous figures as his models adds a dimension of tabloid celebrity frenzy to his work. They are, in a sense, like the models in popular wax museums—copies created to give viewers a sense of getting close to the real thing or the thrill of being witness to a tragic or dangerous event. Kulik indicates that these icons, the actress, tennis player, and cosmonaut, are objects of the collective imagination, doxified in the sense that there are fixed cultural ideas about who they are. The technique of creating hyperrealistic sculptures of people is perhaps most closely tied to US artist Duane Hanson whose casts of ordinary people include museum guards, tourists, shoppers, workers, and janitors, installed inconspicuously in museum settings in such a way that they might escape the viewer’s notice. There are also more conspicuous figures, including a fallen motorcyclist, a group of homeless men, a pair acting out a pieta, and a woman suspended in mid-jump. Hanson’s figures stand in contrast to Kulik’s figures—the figures are not removed from the gallery space by glass partitions as Kulik’s are, but stand in the same space as the spectator. Kulik’s figures are removed from the “real world” by glass, reinforcing the body-as-spectacle of the famous figure. Like Lenin, kept under glass, they represent an unrealized otherworldly vision of death defeated.

---

140 It is worth noting that preserved human bodies have been displayed in action poses before, for instance, in cabinets of curiosities, in scientific collections and in the popular, internationally travelling exhibit BodyWorlds which first opened in 1995. The exhibit shows the muscles, organs, and bones of donated bodies in action poses, preserved using a special process.

141 Wax figures at London’s famous Madame Tussaud’s include members of British royalty, sports figures, politicians, movie stars, and famous figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi. A wax museum in St. Petersburg near the Gostinii Dvor metro station features wax versions of Soviet leaders posed and dressed as if apostles in da Vinci’s The Last Supper (with a grinning Lenin in the place of Jesus), Mark David Chapman, and didactic figures warning the visitor against the perils of drug abuse.

142 For more on Hanson’s hyperrealistic sculptures, see Hanson.
The visible seams on the figures’ bodies disrupt the collective image. Mila Bredikhina writes, “One feels like overlooking them but it is obvious that the project itself was planned for the sake of these seams. These seams prevent the discussion of hyperrealism in sculpture in the traditional sense of the word, they stress that Kulik’s Museum does not refer to real people or mass media personages, it refers to the stuffed bodies of these personages, to mass media phantoms” (Ими очень хочется пренебречь, однако очевидно, что ради этих швов и затевался проект. Швы, не позволяющие говорить о гиперреалистичности скульптуры в традиционном смысле слова, подчеркивают — "Музей" Кулика отсылает не к реальным людям, не к массмедиальными персонажам, но к... чучелам этих персонажей к массмедиальным фантомам” Bredikhina Nihil, 277; 274)]. By bringing the figures to life in wax, Kulik forces the viewer to reconsider their notions about the figures and about taxidermy as well as the relationship between human and animal.

To further emphasize the connection between human and animal, Kulik had the Museum pieces installed in the zoological museum among the skeletons and taxidermied remains of animals. Indeed, wax figures have long been associated with death, as funereal portraiture.143 Later, wax was used for anatomical models, and frequently displayed in cabinets of curiosities, or anatomical theaters. Only in the 18th and 19th centuries did wax portraits come to be associated with famous figures and wax museums an entertainment. Thus, Kulik’s taxidermied figures find a fitting home in the anatomical museum.

143 For a history of waxworks, from funereal portraiture to mass entertainment, see Panzanelli, Schlosser and Schlosser; also Pilbeam for a history of waxworks, with a focus on Madame Tussaud’s wax museum in London.
In two photographic series, *Windows* (2001) and *The Museum of Nature, or The New Paradise* (2000-1) (Окна; Музей природы, или Новый рай) Kulik reflects upon the zoological museum and its visitors by showing the viewers their reflections in the glass of the museum display case. In *Windows*, taxidermied animals including a penguin, a giraffe, and an elephant with a large hole in one ear, are put on display behind enormous windows. The animals are pictured in rich natural environments without evidence of human habitation or intervention (Kulik photoshopped all traces of fences or telephone poles out of the pictures). Kulik recreates a pristine space in the museum. Nature without evidence of human interference must be constructed, since it no longer exists in reality. In the foreground, the massive windows of the title show the reflections of human spectators who demonstrate profound disinterest or who chase after the (immobile) creatures with cameras.

*New Paradise* features Kulik and a female counterpart, both nude, in overtly sexual poses, superimposed over a taxidermied pair of frolicking zebras, a couple of mandrills, and in the midst of a zoological multitude—a giraffe, zebra, water buffalo, monkeys and an assortment of horned animals and tree-bound birds against a painted background, all in the environment of a museum case. The woman holds a photographer’s bulb in her hand in each image, and she looks directly into the camera’s lens—a self-conscious Adam and Eve. The photographs address the human desire for the simulacrum of nature in preference to the real thing. In her article “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936, Donna Haraway’s discussion of the natural history diorama in her essay “Teddy Bear Patriarchy” is instructive.
Haraway compares the camera to a gun. Both were tools of the naturalist seeking to collect the perfect image of nature. The humans in the photograph strive to take the perfect photograph of an animal, or to mount the perfect specimen, in preference to leaving nature alone and protecting natural resources: “The main problem today,’ says Kulik, ‘is the clash between culture and nature. Man defeated nature, and now it survives only in the zoological museum as trophies. This is the consequence of civilization. And I do not want to encounter nature only in a zoological museum. My task is to reveal the animal element in a human being, at least partially.” (“Основная проблема сегодня, -- говорит Кулик, -- конфликт между культурой и природой. Человек завоевал природу, она осталась лишь в зоологическом музее -- в виде трофеев. Это последствия цивилизации. А я не хочу встречаться с природой только в зоологическом музее. Моя задача -- приоткрыть в человеке животное начало” Kulik Nihil 264). The glass in the display case encloses both museum visitor and artifact. Thus, the viewer is a prisoner to his idealized view of nature, exemplified by the museum. The spectators’ attempt to reinsert themselves into the idealized space of nature as imagined in museum tableaux through performance and voyeurism cannot succeed because that attempt is based on a false and empty discourse, embodied by the stuffed and lifeless creatures behind the glass.

According to Bredikhina, humans look to animals for the secret to immortality, because “the animal is immortal as it knows nothing of death, of tabooed zones of meaning, of conflicts between the Real and the Symbolic” (животное бессмертно, потому что ничего не знает о смерти, о табуированных зонах смысла и конфликте Реального с Символическим” Bredikhina Nihil 245). They inhabit a space between the
real and the symbolic or imaginary. The museum serves to stabilize the animal, to fix it as an object, and to prevent it from crossing the boundary between the real and the imaginary. Olga Florenskaya writes in her essay, “Taxidermy, Or Why Man Needs Artificial Animals,” “Man feels a maniacal desire to perfect the world made by God, shoehorning everyone and everything into his own egocentric system of values. He is constantly irritated by the quiet but determined independence with which animals time and again evade the inquiring eye, slipping away into their own ‘parallel’ animal world” (Человек испытывает маниакальную страсть к совершенствованию Божьего мира, подгоняя всех и вся под собственную егоЦентрическую систему ценностей. Тихая независимость животных, с которой они то и дело ускользают от нескромного глаза в свой "параллельный" животный мир...; Nicolson 26; Florenskaya 20)] Taxidermy, according to Florenskaya, is a way of controlling and cataloguing the natural world (much like the bestiary, which I will discuss in the next chapter). Likewise, taxidermy “preserves” cultural discourse surrounding the animal. The animal, once contained within the parameters of a set cultural narrative, becomes art object.\footnote{\textsuperscript{145} Taxidermy also appears in surrealist and expressionist art, for instance, Méret Oppenheim’s fur-covered teacup and saucer (\textit{Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)} (1936)), and Robert Rauschenberg’s \textit{Monogram} (1959).}

Florenskaya also sees taxidermy as a kind of resurrection through commodification. She writes, “As he manipulates the helpless empty skins of animals this way and that, man takes upon himself the role of Creator. Under his touch the dead animal is resurrected, but with a different, reduced status – as a THING. The result of these manipulations is the appearance of a user-friendly, absolutely obedient, and

\footnote{\textsuperscript{145} Taxidermy also appears in surrealist and expressionist art, for instance, Méret Oppenheim’s fur-covered teacup and saucer (\textit{Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)} (1936)), and Robert Rauschenberg’s \textit{Monogram} (1959).}
immortal artificial animal – a kind of edited version of the original creature (Так и сяк манипулируя беспомощной опустевшей шкурой, человек выступает в роли Творца, якобы воскрешая но уже на правах ВЕЩИ. В результате этих манипуляций появляется удобное в обращении, абсолютно послушное, бессмертное "искусственное животное" -- отредактированная версия бес/покойного оригинала; Nicolson 26; Florenskaya 20). In a large sample of postmodern art exploring taxidermy, the fabrication of the animal as art-object not only “edits” the animal, but radically alters it. Many critics note that for some artists postmodernism creates distance between humans and animals by presenting shocking images of disfigured, incomplete, decontextualized, or hybridized animals, and usually incorporate the body parts of real animals, or images of them (Kalof 161-2; Romanov).¹⁴⁶ At least one artist mixes clockworks, some with moving parts, with taxidermy, transforming animals into preserved postmortem cyborgs, but wax museums, not to mention automata have long made use of gears and motors to simulate movement (Sorrel; Pilbeam 11). However, Florenskaya's sculptures, unlike their alienating Western counterparts, do something to close the distance between human and animal. Instead of using real animals, Florenskaya creates stylized versions of them with found, man-made materials.

Olga Florenskaya's *Taxidermy* (1997-99) series interrogates the concept of taxidermy as resurrection by creating sculptural representations of animals in wood and metal. These animals are stylized, without animal parts such as fur, skin, and teeth, but with lively moving (motorized) parts. Because of their use of humble, often found

¹⁴⁶ For a survey of animal imagery and taxidermy in postmodern art, with a focus on Western art, see Baker; and Powell, “Chimera”.

112
materials, the Florensksky’s sculptures are sometimes classified as “Arte Povera,” a term which emphasizes the origin of the materials, and their experimental approach. However, Florenskaya’s choice of materials for this project specifically references the armatures historically used in the production of taxidermy. Wood and metal were used as supports in place of the animal’s bones to give shape to the final product, and were often designed to impart lifelike tension to the stuffed body, as if the animal was caught in the middle of action, leaping, growling, lunging, or flying. This type of taxidermy does not seek to simply preserve the animal as it was at the time of its death, but to breathe new life into its skin, and to present the image on an ideal, active animal.

Florenskaya’s work decodes taxidermy, by dispensing with the “real” animal altogether, leaving only the structure beneath the skin, and creating the illusion of life by adding motorized, moving parts. Indeed, as Tikhon Romanov writes, Florenskaya’s models violate two rules of taxidermy in that they move, and do not use the skin of the animal (Romanov). The infraction is all the more severe, as the term “taxidermy” comes from the Greek words for “arrangement” and “skin” (“taxidermy”). Instead of skin, metal strapping indicates the curves of the animal’s body, secured onto a wooden form with screws. Within the exhibition, a toothless wooden crocodile fitted with a motor opens and closes its jaw, a snake sticks out its forked tongue periodically, and a broad-winged condor swings a fish between its forklike talons. The set features animals that typically

---

147 The Florenskys were part of an exhibition in Perm called “Russian Povera” curated by Marat Guelman in 2008. For the Florenskys, the use of found materials is also linked to the concept of experimentation and invention, as they explore in their 1994 collaboration, “Russian Design,” a set of models of imaginary inventions, some with moving parts.

148 Florenskaya points out that these armatures sometimes distorted the animal’s likeness. The preparer may not have seen the actual animal, but only received the skin. Contemporary taxidermy methods involve stretching the skin over an armature with a clay overlay sculpted to show musculature, or over a papier-maché model.
appeared in cabinets of curiosities as exotic rarities meant for spectatorship.

Florenskaya’s creatures bridge the distance between human and animal, and between scientific specimen and art object by inviting the viewer to interact with them. Romanov writes that, “The viewer is offered two positions: that of a researcher-enthusiast who has entered the *Kunstkamera* for the first time, and that of an experienced consumer of contemporary artistic practices that can evaluate the game with cultural archetypes and sharp-witted pseudoscientific stylization” (“Зрителю предлагается две позиции: исследователя-энтузиаста, впервые попавшего в Кунсткамеру, и опытного потребителя актуальных художественных практик, способного оценить игру с культурными архетипами и остроумную псевдонаучную стилизацию”; Romanov).

Another visitor reported a desire to view the sculptures in Aesopian terms (Tolstova). Indeed, the creatures do not simply reinterpret the practice, but also draw upon cultural associations with specific animals, art, and Russian history.

The animals do not simply bring together multiple ways of viewing animals in a museum setting, but evoke and disrupt cultural associations with each animal. For instance, A Cachalot (sperm whale) squirts water from its blow-hole. Its belly contains an exhibit of sperm whale photography for one person at a time (accessed head first from below). Fully clad in metal, with the words "Maximum capacity 1 person” painted in stencil on its side, the whale is reminiscent of a submarine. Romanov writes that viewing the inside of the whale was reminiscent of the biblical story of Jonah, which tells the story of a man who lived in the belly of a large fish for three days before being expelled safely onto land. The story is a resurrection tale of sorts prefiguring the significance of Jesus’ resurrection in Christian thought. Florenskaya transforms the whale into a
submarine and gallery, disrupting the association with Jonah, but allowing it to coexist with the idea of the submarine. The submarine also hints at Florenskaya’s membership in the Mit’ki group. The group, known for their striped sailor shirts, worked in the dark, underground recesses of boiler rooms. The rounded hull of the whale resembles the cylindrical boilers the Mit’ki maintained, fitted with a single valve.

Some of the animals in the exhibit have more obvious cultural connotations. One is Pavlov's dog (Figure 14) (a Kulik target as well, as I will discuss in chapter 2). The dog is strapped to a supportive structure, as Pavlov's dogs sometimes were for experiments. When the viewer presses a button, activating a light and a ringing bell, the dog squirts water from a valve located where its stomach should be. The model mimics Pavlov's experiments with dogs who were surgically implanted with secretion collection tubes so that scientists could measure their responses to stimuli. At least one of these dogs was preserved, taxidermied, and put on display at the Pavlov museum, tied to a support with a collection vessel installed in its cheek. Here, the viewer reproduces the experiment by activating the light and bell, which appear to trigger the dog’s salivary response. The mechanics of Florenskaya’s model reveal the mechanistic view behind Pavlov’s experiments. After all, this dog is only an automaton, but behaves just as Pavlov’s real dogs did.
Laika, one of the Soviet Union’s canine heroes, is the second dog in the exhibit. She is the only animal in the exhibit to be covered in “skin,” a synthetic faux fur which marks her as a toy. She looks out eagerly from the portal of the improvised spacecraft, constructed from a metal barrel on wheels with a window cut out and an ornate metal pipe on top to represent a nose cone. Laika does not move, though a “working chronometer,” affixed to the ship, measures time, marking the stuffed Laika’s immortality in hours. It is this piece that most clearly raises and challenges cultural myths. Laika, who died in flight, was later memorialized, presented alongside humans as a hero of the Soviet Union. Laika’s status as the plaything of imagination, a mere object for mythmaking is emphasized by her resemblance to a children’s toy. The piece
challenges official narratives surrounding Laika’s flight, and the spaceship made of found materials may reference the improvised equipment on Laika’s flight. The readiness of scientists to sacrifice animals on behalf of science is part of what Florenskaya attacks as the human desire to control animals and discourse.

Florenskaya explains her thesis as a challenge to the pretense of verisimilitude. She writes, “what if man, in order to satisfy his [despotic] creative ambitions, had no need at all to kill animals? Why shouldn’t an artificial animal be completely artificial – and to hang with errors of fact and anatomy!” (а, может, ему, человеку, ради удовлетворения своих деспотических творческих амбиций вовсе не обязательно убивать... Пусть уж "искусственное животное" будет до конца искусственным -- бог с ними, с погрешностями против истины и анатомии!; Nicolson 31; Florenskaya 25). In contrast to Kulik’s hyperrealistic wax models, Florenskaya's renditions do not offer a sense of verisimilitude. They do, however, give a sense of action and the possibility of life. These wooden, motorized creations are to some extent more lively than taxidermied and posed animals. While not intended to look like the "real thing," not taken from life (hunted, killed, and stuffed), they are brought to life through the action of electricity and motors. Florenskaya’s animals add the appearance of life through motion, interacting with the viewer, in this way resurrected.

The resurrection of dead animals is also, on the surface, the subject of Victor Erofeyev’s short story, “The Parakeet” (“Попугайчик”) (1981). In it, a young boy, Ermolai, attempts to bring a parakeet back to life by exhuming its worm-eaten body and throwing it from the roof of his house, expecting it to rise from the dead like the mythical Phoenix. The boy is arrested on charges of intrigue, and tortured until he confesses to a
variety of crimes and implicates others in his plot, including his neighbor and his father. The boy is then executed by being forced to jump off a bell tower in imitation of the parakeet.

The story unfolds in the form of a letter from the executioner, to the boy’s father detailing the boy’s torture and execution in excruciating detail. The executioner explains that Ermolai’s attempt to resurrect the bird was considered dangerous by the authorities precisely because “a bird is an enigmatic creature, not subject to our whims, and it therefore follows that it is not to be trifled with” (“птица есть существо загадочное, неподвластное нашим прихотям, а, стало быть, шутки с ней плохи”; Reynolds 78; “Popugaichik” 103). The parakeet is not merely a creature beyond human control, best kept in a cage, according to the executioner, but a symbol with an unknown meaning. Mark Lipovetsky writes that the torturer is protecting the “Norm” from the threat of non-normative symbols (Dialogue with Chaos 165). The executioner interprets the bird and its attempted resurrection as one such symbol, violating the rules of language and behavior restricted by official discourse. Erofeyev lingers on the torturer’s view of everything as a symbol as an absurd turn of meaning in which the symbolic (the sign) takes absolute precedence over reality (the signified).

A suspicion of foreign things also pervades the story. Worse, even, than its symbolic nature, is the bird’s foreign origin. The parakeet, an uncontrollable,

---

149 For more on violence in “The Parakeet,” see Roll, “Re-finishing.”
150 Translated by Andrew Reynolds.
151 For a discussion of “discourse” and how it controls and regulates the body, see Foucault.
152 Kathleen Parthe interprets text as territory in the chapter “Russkie i ‘drugie’: tekst kak territoriia” in Opasnye teksty. Here, she describes the cultural debate surrounding “Russianness” that raged during the 1980s and 90s, and the xenophobic language that arose during this debate, which Erofeyev parodies here.
unknowable, foreign symbol, constitutes a threat to the state. Reading the torturer as state-appointed reader of symbols, the story functions as allegory. The torturer doubles as state censor, tasked with protecting official discourse from the threat of an oppositional language, whether domestic (the boy) or foreign (the bird), that might pose a challenge to the state’s authority. Indeed, he describes the bird’s potential resurrection precisely as a threat to the state’s “image,” wondering how the authorities would have looked in the eyes of the people if the parakeet’s flight had been successful. The torturer asks,

what if that foreign crap had flown? According to the statement made by your mad son, Ermolai Spiridonovich, it did in fact flap its nasty wings a few times, that is, made some sort of attempt at resurrection! So what if suddenly, against our expectations, it had gone and completely resurrected itself? What words could we have found to explain such an awkward and unusual situation to our well-intentioned and trusting fellow countrymen? I shudder to think how it all might have ended. HOW WOULD WE HAVE LOOKED THEN? (Reynolds 77)

кабы заморская дрянь взлетала? По уверению вашего безумного сына, Ермолая Спирidonовича, она и так пару раз взмахнула свои погаными крыльями, то есть проявила некоторую попытку к воскрешению! Ну а вдруг, паче нашего с вами чаяния, взяла бы и вовсе воскресла? В каких бы терминах мы объяснили сие нарочитое обстоятельство нашим доверчивым в своих лучших побуждениях соотечественникам? -- Теряюсь в роковых догадках... ХОРОШИ БЫ МЫ БЫЛИ! (“Popugaichik” 104).

See also Roll’s discussion of xenophobia in “The Parakeet” and in “How We Slew the Frenchman” in “Re-Surfacing”.

119
The same fear that the bird will fly applies to the boy, who is described in avian terms. He is described as frail and light, with small bones, and he flaps his pale hand when he speaks. When the executioner sends the boy off the parapet, he writes, "Stretching his arms out in the form of the cross, he stepped out and swallow-dived into the emptiness. For a second I was tormented by doubt: what if he soars like a turquoise parakeet, to the demon’s great delight?... Thank God! Smashed to bits!” ("Он шагнул в пустоту, раскластывая крестом руки. На одну минутку взяла меня было мученье: уж не воспарит ли он, как бирюзовый попугайчик на радость бесам?... Слава Богу! Разбился!”; Reynolds 89; "Попугайчик" 119). The boy, much like the bird, represents a potential threat to the state. In the allegorical scheme, he may represent the threat of the nascent, homegrown language of nonconformist culture of which Erofeyev was a part.

Once the torturers get the boy to submit to the restrictions of official discourse, agreeing to say anything that his torturers want him to, they execute him by forcing him to jump from a high tower. After relaying the news of the boy’s death to him, the executioner reassures the father in a gentle tone, inviting him for a friendly visit. The executioner's patronizing and solicitous tone contrasts with the acts he describes, but also contains an element of threat. The boy’s forced accusation of his father can be used against him at any time in the future. That the son’s name, Ermolai Spriridonovich, is an inversion of his father’s name, Spiridon Ermolaevich, is none too subtle a hint on the author’s part that their roles might easily be reversed.

The failed resurrection of both bird and boy represent the suppression of potential threats to official power, and the cultural myth of Russia’s inherently violent nature. Serafima Roll argues that, Erofeyev’s “intention is to show that the causes of the
‘inherent nature’ of violence lie in the desire of the Russian secular and religious authorities to guard the existent world order and to protect their authoritarian position. Hence… violence occurs in the story due to the authorities fear that the individual’s thinking and actions can go beyond the permitted order of things” (Roll, “Resurfacing” 36-7). Erofeyev’s vivid depictions of torture (the rack, rape (reported to the boy as impalement), submersion in manure, and castration) and forced confessions in this fictional scenario are undoubtedly indictments of Soviet KGB methods. However, as Lipovetsky points out, the torturer is a composite of discourses pertaining to torture and to power. Translator Andrew Reynolds calls the story, “a distillation of all Russia’s tyrants and all the subjects who have acquiesced in and assisted these tyrannies” (Reynolds xv). For Lipovetsky, the story’s distinctive element is the language used in the narration, a stylized skaz which combines folk idiom with the lexicon of torture and bureaucratic clichés. Erofeyev, (like Sorokin, Tolstaya, and Sokolov) uses an antiquated-sounding language to produce a sense of timelessness reflective of the history of violence he references.

The violence, torture, and fear in Erofeyev’s story refers to a real history of torture, but the authority of discourse behind it is empty. According to Lipovetsky, the voice of the narrator, when expressed through “multicultural and multihistorical skaz,” does not actually belong to the narrator as a character anymore; it is only the projection of multiple and multidimensional historical and cultural discourses” (Dialogue with Chaos 169). He argues that the clash of discourses resonate with emptiness, which is synonymous with death, and that all systems of reading are equally empty in Erofeyev’s worldview.
Nonetheless, it is difficult to read the story as pure postmodernist game, without any explicit political agenda. It is at the very least a strong example of complicitous critique. While the author quotes from various sources and uses a humorous tone to describe outrageous violence, he satirizes the use of violence against ordinary citizens brought up on false charges and their submission to a government threatened by its own citizens. He points an accusing finger at both Soviet authorities and citizens, and undermines the authority of discourse.

Tatyana Tolstaya’s novel *The Slynx (Кысь)* (written from 1986-2000) similarly attacks authoritarian regimes of power and deals with the theme of failed resurrection. In the novel, resurrection mirrors revolution and regime change, as each coup reinstates the same hierarchical divisions and restrictions under a rotating rogue’s gallery of leaders. Each revolution simply brings a new incarnation of past tyranny. *The Slynx* is set in a postapocalyptic Moscow, more than 200 years from the present, and its events are bookended by two explosions—the first, a nuclear explosion known as “the Blast” (Взрыв) that ended the world at the close of the 20th century, replacing Moscow with Fyodor Kuzmichsk, a walled medieval town populated by mutants; and the second, a gasoline-fueled fireball that consumes the town and most of its citizens, save for the main character and two figures, representatives of the 20th century intelligentsia, who rise into the air as if resurrected, and disappear. Those who survive the Blast are divided into two groups—the “Oldeners,” (Прежние) the spiritually-inclined intelligentsia who do not grow old, and only die if they eat something poisonous; and “Degenerators,” (перерожденцы) materialistic, coarse-mannered, fur-covered mutants, who are used as
cart-horses by society’s elite families. Those born after the blast, called “Golubchiks” (Голубчики) have a variety of mutations, or “Consequences,” (Последствия) primarily hybrid human and animal features. In a category by itself, the Slynx (Кысь), the monster who lends the book its name, is an uncanny and fearsome creature who haunts the northern forest.

At its core, the book deals with the interconnected themes of memory, power, and language. The tale is told from the perspective of a naïve Golubchik named Benedikt, who works as a humble government scribe, transcribing the works of the town’s sole author and political leader, the tyrannical Fyodor Kuzmich. Fyodor Kuzmich, a parodic rendering of authoritarian power with characteristics of both autocrat and dictator, has renamed the town Fyodor Kuzmichsk after himself (it was previously called Moscow, Southern Warehouses, Sergei Sergeichsk and Ivan Porfirichsk, an indication that Kuzmich is the most recent in a line of tyrannical rulers). Fyodor Kuzmich forbids the private use of books (rumored to be poisoned with nuclear waste), hoarding a library of literary classics (along with how-to manuals, popular literature, scientific works, journals, and reference books) and publishing poetry plagiarized from Pushkin, Blok, Tsvetaeva, and others on bark pamphlets transcribed by his army of scribes. Kuzmich likewise claims authorship of all artistic works, signing his name to the reproductions he finds in his library, notably Mikhail Vrubel’s Demon. He issues decrees and slogans from his fortress (the red terem, a structure which references the architecture of medieval Muscovy), while his secret police “Saniturions” terrorize the citizenry into submission, confiscating contraband books, and threatening malefactors with “treatment,” a process which erases the victim’s access to memory and language.
The Oldeners are primarily represented in the text by two members of the intelligentsia – Nikita Ivanich, the eccentric leader of the Monument Preservation Society, respected for his ability to breathe fire, and Lev Lvovich of the Dissidents. Among the surviving twelve Oldeners, members of Nikita Ivanich’s Monument Preservation Society seek to restore the "glorious past.” They exhume buried classical statuary (Creeks and Rowmans) and search among themselves for documents and artifacts of the past (they treat instructions for a meat grinder like a treasure, comparing it to the lost library of Alexandria). Nikita Ivanich erects signposts with old Moscow street names, and asks Benedikt to carve a statue of Pushkin to replace the famous Opekushin bronze in Pushkin square. Benedikt, a literate but literal man, refers to this as “the pushkin,” and interprets Nikita Ivanich’s references to Pushkin’s poetry literally. Nikita Ivanich quotes Pushkin’s poem “Exegi Monumentum,” a meditation on mortality and legacy wherein he plans to live on through his poetry, comparing it to a monument, written after Horace. When he says that Pushkin is higher than the Alexander column, Benedikt wants to know the measurements; and when he says that the people’s path to the poet must be clear, Benedikt demands that the area around the monument must be properly weeded.

The pushkin is a grotesque distortion of Russia’s great poet, carved

153 Nikita Ivanich’s ability to breathe fire is a reference, perhaps, to Pushkin’s poem “Muse of Satire, breathing fire.” The attribute links Nikita Ivanich to poetic tradition in which the poet is given the gift of fiery speech in order to speak the truth, especially to those in power. Nikita Ivanich fails to fulfill this role, instead using his literalized gift to light the hearths of the townspeople as the town’s “head stoker,” a role both with both domestic and demonic connotations in Russian culture.

154 Pushkin’s poem reads: I have built myself a monument not made by human hands,/The people’s path to it will not be overgrown,/ Head unbowed, it rises higher/ Than the Alexander Column (Я памятник себе воздвиг нерукотворный,/ К нему не зарастет народная тропа,/ Вознесся выше он главою непокорной/ Александрййского столпа).
out of “beriawood,” (дубельт) with six fingers, a long nose, sideburns resembling meat patties, and his head stuck to his chest (a reversal of Pushkin’s characterization of the “head unbowed”). Nikita Ivanich’s focus on the physical artifacts of culture reveal that he, a representative of the spiritual elite, is as materialistic as any Degenerator. Tolstaya satirizes the act of creating monuments, suggesting that they invariably distort the poet’s words by deifying him.

Tolstaya’s novel is one of several published since the 1970s dealing with alternate realities. Some critics have taken Tolstaya’s shift into an alternate reality as a marker of allegorical content, and sought a political message between the lines. Several critics in the popular press have panned the book as an unsuccessful dystopia. The direct targets that would make a dystopian or allegorical reading satisfying are absent, however. Tolstaya’s invention of a hierarchical society with its despotic ruler, widespread bureaucracy, secret police and hollow propaganda is easily read as an allegory of Soviet power, but Tolstaya takes aim at the intelligentsia, resurgent monarchists, and post-Soviet government as well. In her essays, Tolstaya expresses

---

155 The Russian term refers to Leontii Vasilievich Dubel’t, a member of the Third Section in Pushkin’s time. His name combines the words for oak and evergreen. In her translation, Jamey Gambrell rendered this as Beriawood, maintaining the reference to secret police in the person of the Stalin-era NKVD director Lavrentii Beria.
156 Tolstaya expands upon this idea in her essay “Pushkin’s Children.”
157 Livers discusses several of these post-apocalyptic texts, and their accompanying conspiracy theories in “Labyrinth.” Russian literature has a strong tradition of post-apocalyptic dystopian and satirical literature, including Evgennii Zamiatin’s We (My) (first published in English in 1924), and Vladimir Voinovich’s Moscow 2042 (1986). Sorokin’s Led trilogy (2002-5) and Day of the Oprichnik (2006) are variations on this theme.
158 Richard Eder, NYT; Alex Abramovich, Washington Post, Jean Charbonneau Denver Post.
doubts about Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin, and critiques fixed cultural values as well as incoherent democracy.  

Tolstaya’s novelized description of regime change is not a straightforward allegory, but gives vent to fears of false promises without real change. Fyodor Kuzmich is not only a symbol of the Soviet dictator, but of the rulers that have come before (and those who may come after). The 1990s saw a return to tsarist symbols such as the double headed eagle and Russian flag, and, as Livers notes, the period also saw a return to the “language of empire.” Kuzmich announces himself in his decrees as “Fyodor Kuzmich Kablukov, Glory to me, the Greatest Murza, Long May I Live, Seckletary and Academishun and Hero and Ship Captain and Carpenter” (Gambrell 90). While the term “Seckletary” refers to Stalin, the first General Secretary of the Soviet Union, the other attributes refer to Peter the Great and are borrowed from Pushkin’s “Stanzas,” («Стансы») («то академик, то герой, то мореплаватель, то плотник»), a poem referencing Peter’s famous reputation as a man of many talents with a strong hand.

Russia has a history of despotic rulers, and Tolstaya seems reluctant to believe that society will change with reform. In The Slynx, Benedikt and his father-in-law stage a coup, only to perpetuate the status quo of the previous reign. Like Kuzmich, they come up with pompous but meaningless titles for themselves and issue endless decrees, restricting more freedoms as they go.

Fyodor Kuzmich’s consolidation of language and image under his own name, and his attempts to claim the power of past rulers by claiming their titles demonstrate the

---

159 Tolstaya’s Pushkin’s Children is a collection of essays expressing Tolstaya’s views on contemporary Russian culture, including the place of the intelligentsia in contemporary society.

power of language. It is language that gives him his power, and language that organizes the text. Kuzmich bypasses the process of censorship, aggregating both political and spiritual authority in his own name. When Benedikt first meets Fyodor Kuzmich, he is surprised to discover that he is tiny in stature, and childlike in his behavior. Language alone gives him power. The novel is driven by language. Fyodor Kuzmich’s endless decrees regulate every aspect of life, but Benedikt seeks more regulation. Benedikt, an avid reader, who discovers the pleasure of reading the contraband “Oldenprint” books, spends most of the novel reading, or hunting for the book that will tell him how to live. He reads indiscriminately, recognizing no difference between instructional manuals and poetry. Benedikt desires, above all, to be ruled by authoritative language. His search for a guiding text reflects the crisis of authority described by Livers during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Livers writes that, during the post-Soviet period the “most unsettling loss concerns the disappearance of Russia’s fabled ‘spirituality,’ most keenly experienced in the downgrading of the Russian writer from prophet-poet to yet another consumer good” (Livers, “Labyrinth” 481). Tolstaya expresses her disillusionment with the intelligentsia, focusing on the figure of Solzhenitsyn, who she views as a petty idol, doling out irrelevant advice from his isolated reality. If the traditional representatives of authority such as political leaders, poets and intellectuals are discredited, what is left?

Nikita Ivanich seeks authority in the past, himself a representative of the intelligentsia—a group traditionally granted spiritual authority. In Tolstaya’s new world,

---

161 Goscilo points out that the chapters are organized according to the letters of the Old Church Slavonic alphabet, a move that adds an element of archaic age to the text, alongside the phonetic misspellings that characterized contemporary Russian slang. She goes so far as to call language the hero of the novel, referring in part to Tolstaya’s extensive verbal play (“Dystopian Dreams,” 10).
162 Tolstaya “Solzhenitsyn.”
however, the intelligentsia and the dissidents have no place. They are out of place, and out of time. There is no longer any relevance to Nikita Ivanich’s observations, and Lev Lvovich of the Dissidents finds no fresh target for his dissent.

In the end of *The Slynx*, Nikita Ivanich, is sentenced to be burned at the stake, in this case, the pushkin, not far from a cache of barrels filled with gasoline in order to allow the new leader, Kudeyar Kudeyarich, to consolidate power over the newly-named town of Kudeyar Kudeyarichsk. The resulting fireball engulfs the town, sparing only a few huts and a cowering Benedikt. Lev Lvovich emerges from the ashes reciting Soviet-era cliches “Now that’s nationalist claptrap… That stinks of the Newspaper Tomorrow! Vulgar Spiritualism!” and Nikita Ivanich, rising phoenix-like from the fire, proposes an escape. The pair rise into the air and exit the scene, brushing soot from their feet and giggling. A stunned Benedikt asks, “So you mean you didn’t die? Huh? Or did you?” The pair reply, “Figure it out as best you can!” (a reflection of the Fyodor Kuzmich commonplace, “Figure it out for yourself”). While Nikita Ivanich and Lev Lvovich are resurrected, placed in the position of martyr and prophet, they have no words of wisdom to impart, only variations on old themes. Helena Goscilo sees this ending as an authorial cop-out, an escape from the narrative without providing a proper conclusion. Such an ending, however, befits the sense of confusion in Russia in the 80s and 90s. To paraphrase Goscilo, in leaving the novel open, Tolstaya succeeds in reproducing what she aims to represent (Goscilo, “Dystopian” 10).

In Tolstaya’s *Slynx*, revolution, destruction, and resurrection bring about repetition rather than change. Benedikt, the willing but short-sighted bibliophile remains a neophyte, and the intelligentsia—Lev Lvovich of the dissidents, and Nikita Ivanich of
the Monument Preservation Society, with no governments to oppose, and no monuments
to preserve, wax poetic about the loss of the clothespin and safety pin—tokens of lost
civilization, while continuing to recite arguments from the distant past. These household
objects take the place of monuments, more utilitarian, perhaps, but here, treated as
equally meaningful. The fireball that concludes the novel ends the world temporarily set
in place by the nuclear explosion, the Blast that transformed the world some 200 years
before the novel began. In effect, the explosion puts an end to the carnival atmosphere of
the novel, with its grotesque characters and fool king, but puts nothing in its place.
Unofficial artists and writers challenged the claims of official discourse, and, at the same
time, challenged the authority of discourse itself. Tolstaya’s ending exposes a limitation
of postmodern discourse—postmodern art relies on quotation in order to destabilize
authoritarian language and provides no alternative, creating a crisis of identity.\footnote{163}

Paradoxically, the destroyed pushkin monument, formerly a representation of
authority, is a hopeful image. Once the cliché, dead, fixed, and distorted image of
Pushkin (and by extension, authoritarian control of language and culture) is destroyed,
Pushkin can live again, free of preconceived notions of him. For Bakhtin, the world
conflagration that concludes the carnival reinstates the status quo, but also promises new
life. In many ways, Tolstaya’s Slynx resembles a perpetual carnival, constantly replacing
one hierarchical structure with another, one fool-king toppling the next, a society forever
masked in its mutant multiplicity. The end of carnival was signaled by a bonfire,
representing the end of the world. For Bakhtin, fire, representing a “world

\footnote{163 The theme of loss and confusion after perestroika is treated in Yurchak’s \textit{Everything was Forever until it was no More}, as well as the recent documentary film \textit{My Perestroika}.}
conflagration”—the end of the world, symbolized both a new end and a new beginning. He wrote, “The festival of fire revives the ancient ambivalence of the death wish, which also sounds like a wish for renewal and rebirth: die, and live again” (Bakhtin 249). In *The Slynx*, offers a similar promise of renewal. After the fire, Benedikt complains, “Life is over,” and Nikita Ivanich replies, “It’s over… so we’ll start a new one.” The promise functions as a model from artistic practice—from the old language, we create something new.

The images of violence, death, and in postmodern literature and art are ultimately not about the human body, but, rather, language. The destruction and abstraction of the human body as presented in these texts provide a medium for language. Once the sign is mutilated, destroyed, and dead, anything is possible. The death and resurrection of signs is part of the bodily multiplicity demonstrated in postmodern representations of hybrid creatures and technological shift.
Chapter 2: A Cabinet of Curiosities: Monsters and Metazoa

Monsters hardly ever started out as monsters. Something always transformed them.

--Lynda Barry

Homo homini lupus

--Plautus

МУРАВЕЙ МУРАВЬЮ — ЖУК, СВЕРЧОК И СТРЕКОЗА

--Pelevin

In his 1959 essay, "On Socialist Realism," Andrei Siniavskii, writing under the pseudonym Abram Tertz, called for the development of the grotesque, phantasmagoric, and fantastic in art in order to put an end to the constraints imposed by Socialist Realism and to create art better suited to contemporary life. As if in response to his call, Russian postmodern writers and artists made work about shapeshifters, hybrid human and animal creatures, and embodied animal personae. This chapter will explore the menagerie of

164 Lynda Barry, One Hundred Demons, 2002.
165 Man is wolf to man: a proverb regarding human interpersonal cruelty, in Russian, человек человеку волк. The proverb is a favorite target of Pelevin’s, and this one appeared in his earlier novel Generation P, a text which I discuss in Chapter 3, as “Man is WOW to man”—a phrase using the specific lexicon of Generation P in which WOW indicates the overpowering media-based stimuli that override a person’s control of his own thoughts. The proverb becomes a formula in which the comparison welcomes multiple substitutions to create new meanings.
166 Ant is Beetle, Cricket, and Dragonfly to His Fellow Ant (Insects 71). Translated by Andrew Bromfield.
creatures in postmodern literature and art, and investigate the issues tied to the use of animal imagery in each artist's oeuvre.

Siniavskii used fantastic imagery in his own fiction, writing shapeshifters into his novel Liubimov (Любимов) (1963). The novel is an allegorical depiction of a future ruled by Lenya Tikhomirov, a man who is able to physically manipulate reality. According to the eyewitness accounts of his (hypnotized) subjects, he transforms into various creatures and machines to outsmart his opponent during a coup d'etat.

Tikhomirov defeats his rival, a fellow shapeshifter, who turns into a crow, a fox, and a bicycle, by himself becoming more agile and quick as hawk, a borzoi, and a motorcycle. Each animal is faster, stronger, and, finally, more technologically advanced than the last, a parody of Soviet claims of supremacy, particularly regarding Stalin. The narrative casts doubt upon the veracity of the event, but Siniavskii's point is that truth can be created and manipulated. The citizens of Liubimov are in the thrall of Tikhomirov’s powerful persona, and are susceptible to his mental manipulation. They bend their wills to his cult of personality. The novel is a critique of Soviet propaganda, of Stalin’s personality cult, and of the complicity of the citizenry in believing in and supporting the illusions presented to them as reality.

167 The book has been published in English translation as The Makepeace Experiment (Translated by Manya Harari) based on the main character’s surname.
168 Lenya = Lenin; Tikhomirov = quiet world/peace.
169 Vasilii Aksionov’s The Steel Bird (1965) similarly uses grotesque imagery to express distrust of ideological truths. In it, an anthropomorphic bird with steel wings takes up residence in the elevator of an apartment building. The residents suffer, but remain in his thrall until some of the worker-residents stage a siege. He leaves, but their lives and landscape are forever changed. The steel of the title is a reference to Stalin, whose chosen pseudonym derives from the word for “steel.”
In its skepticism of constructed truths, its complicitous critique, irony, metatextuality and use of fantastic elements, Siniavskii's novel anticipates the development of postmodern literature in Russia. In postmodern fiction and art, the fantastic and grotesque have become fertile ground, particularly with regard to the combination of human and animal features. Here, I attempt to create a taxonomy of representation, comprising four categories: hybrids, anthropomorphized animals, shapeshifters, and humans who perform hybrid or animal selves. Within these categories, there is a preponderance of representations of mammals, or creatures with mammalian features (for instance, dogs, cows, bears, whales, monkeys, and, of course, humans), several anthropods (including flies, mosquitoes, and cockroaches), a few birds and other winged creatures (chickens are especially well-represented), and a small number of fish. This chapter presents a cabinet of curiosities (a Kunstkamera) or a bestiary of sorts in its attempt to collect and to categorize the various creatures that appear in postmodern Russian culture. In presenting the animals in the Russian postmodernist Kunstkamera, I uncover the motivations and meanings behind each artist's use of animal and human features. These artists and writers expand the human body to include animal features as a means of exploring the boundaries of language, concept, and identity.

The bestiary and cabinet of curiosities are recurring themes in Russian postmodern art, and closely related to one another and to the project at hand, though neither is contemporary nor Russian in origin. Two of the artists in this chapter have created their own bestiaries, and another has photographed the scientific specimens of the

---

170 While humans are indeed animals, I mark the distinction between Homo sapiens and other species with the terms “human” and “animal” throughout my discussion for the sake of simplicity.
Kunstkamera, Peter the Great’s cabinet of curiosities. The bestiary, a devotional book popular in medieval Europe which catalogued the natural world, provided rich illustrations, vital statistics, physical descriptions, and allegorical interpretations of each creature. In the age of reason, it was replaced by the cabinet of curiosities, a small (usually private) collection of archaeological, geological, technological, and biological specimens, including taxidermied animals, skeletons, fossils, and human or animal remains in jars of preserving fluid.\textsuperscript{171} The cabinets provided scientific information, and promoted the value of scientific inquiry. At the same time, they contributed to the dominant narrative of European cultural superiority, presenting archaeological specimens and souvenirs of travel to “exotic” locales.\textsuperscript{172} Human superiority over other creatures is also a common feature—many illustrated bestiaries begin with an image of Adam naming the creatures. The bestiary, in turn, does what it says—its pages name and catalogue the animals, both real and fanciful. My task in this chapter is to name the creatures in Russian postmodernist discourse.

The first section of this chapter is dedicated to hybrid creatures, partly human and partly animal, a frequent variation on the theme of transformation. It includes a society of mutants who populate the post-apocalyptic world of Tatyana Tolstaya's novel \textit{The Slynx} (2000). Most characters in the novel are affected by some type of mutation (referred to in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Both the bestiary and the cabinet of curiosities are Western European traditions. The Bestiary tradition most likely came to Russia through Germany, and Peter the Great brought his \textit{Kunstkamera} to Russia from Amsterdam. Just as the bestiary sometimes included imaginary creatures, cabinets of curiosity sometimes included fake specimens.
\item Bestiaries, cabinets of curiosities, and natural histories described places outside the borders of Western Europe in such a way that they supported a narrative of Western cultural superiority. Reading Clark and Hassig on the bestiary, facsimilies of bestiaries, and Asma and MacGregor on cabinets of curiosities, these collections demonstrate the attitude of Western cultural dominance described by Edward Said in his influential 1978 critique of Western imperialism, \textit{Orientalism}. Much has been written on the topic of orientalism, and about Russia’s position between East and West, a situation which impacts the political orientation of Russian artists working internationally such as Kulik.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the novel as a "consequence"), in the form of a tail, feathers, or fur—the result of a nuclear blast. Post-apocalyptic society is divided into different social classes depending on what kind of consequence the individual suffers (or benefits) from. The novel is a reflection of Soviet reality, with references to the Chernobyl disaster, the cold war, supply shortages, the government's control of information and its relationship with the intelligentsia. The mutated bodies are carnival masks in a world turned upside down, which maintains its power structures in reverse.

In other cases, hybrids are created on purpose. For example, a baby is born from the combination of human and chicken genetic material in Valeria Narbikova's 1990 *In the Here and There* (Около Эколо). The creation of the child is a project undertaken by two men who are unable to have a child on their own—they require an egg, and procure one from a chicken. The resulting creature is unpredictable, dangerous, and ambiguous. The novel reflects the uncertainty, cynicism and hopefulness of a generation during the collapse of the Soviet Union, and serves as a fine example of Narbikova’s authorial strategy of estrangement.

In his *Bestiary* series, a collection of pen and ink drawings created over thirty years beginning in the 1970s, poet and visual artist Dmitrii Prigov creates a gallery of portraits featuring prominent cultural figures drawn in a style reminiscent of religious icons, with an array of features, both animal and human. Prigov's portraits, which depict poets, artists and politicians alike, have a puzzle-like quality. The names of the subjects are written into the drawings, with the consonants and vowels separated, and the letters themselves obscured by the leaves of stylized flora carved out of negative space. The compression of names references the art of Orthodox icon painting, in which the names
of saints were often written above the figure, with the vowel sounds removed—ciphers which would have been legible only to the literate few. At the same time, Prigov's portraits seem to contain their own code. The portraits rarely caricature their subjects, but rather contain composite parts which are then merged to create the portrait. Some have long snouts, others beaks, some have wings, others tails, some have long fingers, and others have claws. The puzzle is in the impulse to reconcile the nominal subject with the image.

The second section is dedicated to theriomorphs or anthropomorphized animals. Pelevin presents an array of shapeshifters in his 1993 novel *The Life of Insects* (*Жизнь Насекомых*). In it, businessmen transform into mosquitoes, and dung beetles contemplate the meaning of life. Pelevin's insect world is a microcosm of the human world. He uses his insects to comment on growing consumerism and the place of the intelligentsia in Russia, among other issues.

The artist Ilya Kabakov likewise explores the relationship between humans and insects in his work on the subject of flies. His installation, *The Life of Flies* (*Жизнь Мух*) (1992) positions flies as the subject of an ethnographic study, placing them in a museum context with details about their philosophy, history, fine art, and economics. A collaboration with composer Vladimir Tarasov, *Concert for Flies* (Концерт для мух) (1993) is an installation with a sound component wherein a group of flies, poised over a piece of sheet music, seem to play the human language indicated by the symbols on the page. In Kabakov’s ballet *The Flies (In the Communal Kitchen) – A Musical Phantasmagoria* (1995), a group of dancers dressed as flies infest the kitchen of a
communal apartment, taking on the personalities of its residents. In each case, the insects inhabit the same world and conform to the same structures as their human counterparts.

The third section of this chapter will investigate shapeshifters and animal embodiment. In the fiction of Viktor Pelevin, people turn into wolves or dogs, while artist Oleg Kulik turns himself into a dog (and on occasion into a bird or hybrid creature), by performing as one. In Pelevin’s story, “A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia” (‘Проблема верволка в средней полосе”) a young man finds himself lost in the forest, and drawn into a group of werewolves. He becomes a werewolf himself, casting a human shadow while in a wolf's body. In Pelevin’s 2008 The Sacred Book of the Werewolf (Священная книга оборотня), an ancient Chinese fox, in the guise of a young woman, hypnotizes men with her tail, and searches for the secret to life.¹⁷³ Performance artist Oleg Kulik is best known for his performances as a dog, in which he appears naked and collared, on his hands and knees, barking, growling, lunging at spectators, and sometimes biting them. In other performances, he has worn hooves over his hands and mooed at a Moscow meat counter, run for president as the horned candidate of the Animal Party, and staged a confrontation between his human and animal selves. Part of Kulik's strategy as an artist is to induce shock in his viewers—to question what can be considered art, what is acceptable in society, and what is human.

¹⁷³ The term “оборотен” may mean any number of shapeshifting mammals, not necessarily a werewolf. The main character of The Sacred Book of the Werewolf is, in fact, a were-fox.
Hybrids

In the post-Soviet era, postmodern artists are not alone in their use of grotesque imagery. Geli Korzhev, a contemporary pro-communist painter who continues to work in a Socialist Realist vein following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is known for paintings of heroic young revolutionaries, war ravaged veterans, religious figures, and the heroic Don Quixote, also paints grotesque figures he calls “tyurliki” (тюрлики), a term synonymous with mutants. These grotesque figures, bipeds with thin limbs, oversized heads, round bellies, snouts, fur, beaks, horns, sharp teeth, and talons, engage in everyday activities—they attend political rallies, sit down at the table to feast, and go to the barbershop. Some appear alongside apparently unmutated humans in military garb or sunglasses, jeans, and slippers. The Tyurliki reflect Korzhev’s pro-communist critique of perestroika-era and post-Soviet society. Despite his unorthodox subject matter, Korzhev defends the aesthetic integrity of his work, emphasizing artistic license over realism. He explains, “The Tyurlikis [sic.] did reflect many of the changes in our society that happened during and after perestroika. Generally speaking, I do not think that art should be confused with journalism, and in Russia we often see lower artistic standards applied to works dealing with socially important subjects. Different rules apply to journalists, caricaturists and artists” (Korzhev 124). While Korzhev supports a communist political program, it is doubtful that some of his work would have been accepted for official exhibition during the Soviet period. It is precisely post-Soviet pluralism that allows Korzhev the freedom to choose to paint in both a socialist realist and a fantastic mode. Indeed, Korzhev’s politically-motivated mutant paintings sit neatly alongside the politically ambivalent mutant-filled work of Tatyana Tolstaya, who likewise creates an
alternate, grotesque world to reflect changes in late and post-Soviet society, but who claims not to favor any particular political point of view, true to the alternative politics of her generation.

In Tatyana Tolstaya’s novel *The Sly*nx, a nuclear explosion, referred to as “the Blast” (Взрыв) destroys contemporary Moscow. Over 200 years later, in the time the story is set, Fyodor Kuzmichsk, a town (medieval in its architecture, culture, and technology) set on the ruins of the Russian capital, is populated by mutants. The world of *The Sly*nx resembles a carnival on earth, with an array of grotesque (masked) characters, a fool king (a tiny, petty mutant), and an emphasis on excesses of food, humorous violence, and sexual humor. The novel is primarily narrated in third person, but from the perspective of its hero Benedikt, a poor bachelor who works as a scribe in a government office. The text demonstrates a deep concern with language. Its chapter headings are letters of the early Cyrillic alphabet, and the novel is written in a coarse and chatty *skaz* style littered with unwieldy neologisms. Benedikt is obsessed with collecting and reading all of the books he can find, hoping to find the book that will tell him how to live.

The citizenry of Fyodor Kuzmichsk is made up of those who survived the Blast – “Oldeners” (Прежние) and “Degenerators” (перерожденцы) and those who were born afterwards – “Golubchiks” (Голубчики). Benedikt explains, whoever didn't croak when the Blast happened doesn't grow old after that. That's the Consequence they have... Whoever was born after the Blast, they have other Consequences – all kinds. Some have got hands that look like they broke out in green flour, like they'd been rolling in greencorn, some have gills, another might have a cockscomb or something else. And sometimes there aren't any
Consequences, except when they get old a pimple will sprout from the eye, or their private parts will grow a beard down to the shins. Or nostrils will open up on their knees (Tolstaya *Slynx* 10).  
Это уж так: ежели кто не тютюхнулся, когда Взрыв случился, тот уж после не старится. Это у них такое Последствие… А кто после Взрыва родился, у тех Последствия другие, – всякие. У кого руки словно зеленой мукой обметаны, будто он в хлебеде рылся, у кого жабры; у иного гребень петушиный али еще что. А бывает, что никаких Последствий нет, разве к старости прыщи из глаз попрут, а не то в укромном месте борода расти учнет до самых до колен. Или на коленях ноздри всючат (Tolstaya *Kys* ’16).

The Oldeners have no visible mutations, but they do not age and only die if they eat poisonous or incorrectly prepared food. One of them, Nikita Ivanich, the leader of the Monument Preservation Society, has the ability to breathe fire. Because of their special abilities and experience, Oldeners are, for the most part, treated with respect. Their elevated linguistic register and discourse on culture and politics mark them as the intelligentsia and dissident voice of Tolstaya’s invented world. The Oldeners remember the past and make attempts to restore it, erecting signposts designating Moscow street signs, or erecting a monument to Pushkin in place of Opekushin’s famous bronze. “The pushkin,” as Benedikt calls the sculpture, is itself a distorted, mutated representation of the poet, with six fingers and a long nose that sticks to his chest.

The “Degenerators” also survived the Blast, but, in contrast to the Oldeners, are treated as sub-humans. They are covered in fur, walk on all fours, and are used as cart

---

174 Translated by Jamey Gambrell.
horses. Benedikt, the Golubchik narrator of the tale, explains, "They're strange ones, and you can't figure out if they're people or not. Their faces look human, but their bodies are all furry and they run on all fours. With a felt boot on each leg." ("Страшные они, и не поймешь, то ли они люди, то ли нет: лицо вроде как у человека, туловище шерстью покрыто и на четвереньках бегают. И на каждой ноге по валенку"; Gambrell, Slynx 2; Tolstaya, Kys’ 6). The Degenerators are separated from the dominant Golubchik society, and differ in their speech and coarse manners. One Degenerator, Terenty Petrovich, a proponent of totalitarian and reactionary policies, becomes a prominent government figure late in the story, and fathers one of the children born to Benedikt’s wife, Olenka (Tolstaya Slynx 200-2). Like the Oldeners, they have memories of the past, but these are focused on material goods and luxuries. The Degenerators show little interest in restoring Russian culture.

Some residents of the town fall victim to dangerous creatures which roam the forest on the outskirts of town, including the eponymous monster, the Slynx, who attacks unwary victims by hooking a vein in their necks with its claw: “if you wander into the forest it jumps on your neck from behind: hop! It grabs your spine in its teeth—crunch—and picks out the big vein with its claw and breaks it. All the reason runs right out of you” (“Пойдет человек так вот в лес, а она ему на шею-то сзади: хоп! и хребтину зубами: хрусь! – а когтем главную-то жилочку нашупает и перервет, и весь разум из человека и выйдет”; Gambrell, Slynx 3; Tolstaya Kys’ 7). The Slynx is terrifying not only because of its predatory behavior, but because nobody can describe it, and it is possible that no one has seen it. A nightmare creature, muscular and agile, with a flat, spoonlike head, ears that it presses back against its skull when it hunts, and invisible
claws, the Slynx is the embodiment of fear. The denizens of the walled city fear all outside elements, citing the presence of the Slynx to the north, Chechens to the south, and an enchanted pathway that leads to confusion and homesickness to the west. The Golubchiks gather food in the beautiful, safe eastern forest and interact only with the Cockynorks (Кохинорцы) who live in the neighboring settlement who have long, dexterous noses which nearly touch the ground, and traveling merchants (Tolstaya, *Slynx* 39). The four directions allude to conflicts and political issues facing Russia—particularly the ongoing conflict with Chechnya, the legacy of the Russian Empire’s expansion to the east, and Soviet-era emigration to the West, especially among Tolstaya’s fellow writers.

The Golubchiks are the most variegated category, with mutations ranging from a tail to horns, cockscombs, claws, and udders. Among them are one-and-a-half, with “one and a half faces and a third leg.” (Tolstaya *Slynx* 29) («у него полтора лица, и третья нога растет.»); (Tolstaya *Кыш* ‘37), Polotrak, with only one leg; and Vasiuk the Earful, who is entirely covered in ears, “so many ears you can’t count them: on his head, and under his head, and on his knees, and behind his knees, and even in his boots. All kinds: big, little, round, long, and just plain holes, and pink pipes, and something like smooth slits, with hair—all kinds.” (“А ушей у него видимо-невидимо: и на голове, и под головой, и на коленках, и под коленками, и в валенках—уши. Всякие: большие, малые, круглые, длинные, и просто дырочки, и трубочки розовые, и вроде щели, и

175 The topography of Moscow may also be read metatextually—Kathleen Parthe describes the Russian literary canon as a treasure to be defended from outsiders in the chapter “Русские и "другие": текст как территория” in the book *Опасные тексты России: политика между сроком*. According to Parthe, internal threats are the most dangerous.

176 Homesickness, disillusionment, and meditations on the Russian language are common themes among émigré writers including Nabokov, Brodsky, and Solzhenitsyn.
с волосами, и гладкие—всякие”; Gambrell, Slynx 25; Tolstaya, Kys’33). Ivan Beefich “has really bad consequences. His head, arms and shoulders are all strong, straight, and powerful, it would take three days to unscramble them, as they say. But right after his underarms come the soles of his feet, and in the middle there’s an udder” (“У Иван Говядича Последствия уж очень тяжелые. Голова, руки, плечи—это все крепкое такое, ладное, могучее, в три дня, как говорится, не обгадишь, а из-под мышек—сразу ступни, а посередке—вымя”; Gambrell, Slynx 40; Tolstaya, Kys’49). Here is a kind of human-animal multiplicity. Beefich mixes male and female characteristics. He is considered male, but has an udder, which marks him as part female and part cow. His patronymic, “Beefich,” capitalizes on the bovine connotation of his name, with an emphasis on the animal aspect as food. As a patronymic, the name suggests that Ivan’s lineage comes from domestic cattle.

Varvara Lukinishina is covered all over in cockscombs. She is one of Benedikt’s coworkers, passionate about the written word, a representative of hope for the future, inadvertently and tragically suffocated by Benedikt. Her body continues to mutate and expand over the course of the novel. By the time of her death, it is impossible to distinguish her hand and face from the rest of her body because she is covered from head to foot in countless cockscombs. Varvara Lukinishna appears at first with “not a hair on her head, and cockscombs growing all over it” (“голова голая, без волоса, и по всей голове петушиньые гребни так и кольшутся”; Gambrell, Slynx 26; Tolstaya Kys’33). By the end of the novel, however, Varvara Lukinishna is not only an example of human and animal features coming together, but also of bodily excess. After a long separation, Benedikt visits her and finds her much changed: “She lay on the bed, wrapped in tatters
and rags, but you could hardly tell it was Varvara Lukinishna: one eye was visible through the rags, and the rest was all in cock’s combs—and more combs, combs, combs, combs” ("Лежит на лежанке, в тряпье, а это только называется, что Варвара Лукинишна: один глаз из тряпья виден, а остальное—всё гребешки, гребешки, гребешки, гребешки, гребешки, гребешки…"; Gambrell, Slynx 211; Tolstaya, Kys’ 246). Varvara Lukinishna’s death parodies deathbed scenes in literature, particularly those that linger over mawkish details. Varvara Lukinishna’s sentimental outbursts in her last moments contrast comically with Benedikt’s self-interested attempts to acquire her hidden books. Benedikt, obsessed with finding the book that will tell him how to live, gropes around her sickbed looking for it and she mistakes the gesture for affection. He puts too much weight on her body and crushes her.

Benedikt’s wife is considered a beauty, with folkloric features—she has dark eyes, golden hair in a braid, and rosy cheeks (Gambrell, Slynx 18). Benedikt discovers that she has claws on her feet with which she scrapes up pieces of the floor. After marriage, Olenka expands, and, by Benedikt’s standards, becomes even more beautiful.

They say you can never have too much of a woman’s body—and they’re right.

Olenka expanded sideways, forward and backward. You couldn’t have asked for anything more beautiful. Where once she had a dimpled chin there were now eight. She had six rows of tits. She had to sit on five stools, three weren’t enough. Not long ago they widened the doorway, but they’d been stingy: it needed to be widened again. (Gambrell, Slynx 233).
Olenka’s expansion is an additional transformation positioning her firmly between human and animal. Early on in their relationship, Benedikt discovers that she has long, sharp claws with which she scrapes up wood shavings from the floor when she is nervous, but her transformation into a beauty endows her with additional features of both, more human chins, and more nipples to go with her catlike, and Slynx-like claws. Both Olenka and the Slynx may have sharp claws, but while the Slynx is frightening, Olenka is alluring. Her bodily excess is a marker of wealth, good appetite, and reproductive health. She gives birth to a small litter of three (one evidently fathered by Terenty Petrovich, the Degenerator). Her feline-like ability to give birth to offspring fathered by multiple individuals links her to cats, making her marriage to the dog-like Benedikt a mesalliance with implications beyond social stature. Her first two children have flat faces, like Benedikt, while the third is covered in fur like the Degenerator:

There were three kids: one appeared to be female, she was tiny and cried. Another seemed to be a boy, but it was hard to tell right off. The third—well, you couldn’t figure out what it was—to look at, it was a fuzzy, scary-looking ball. All round-like, but with eyes. They picked it up…and with a shove it pushed away, jumped on the floor, rolled off, and disappeared into a crack in the floor (Gambrell, Slynx 239).177

177 This child’s disappearance may reference Fyodor Sologub’s nedotykomka, a demonic figure, possibly imaginary, who rolls onto the floor and disappears in the novel The Petty Demon (Sologub 238-9).
Деток трое: одна вроде самочка, малонькая, пищит. Другой вроде как мальчик, но так сразу не скажешь. Третье—не разберёшь поймешь что, а с виду как сыр—мохнатое, страховидное. Круглое такое. Но с глазками.
Взяли его на руки…а оно толк!—оттолкнулось да на пол и соскочило, по полу клубком покатилось и в щель ушло (Tolstaya, Kys' 277).

Olenka is an exemplar of Bakhtin’s “open body,” expanding into comic excess, open to constant transformation. In Bakhtin’s reading of carnival, such physical excess is productive—a metaphor for rebirth, renewal, and the bounty of the harvest. In Tolstaya, the promise of change is destroyed by the ending, in which the town is destroyed with only three named survivors—Benedikt, Nikita Ivanich, and Lev Lrovich of the dissidents. Only one foolish representative of the present and those who seek to revive the lofty past (“светлое прошлое”) remain.178

Fyodor Kuzmich, the ruler and namesake of the town, bears both human and animal traits.179 When Benedikt first meets him, he is stunned by the great leader’s modest stature. The leader is a tiny man the size of a kitten, but with large, flat hands (Tolstaya, Kys’63). His small stature places him in the position of the mock king.

---

178 Nikita Ivanich’s mention of the “svetloe proshloe,” or “exalted past” parodies the Soviet hope for the “svetloe budushee”, or “bright future”. By implication, the restoration of the past is as dangerously restrictive as the utopian project of creating a bright future.

179 The name Fyodor Kuzmich is also the name of a wandering holy man, according to legend, the assumed identity of Alexander I following his elaborately faked death. Lev Tolstoy, Tolstaya’s great-greatuncle, wrote an unfinished fictional work based on the legend (See Nickell 159-64). The name Fyodor Kuzmich may also be a reference to Fyodor Sologub, the pen name of Fyodor Kuzmich Teternikov, who published his Symbolist masterpiece The Petty Demon (Мелкий бог) in 1907. The novel describes the adventures of its petty anti-hero who is followed by a giggling, shapeshifting creature, the nedotykomka.
Tolstaya violates hierarchical norms by placing the smallest person (in a physical sense) at the top of the official structure.\textsuperscript{180} Benedikt himself has a small, white tail which he discovers belatedly, is not standard equipment.\textsuperscript{181} The narrator explains, Benedikt had lived his whole life proudly: fine and fit as a fiddle he was. He knew it himself, and people said so. You can’t see your own face, of course, unless you pour water in a bowl, light a candle, and look in. Then you can sort of see something. But his body was right there in plain sight. Arms, legs, belly button, nipples, private parts, here are all the fingers on his hands and there are the toes on his feet—all without any defect. And what’s in back? His backside, of course, and on his backside—a little tail. And now Nikita Ivanich says people don’t and shouldn’t have tails! What? What was it then, a Consequence? (Gambrell, \textit{Slynx} 115).

Всю жизнь Бенедикт прожил, гордясь: вот он какой гладкий да ладный; и сам знал, и люди говорили. Личика-то своего, конечно, человеку не увидать, разве воды в миску налить, свечку зажечь и глядеться. Тогда чего-то слабенько видать. Но тулово-то, оно ж вот оно. Оно ж все на виду. Вот руки, ноги, пуп, титьки, уд срамной, вот пальцы все, на руках и на ногах, — и

\textsuperscript{180} In folk imagery and church icons, the most important figure in a group was usually represented as the largest. This practice carried over into propaganda, in which leaders such as Lenin and Stalin were depicted as larger than other figures.

\textsuperscript{181} Tails figure prominently among the animal features in Tolstaya’s stories. Lora, the heroine of “Sleepwalker in a Fog” desires a “thick, fluffy tail, possibly striped.” Animal imagery is not limited to tails: “Her mad father is a zoologist, preoccupied with the problem of birds’ kinship to reptiles and crocodiles, toads, cocks, and elephants. Denisov, the story’s protagonist, yearns to be transformed into a bear…. Ladies’ legs turn into ‘Silver tails and patent-leather hoofs’” (Ivanova). Ivanova posits that animal features function in the story as markers of fairy-tale fantasy posed against stark Soviet reality.
The tail links Benedikt to a separate, animal self. The image is tied to other descriptions that render him doglike. He complains that his mother gave him a dog’s name, and he wags his little tail when he is happy. The tail is also connected to reproduction: it started to grow during puberty, and Benedikt assumed that it is a normal male trait. Benedikt, believing himself to be the rare Golubchik free of mutations, is horrified to discover that his tail is a Consequence and elects to have it removed, a castration performed by Nikita Ivanich with an ax. Following this event, Benedikt lands a job with the terrifying Saniturions (Санитары) the town’s secret police, and begins a transformation of his own. As a Saniturion, Benedikt is given special privileges such as a sleigh and personal Degenerator (Terenty Petrovich) and lives in luxury with his wife’s family, eating rich, plentiful “spiritual food” instead of the thin “worrum” soup he ate as a scribe. He wears a special hooded uniform, and hunts contraband books hidden in the homes of citizens. He retrieves books from their hiding places using a hook on a long pole, which becomes a kind of third arm with a heightened sense of touch. Benedikt is able to find books more readily with it than with his hands alone. The red robes of the order become a mask behind which he becomes invisible like the fearsome Slynx. The Saniturions have "slits where their eyes should be, and you can't see their faces" (“на месте глаз – прорези сделаны, и лиц не видать"; Gambrell, Slynx 35; Tolstaya Kys’ 45). His robe becomes a second skin, his hood improves his vision, and his hook becomes part of his hand (Gambrell, Slynx 236). As he becomes more deeply involved in his work as a Saniturion,
Benedikt's appearance seems to change. Tolstaya writes that, "without seeing, he knew that his eyes were red with blood, that he had dark, deep rings under his eyes, that his face and curls had darkened, stuck together—uncombed, unwashed, his head had become flat, like a spoon..." (Сам, и не видя себя, знал, что глаза кровью налиты, под глазами провалилось, притемнилось лицо, кудри притемнились, слиплись, нечесаны, немыты, — голова стала плоская, как ложка"; Gambrell, Slynx 237; Tolstaya Kys '274). The methods by which Benedikt confiscates books from his fellow Golubchiks are tellingly similar to The Slynx’s hunting methods. Benedikt uses a hook to grab books; the Slynx uses its sharp claws to tear out the vein in its victims' necks. An analysis of Benedikt’s first hooking reveals a strong similarity to the hunting methods of the Slynx. After his first hooking, Tolstaya writes, Benedikt's arm could still feel the crunch up to the elbow, the way you squash a beetle: instead of just grabbing the book, jerking it, tearing it away, he caught the Golubchik right on the neck, on the vein, and since he whirled the hook with unpracticed fingers, the vein snapped and something streamed out, something black. The head flopped to one side, the eyes dimmed, and vomit gushed from the mouth (Gambrell, Slynx 184).

Benedikt’s unhappy accident links him, once and for all, to the Slynx.
At the peak of his power, after he has acquired the vast library he desires, Benedikt’s family asks him to betray his friend, Nikita Ivanich, so that his father-in-law can consolidate his power. They accuse Benedikt of being the Slynx, and threaten to destroy his library. He looks into a pool of dark water and sees himself as the monster:

“He touched his ears. Regular ears… His palms were normal too, rough; across his entire palm and his fingers was a wide callus from the hook… He checked his stomach. Rear end. No tail or… Wait. Just a minute. The tail. There had been a tail… But people weren't supposed to have… So what did that?... you're the Slynx… Just think about it… it never rests…It crept up behind me… and licked my neck with its cold lips, and searched with its claw, looking to hook the vein.

Yes, it's the Slynx! It ruined me… everything's been turned inside out, there's nothing there! Only guts! I'm hungry! I'm tormented! (Tolstaya Slynx 267-8).

Пощупал уши. Обычные… Ладони тоже обычные, шершавые; через всю ладонь, с переходом на пальцы – широкая мозоль от крюка… Живот. Зад. Ни тебе хвоста, ни... …Так. Минуточку. Хвост. Был же хвост. Был, блин, хвост. А у людей вроде не должно… Так что же?.. ты кысь… Вспомни-ка… нет ей покоя… Подкралась сзади – и уши прижаты, и плачет, и морщит бледное лицо, и облизывает шею холодными губами, и шарит когтем, жилочку зацепить… Да, это она! Испортила меня! …уж всего вывернуло наизнанку, нет там ничего! Кишки одни! Голодно мне! Мука мне! (Tolstaya Kys’ 307-8).

The accusation is confirmed by the appearance of his children Bubble and Concordia, who have the flat, spoonlike head common to Benedikt and the Slynx. The shift to first
person perspective marks this moment as a key moment of change in which Benedikt and the narrative voice collapse. Benedikt, the protagonist and central figure of the tale, realizes that he has become the thing he is most afraid of. The monster has been inside him all along.\textsuperscript{182} His physical transformation marks a spiritual change. In his humble quest to read and to find the book that will tell him how to live, Benedikt becomes selfish, stealthy, and destructive. His revelation does not make him turn back, but rather move further toward violence. Following his revelation, Benedikt betrays his friend Nikita Ivanich (and his beloved sculpture of “the pushkin”) who is to be burned at the stake, back to back with the pushkin sculpture in order to allow his father-in-law, Kudeyar Kudeyarich, to consolidate power following their coup d’état against Fyodor Kuzmich. Tolstaya’s text contains a warning against the transformative properties of obsession and power. In the process of the coup, it is Benedikt himself, not the state, which changes.

*The Slynx*, like many other postmodern Russian texts, is ultimately about language, totalitarianism, and memory. Daria Kabanova argues that the division between animal and human are compromised in the novel because most of the characters, including those that appear to be fully animal, have access to language, a factor which has traditionally been used to separate humans from animals.\textsuperscript{183} She likewise suggests that the Slynx operates as the terrifying other in the text because it lacks language or form, and that even the creature’s name exists outside of language. Indeed, the Slynx’s name comes from the sound of its plaintive howl—it cries out in the forest,

\textsuperscript{182} Kabanova argues that the Slynx’s affinity with Benedikt makes the monster more human over the course of the novel, in contrast to my suggestion that Benedikt becomes more monstrous (Kabanova 230).

\textsuperscript{183} Kabanova 230.
“Slyyyyynx!”—but its complaints of hunger and torment are reported alongside its cries. It is my assertion that the Slynx gains form and language in Benedikt’s mind, and that his perception is the only evidence of the monster’s existence. In fact, Benedikt becomes more Slynx-like the more he reads, and ultimately becomes the Slynx when his library is threatened.\textsuperscript{184} The Slynx remains unseen, but gains a body through description, and Benedikt develops a similar body through his work as a Saniturion. Even as he performs the duties of a Saniturion, he fears becoming a victim of the very “treatment” he administers. The Slynx and the Saniturions share the ability to take away language and memory, and it is this that Benedikt fears most. He reacts to the threat of “treatment” by the Saniturions in the same way as he does the Slynx—the two names are equally unspeakable. Benedikt seeks the ultimate authoritarian text that will tell him how to live, and fears the loss of language itself.

The openness to transformation in the text and the use of animal-human hybrids reveal environmental concerns in the aftermath of nuclear disaster, but celebrate open society and grotesque imagery at the same time. The text carries a warning – the hybridized townsfolk who take part in the perpetual carnival overseen by the carnival king Fyodor Kuzmich, propagate the lies that they are told and participate in their dissemination. While on the surface \textit{The Slynx} appears as a carnival complete with masked characters, a fool king, humorous violence, feasting, bodily excess, and a bonfire at the end, the narrative gives no sense of renewal. Perpetual carnival is by definition impossible. Tolstaya’s world is not a Bakhtinian celebration.

\textsuperscript{184} I differ from Kabanova on the subject of Benedikt’s relationship to the Slynx. To my mind, Benedikt becomes the Slynx as he transforms within the masked and hooded uniform of the Saniturions and wields the hook, snagging his victims much as the Slynx does. Kabanova notes a connection between Benedikt and the Slynx, but does not suggest a closer affinity.
Several critics argue that Bakhtin’s carnival is flawed to begin with, arguing that, since carnival is by necessity temporary, it reestablishes the status quo when it ends, and thus reinforces it as the natural order of things. The folk participate their own subjugation even as they participate in the apparently subversive festival. Boris Groys writes that obligatory participation in carnival activity is inimical to carnival, and that carnival inevitably supports totalitarian hierarchy. Charles Lock holds a similar point of view, stating that carnival can only exist when it is officially sanctioned, and that it requires a structure to invert. In Tolstaya’s novel, the government is repeatedly toppled and replaced with another government just like it. A carnival world which establishes an upside-down structure in place of the established order is merely the same thing in reverse. Tolstaya’s cynicism and scorn is not reserved, as some suggest, only for the Soviet regime. The specter of the Slynx is a warning against fixed ideas and power structures of all kinds. In her essays, she warns against hero worship and unquestioning loyalty to monarchs, communist leaders, Post-Soviet presidents, American presidents, dissident leaders, and the intelligentsia. In her essays, Tolstaya rails against the famous dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s support of a return to monarchy. She cries out against the worship of poets as prophets, specifically Pushkin, suggesting that

---

185 Averintsev emphasizes the temporality of carnival, and describes the totalitarian uses of laughter, in opposition to Bakhtin’s claim that power does not use laughter.
186 Benedikt names six variations on the name of the town, at least four of which bear the name of a ruler, implying a series of coups: Moscow, Southern Warehouses, Ivan-Porfirichsk, Sergei-Sergeichsk, Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, and Kudeyar-Kudeyarichsk.
187 See Averintsev 80. Caryl Emerson gives an overview of various interpretations of Bakhtin’s carnival in her book *The First Hundred Years of Bakthin* 162-206.
188 In his futuristic novel, *Moscow 2042* (1986), Vladimir Voinovich, like Tolstaya, mocks Solzhenitsyn’s ideas. In the novel, a figure who resembles Solzhenitsyn both physically and ideologically, returns to Moscow, overthrowing the communist leadership, and taking up the throne as Russia’s new Tsar.
doxification renders the poet dead. She is as suspicious of change as she is of stagnation, cautioning that a new regime may turn out like the old one, as Benedikt and Kudeyar Kudeyarich demonstrate in *The Slynx*. The novel critiques the promise of change offered in pursuit of power.

As in Tolstaya’s self-repeating carnival/ anti-carnival vision, Valeria Narbikova’s novella *In the Here and There (Около Эколо)* (1992) shows change and repetition as part of a single process.¹⁸⁹ Nadya L. Peterson writes, “Narbikova’s work is a permanent exercise in transgression, which, by virtue of its predictability, subverts its own transgressive intent” (Peterson 166). The characters, time, and landscape shift as Narbikova uses language to destabilize the concepts attached to words. Characters disappear and reappear, reenact historic events, and repeat dialogue with variations.¹⁹⁰ For Narbikova, language itself is the primary subject. Her hybrids are first and foremost linguistic—neologisms formed out of two or more words are typical of her writing, and the singular hybrid creature in the text—part chicken, part human—seems like the physical manifestation of Narbikova’s manipulation of language. Rudova notes that Narbikova's character names are often also hybrids, such as Gleb O.R., Dodostoevskii, and Toest’IstoI. She writes, “History and fiction blend in her use of proper names and the interplay of historical and fictional planes. Not only do the characters' names sound bizarre, but they also bridge irreconcilable contexts and generate grotesque hybrids.

¹⁸⁹ The translation of Narbikova’s titles represents a challenge, and *Okolo Ekolo* is no exception. I use translator Masha Gessen’s choice “In the Here and There,” as this is the edition to which I refer. Jane Costlow uses a direct translation of the two words, “Around Environ” in her discussion of the text. Neither renders the sound game of the original, but both give a sense of spatial indeterminacy.

¹⁹⁰ Porter mentions that Petia becomes involved with Nicholas I, the False Dmitrii appears, and Boris reenacts Pushkin’s duel (52). Narbikova, like her fellow postmodernists, plays with time, history, and memory.
Narbikova’s use of the grotesque is part of her play with language and concepts.\textsuperscript{191}

Narbikova is tied to the conceptualist movement, and, in her work, she allows words to repeat, build, and collapse on one another, to crash against one another, and forces concepts to coexist even as they contradict one another. She challenges the assumptions surrounding language. Elongated, rambling assemblages of phrases which play with word order and rhythm are part of her signature. The following run-on sentence exemplifies her manipulation of language, and her understanding of concepts as malleable:

The backdrop against which they were human beings was a street, and it was inconsequential that it was Gorky Street, because what was Gorky today had been Tverskaya yesterday and would be La-la tomorrow, and everything would change, and the only thing that would remain would be beauty (the landmark examples of art and architecture)—no, only love would remain, as the poet said… love has remained, while revolution has come and gone, leaving behind flags, prisons, and monuments… and what will be left tomorrow? flags?” (Gessen, \textit{Here} 39).\textsuperscript{192}

\textsuperscript{191} Little has been published about Narbikova’s writing and art, save for notices of awards and exhibitions. Chernetsky looks at Narbikova and language in relationship to politics, Pittman reads Narbikova’s intertextual play with literary predecessors, and Gosci\l o discusses Narbikova’s methods in relation to those of other female writers in \textit{Fruits}. Rudova describes Narbikova’s critical viewpoint and use of taboo subject matter in “Mindset”. Her “Paradigms” focuses on the novel as an exemplar of sots art themes in literature.

\textsuperscript{192} Translated by Masha Gessen.
архитектуры), нет, только любовь останется, сказал поэт... осталась любовь,
а революция пришла и ушла, и от нее остались флагки, тюрьмы, и
памятники... а завтра что останется? Флагки? (Narbikova Okolo 34).

Just as street names are changeable and do nothing to indicate place, character names
seem arbitrary or intentionally obscure. The main female character is named Petia (a
male nickname, in this case short for Petrarka rather than Piotr, a reference to the Italian
poet), while another character is named Kostroma, after a Russian town. The names
destabilize assumptions about gender, and traditional uses of names to inform identity.193

Play with gender-bending names is complicated by the characters’ androgynous
appearances (Petia has an attractively masculine face, while the male character Dyl has
unattractively girlish features) (Narbikova, Okolo 19). Narbikova’s play with names is
especially confounding given Russia’s history of using “speaking names” which indicate
an aspect of a character’s personality as a signpost for the reader. Narbikova’s names
deliberately obfuscate rather than elucidate.

Peterson describes Narbikova’s strategy as a game, piling up word play and
intertexts until her devices are laid bare and automatized, while she defamiliarizes clichés
by getting inside of them and exploding them from within, often through inversion or
expansion (Peterson 166, 172). For example, Narbikova’s description of falling in love in
the novel subverts the reader’s expectations of falling in love, expanding on the
reinvigorated notion to the point that it, too, becomes cliché. Within a few words of the
introduction of a concept, the concept is made banal: Petia…

193 Porter 53. For more on gender in Narbikova see also Peterson, “Games Women Play” in Fruits of Her
Plume, and Adlam, who discusses gender as one aspect among many in establishing identity.
was horrified by the thought of how horribly she wanted to stop loving him. She knew that she loved him and only him and would never love another. That’s exactly why she wanted to stop loving him—so that she would never love anyone else. She knew for a fact that she would never love another, and so she wanted to stop loving him forever. She decided that she would try her hardest to stop loving him so that she would never love anyone else (Gessen, *Here* 45-6).

Eventually, Petia does stop loving Boris, and instead loves Gleb O.R. (whom she also wants never to stop loving), and then falls in love with Boris again. Petia’s love is not as inconstant as it may seem at first. The name of Gleb O.R. (Глеб Ил. И.) contains a marker of choice when placed next to Boris’. In other words, Petia loves Gleb or Boris. Gleb O.R. is inserted verbally and thus physically between Petia and Boris, so that the idea that “Petia loves only Boris” becomes “Petia loves only Gleb or (O.R.) Boris,” challenging the very possibility of loving *only* one person.

---

194 Boris and Gleb are the names of the first martyred Russian saints, who play a significant role in Russian culture as martyrs exemplifying the virtue of non-resistance to violence. In Orthodox iconography, the two almost always appear side by side, dressed in similar red garb. Narbikova’s choice of these venerable saints as models for Petia’s paramours is intentionally provocative.
Petia’s meditations on love sample from the cannon of Russian literature and its love-struck heroines. The narrator compares her to Karamzin’s Liza, Pushkin’s Tatiana, and Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina. Like Tolstaya, Narbikova targets both literary and political commonplaces. Larissa Rudova explains that Narbikova’s play with language is an attack on official discourse and clichés. She writes, “Contrasting the official, clichéd discourse with a more objective one is one of Narbikova's favorite literary methods. The resulting defamiliarization helps her to convey the realization of how Russian consciousness is conditioned by dead, trivial language that stands for nothing and conveys nothing” (72). Rudova, citing Peterson, also sees the "dual optic" of conceptualist art in Narbikova’s work (Peterson 169-71). She writes, “In the spirit of conceptualism, Narbikova creates a disjunction between linguistic ‘prefab’ expressions and her own words, and thus undermines the seriousness with which we receive official discourse. Inversely, by deconstructing the language hierarchy through the ‘dual optic,’ the official discourse penetrates and contaminates Soviet man's being and consciousness and makes him into a ‘quotation’”(72). In this scheme, identity itself is controlled by language. By performing a role in conformity with official discourse, a person loses control of his free will, and is restricted to a closed set of variables (Yurchak’s “block language”), thus becoming a quotation.

One way that Narbikova destroys clichés is by introducing the hybrid “andriusha” to attack them. In the novel, two men, Kostroma and Dyl, on a whim decide to make an “andriusha” (андрюша), a humanoid creature said to bring the creator

---

195 Porter interprets these analogies as part of a complex of metaphors which enhance Narbikova’s characters (Porter 52). I read them as empty intertexts meant to mock such comparisons. After all, the narrator’s explanation for these comparisons is “just because” (Porter 52).
happiness. They fertilize the egg of a black chicken by removing the egg white and replacing it with Kostroma’s sperm. They eat the chicken. The process of creating the andriusha is not explicitly sexual, though the shock value of two men, one of whom is androgynous (Dyl) creating offspring should not be discounted. The actual practice of producing the baby involves a series of steps akin to a spell or recipe, a parody of the resurgent folk remedies popular in the 1980s and 90s. Curiously, the creation of the andriusha is tied to the building of automata. Of the two methods available for creating an andriusha, building one out of mechanical materials is the standard method. When the men decide to create their hybrid andriusha, they trade the uncanny but controlled maneuvers of an automaton for the unpredictable behavior of a monstrous organism.

Like the Slynx, the andriusha is frightening because nobody can describe it. Its features are only a confluence of markers that render it invisible. Likewise, the creature does not quite speak in human language. The andriusha’s voice sounds like a tuned-out radio station. Narbikova writes,

it was impossible to tell what language it was, but it was clearly human speech, or at least speech resembling human speech. Kostroma listened to the andriusha

196 The name “Andriusha” is the diminutive form of Andrei, but also hints at the word “android.” Gessen translates this as “andy-baby.” I have chosen to use the term “the andriusha” to express both humanity and otherness.
197 The Gnezdo Group, Gennady Donskoi, Mikhail Roshal and Victor Skersis, protégés of Komar and Melamid, produced a series of actions in the 1970s which played with similar themes, and which serve as a possible intertext. They are named for their first action, Nest, in which the men sat on a large nest installed in the hall of culture at the Soviet exposition center, VDNKh. A second action Fertilizing the Earth, in which the three artists stripped and laid face down in a field in an attempt to fertilize the earth, took place in 1976. http://www.conceptualism-moscow.org The group is profiled briefly in The Russian Concept.
198 The theme of uncanny and potentially dangerous creatures made from experiments with automata and eggs has strong precedents in literature. I have already mentioned Hoffmann’s mechanical doll in “The Sandman,” and Mikhail Bulgakov’s story “The Fatal Eggs,” (Роковые яйца) (1924) a tale of laboratory-treated eggs hatching enormous, aggressive crocodiles and snakes instead of the chickens the experimenter intended.
talking and looked at him. He was hard to hear and even harder to see, but
Kostroma was able to see that he seemed to be folded in half along the nose line:
in profile, the little monster looked enough like a person, but when he looked at
him straight in the face, he appeared as a fuzzy line, and the very concept of
looking “straight in the face” became a bit fuzzy; this line had no eyes, mouth,
ears or anything (Narbikova *Here* 52-3).

на каком языке говорит, невозможно уловить, но это явно человеческая
речь, во всяком случае похожая на человеческую. Кострома слышал, как
андриуша говорит, и смотрел на него. Его было достаточно плохо слышно и
еще хуже видно, но все же Кострома увидел, что он как бы сложен пополам
по линии носа: в профиль он был вполне человек, этот монстрик, но когда
он поворачивался к нему прямо лицом, то представлял из себя размытую
линию, и само понятие "прямо лицом" становилось каким-то размытым
понятием; эта линия была без глаз, рта, ушей, без всего (Narbikova, *Okolo*
48-9).

This obfuscation of physical detail and interference with language are no mistake. Like
Kharms’ red-headed man who disappears through the process of physical description (the
story says that he has no eyes, ears, nose, hair, legs, etc., deconstructing his body as it
goes along until there is nothing left), the more the *andriusha* is described, the less we
see him, indeed, the less there is of him until he is no longer there.199

---

199 Narbikova’s *andriusha*, like Tolstaya’s furry, rolling creature, also seems to reference Sologub’s
*nedotykomka*. Kostroma alone sees and hears the sometimes-invisible creature.
The disappearance of the *andriusha* is typical of Narbikova’s work. She describes objects and places in very general terms, or as perceptions. This dissimulation makes Narbikova, as Peterson says “hard to read,” and creates a kind of total defamiliarization. Narbikova’s description of the *andriusha* intentionally makes the creature difficult to perceive, and this difficulty is deliberately tied to complications in understanding language (radio static and linguistic indeterminacy), and difficulties in the perception of two-dimensional images as human (the *andriusha* only looks like a person in profile). The *andriusha* is only the representation of the human, not the real thing. Language and images cannot be trusted.

The *andriusha* turns from uncanny monster to dangerous avenger, and murders his father, Kostroma, using some official Soviet medals that appeared several times earlier in the story as weapons. The *andriusha*, speaking to Kostroma in his sleep, demands that he kill his grandfather who is implicated as an executioner who worked for the Soviet authorities. Both Dyl and Petia accuse him of killing their grandparents, and Dyl also explains how Kostroma’s grandfather tortured and killed the black chicken, the *andriusha*’s mother. Kostroma refuses to kill his grandfather, and the *andriusha* retaliates:

[He] pierced Kostroma’s body with the pins from the medals. He used the medals to pin his insides to his skin. And he used the diamond pin to pierce his heart. And he dragged him down to the river and let him go with the current… And when Kostroma’s funeral was over, when his body had floated off… his body floating into the distance, was covered with junk—with little Oktiabrist star pins and Young Communist pins and factory pins all over…” (Gessen *Here* 60).
[Он] вколол ему в тело иголки орденов. Орденами он прилепил его внутренности к коже. И бриллиантовой булавкой проколол ему сердце. Он потащил его к речке и пустил по течению.... И когда кончились похороны Костромы, когда тело его уплыло вдаль... все его тело, уплывшее вдаль—было в дешевке: в значках, которые ржавеют: в октябрятских звездочках, комсомольских значках, значках ГТО, и в--прочем неблагородном металле... (Narbikova Okolo 56).

Kostroma, named for a town famous for its loyalty to the Tsar during the Time of Troubles, with a grandfather who served the Soviet regime, is tied through his lineage to violent periods in Russia’s history. Since he will not destroy the past (his grandfather), Kostroma is punished for his grandfather’s deeds. As the representative of Russia’s past, Kostroma is killed with its medals—the dead symbols of the past, and discarded like so much trash. The text emphasizes the cheapness of the medals, transformed from awards with real meaning indicating valuable information about the character of the person wearing them (they might have been received for bravery or service), into empty pins without meaning beyond allegiance to Communist discourse. When Kostroma is dumped into the river, the past is discarded, too. The andriusha plays the role of moral and cultural judge. At the same time, the andriusha is all impulse—a catalyst for moving the plot forward. The andriusha functions as a narrative device, moving the story forward despite the lack of a coherent or dynamic storyline. He is able to create effect without cause (the death of Kostroma) and cause without effect (no one notices Kostroma’s (or

---

200 An antecedent of the andriusha is the folkloric helper figure, who helps to move the plot along by appearing to the hero at an appropriate time to promote action. See Propp, Morphology.
Dyl’s) absence). After Kostroma’s death, the andriusha continues to intervene in the lives of the characters. He stands between Boris and his opponent when they fight a duel which closely resembles Pushkin’s famous, fatal duel. Boris is killed, and, while Petia mourns, the novel draws to a quick end in which crowds gather and fly away, like birds. The ending matches the conclusion to Tolstaya’s *The Slynx* in which two Oldener fly away with little explanation. In Narbikova’s text, the whole town transforms and flies away. It is, as she says in the last pages, “literature”—without moral or message, indeterminate like the andriusha.

The andriusha exists in a liminal space without language or form, between human and animal realms. He, like the Soviet Union, which was in the process of disintegration when the book was published, is the product of an experiment which promised happiness but brought destruction. In some ways, he is the embodiment of Narbikova’s authorial practice—obscure, difficult to read, hard on the ear, critical and destructive of the past.

Human-avian creatures appear in the work of Komar and Melamid who happily continued their assault on national and political symbols once they were well established in the United States by attacking symbols associated with US patriotism. For their *American Dreams* project (1996-7), they painted *The Wings will Grow* (1996-7), a portrait of George Washington as the father of the nation. He holds an eagle-headed baby with a human body, which he presents to the world in a gesture resembling one of Stalin’s glad-handing propaganda posters in its spatial arrangement. The imagery involved in this painting is all-American kitsch—including a healthy looking eagle-baby, held by George Washington, symbolizing the birth of the republic; the head of a bald
eagle, a national symbol associated with freedom; Washington’s military uniform, a symbol of military might; and the globe (with the US facing Washington and the USSR resting toward the viewer in shadow) representing global domination. While the imagery of the painting contains symbols of American mythology, it is executed in a socialist realist style. If not for the national attributes associated with the symbols involved, the painting might be part of the artists’ Nostalgic Socialist Realism series. Indeed, some of the paintings that are part of American Dreams include explicitly socialist realist imagery as a counterpoint to the imagery of US history with similarly authoritative implications.

Figure 15. *The Wings will Grow* (1996-7)

Figure 16. A fatherly Stalin

164
One such image, *Our Way of Life* (1992) (figure 17) features the now fully-grown eagle-man, striding forward in imitation of Vera Mukhina’s famous sculptural pair, *Factory Worker and Collective-Farm Worker* (Рабочий и колхозница) (1937) holding an enormous red flag and wearing a crisp white business suit. He strides into the bright future on his right foot, matching the footsteps of Mukhina’s (female) collective farm worker, a symbol of workers’ solidarity. The eagle is the physical embodiment of American freedom. The eagle-man is unaccompanied, marking his individualism, while his suit suggests business and capitalist enterprise. He holds aloft a red (Soviet) flag, emblazoned with the greenback-tinted portrait of George Washington on a shield covered in stars and stripes (bringing to mind America’s founding, the union of the states, and US currency). Two cherubs grace the scene, flying overhead, a parody of baroque-era religious art. The contradictory symbols coexist and feed equally into the image, frustrating interpretation.
As they painted *American Dreams* the artists were exploring American mythology, attempting to deconstruct it in much the same way that they did Soviet imagery in their parodies of socialist realist art. The paintings coincided with an opera composed by Dave Soldier entitled *Naked Revolution* featuring Lenin, Washington, and Marcel Duchamp (as the representative of the émigré’s artistic success in America) as its main characters. In the opera, this trio debate the nature of revolution, each having played a role in a political or artistic transformation (Dawson). Several of the paintings revive Soviet imagery when Russia’s capitalist economy was developing following the fall of the Soviet Union. This painting in particular reuses an iconic Soviet monument—
the factory worker and collective farm girl, at a time when Komar and Melamid had initiated a project to save Soviet monuments from destruction a few years earlier. 201

Komar and Melamid’s paintings attempt to turn the lens of the “dual optic” on the symbols of their adopted home, but critics reacted coolly to the work. 202 Jessica Dawson asserts that Washington’s cult of personality is much smaller than that of Soviet leaders. Perhaps, on the other hand, since Washington’s legacy is still celebrated, Americans were not prepared to reexamine his myth, nor to approach the cultural symbols that accompany it with an ironic sensibility. In any case, Komar and Melamid’s attempt to deconstruct the iconography of US power relies on kitsch, but fails to remythologize it. In fact, the images of Washington and Lenin are quotations from the artists’ collection of memorabilia including busts, souvenir portraits, and figurines. The use of the hybrid figure of the eagle-man is no doubt meant to underscore the mythological underpinnings of national pride. 203 Komar and Melamid’s juxtaposition of materials from the prop rooms of US and Soviet self-representation demonstrates a simple correlation between the two old rivals. Each nation participates in mythmaking, giving meaning to a carefully orchestrated collection of signs, which, Komar and Melamid suggest, might be interchangeable if the meanings associated with them were only reassigned.

201 Komar and Melamid, Monumental Propaganda. I discuss this project in chapter 1.
202 Dawson and Zimmer, two newspaper critics, both found the work repetitive or “wearisome.”
203 Judith Bernstock notes that Komar and Melamid previously presented Stalin and Lenin in the guise of the mythological minotaur as an ironic demonstration of their “legendary” status (155).
Dmitrii Prigov’s Bestiary series (1970s–2000s) is an exercise in the juxtaposition of arbitrary signs. It is a series of full-length portraits all executed in the same style, incorporating the mystical into the everyday. In the drawings, Prigov uses the aesthetic markers of Orthodox icons alongside grotesque portraits of writers, artists, and politicians. The series includes several of the artists and writers who appear in this dissertation, among others, such as Prigov himself, poets Lev Rubinstein, Vladislav Khodasevich, Marina Tsvetaeva, Iosif Brodskii; artists Sven Gundlakh, Sergei Anufriiev, Timur Novikov, Oleg Kulik; critic Boris Groys; author Vladimir Sorokin; and politicians Viktor Chernomyrdin, Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin.

Each drawing is executed in Prigov’s signature cross-hatching, with a stylized branch carved out in negative space over the image, obscuring some of the features of each figure. Each image contains several motifs familiar from Prigov’s other projects—the single eye with a red teardrop in the corner, one or more glasses of red wine, a dark sphere, and an egg with an irregular opening in its side. Each also contains white crosses resembling printers’ registration marks, two outlined triangles, one pointing up, the other down, a black square, a white square, and a white circle. Each figure stands inside a white ring containing the consonants in his or her last name. A small ring containing the first initial of the subject’s first name rests in one of the lower corners, while a ring or fumetti bubble with the vowels in the subject’s last name floats in one of the upper corners. The letters are obscured by the figure or stylized branch, but they can help to identify the subject, whose visage is profoundly distorted through the reinterpretation of Prigov’s pen.
The fragmented names not only reflect the pieced-together bodies, but also bring an element familiar from Orthodox icon painting to the works. In these works, famous figures who are expected to speak for the people in one way or another in their capacity as poets or statesmen take on an element of saintliness. It is worth noting that some Orthodox icons, church decorations, and manuscript illustrations depicted grotesque or hybrid creatures, particularly images of Saint Christopher, who was sometimes represented with a dog’s head, and that church décor (albeit mostly in Western Europe) often featured lush sculptural groups of bestiary animals. Prigov’s choice to use an icon-like format allows him to play a conceptualist game with names. Prigov’s names reference Orthodox tradition, in which names are shortened by the removal of vowels, which are sometimes suspended over the other letters. Abbreviated names are typically painted in above a figure’s head in icons in order to help the viewer identify the subject. While the shortening of certain words, including holy names such as “God” or “Jesus” was originally borrowed from Greek religious texts, the convention spread to other words in Orthodox writing, most likely to save space on parchment (Lunt 28). Of course, there was no shortage of Pravda, but Prigov’s use of the official party paper mocks its status as a “holy” text and a record of truth. In icon painting, truncated names became decorative, a marker of tradition. Drawing on this tradition, Prigov plays a conceptualist game with the names, separating the letters from one another and thereby increasing the difficulty of identification. In Prigov’s work, this linguistic game is an act of defamiliarization.

---

204 For more on bestiary figures in church architecture, see Hassig.
205 Monks often reused parchment, writing over previous text. Prigov’s use of Pravda as a writing surface was the contemporary Soviet version of this practice.
Prigov further defamiliarizes his subjects by transforming them into mythical monsters. He refers to his collection as a “portrait gallery” and a “bestiary”, but defies the conventions of both portraiture and bestiary writing. Bestiaries were popular illustrated books compiling information about the natural world—specifically animals and birds (sometimes treated separately in an aviary). They were ornamented with rich, fanciful illustrations and typically presented animals in a set order, beginning with the lion. They included real creatures as well as mythological ones, often hybrids. Some typical beasts include lions, beavers, dogs, owls, monkeys, manticores, griffins, and unicorns. The bestiary presented ostensibly factual statistical information about each creature such as its environment and diet, and also presented allegorical readings of each creation. The lion was perceived as noble, the owl evil.

Prigov offers no allegorical interpretation of his *Bestiary*, and most portraits in it neither resemble their subjects nor contain references to their interests, accomplishments, or personalities. The figures vary considerably in their manifestation of human and animal traits. Some figures have human features such as a human face, hands, beard, breasts, genitalia, or clothing such as robes or shoes. These features are combined with beaks, snouts, trunks, distended ears, fur, claws, horns, wings, spinal ridges, and paws. I will describe a few of these in more detail.

Prigov’s self-portrait shows him as a creature with a long, jointed neck, leaning forward over a large wine glass and dipping into a smaller wine glass with his long,

---

206 Little has been written on the topic of Prigov’s *Bestiary*. A collection of images was published along with an interview with Prigov by Dmitrii Shapoval, but the interview does not address the bestiary in depth. The book does provide biographies of some of the subjects pictured, but these are straightforward biographies without allegorical links to, or interpretations of, the drawings. A number of the portraits were included in Prigov’s retrospective at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in 2007, but the catalogue, too, provides no straightforward answers.
hooked beak. He supports himself on strong hind legs and reaches downward to grasp an empty egg with long-fingered human hands.

The portrait of Kulik is among the easiest to reconcile with its subject. Kulik appears on all fours, as in his performances as a dog, suspended over a large wine glass, the rim ringing his stomach. His back is spiny and hairless, and his feet each have four long claws. He rests one hand on an egg and sniffs at a bowl on the ground, his human head supported by a long neck. His hair and beard are long, recalling his appearance at the time of the Venice Bienniale, and his spiny back recalls an oft-printed photograph of the leashed and collared Kulik being led down a flight of steps.

Prigov’s portrait of Kulik’s friend and artistic collaborator Vladimir Sorokin also bears some familiar features. On his back with a giant wine glass resting on his stomach, Sorokin turns his beaked face to the side. His ears are long-lobed and pointed, but he is shown with long hair and sideburns as he appears in photographs. His four legs are hairy, with hands rather than paws, and his rear legs are stifle-jointed. He holds an egg aloft in one of his rear hands.

Prigov’s Vladimir Putin has a long, broad, rounded nose, dangling, pointed ears, and a long, curved neck with a ridged spine. Like Prigov, he reaches over a wine glass with his body, but appears seated, holding a circle or square in each of his four hands. He is bald, and his face bears a resemblance to the real Putin, particularly the eyes. In this context, the resemblance is jarring. Putin’s fellow politicians and predecessors are depicted more obscurely. Yeltsin peeks out from behind an enormous wine glass, crouching on the floor. He embraces the wine glass with one (human) hand, and holds a

---

207 A stifle joint is a rear-facing knee joint like that of a dog.
white circle in one of his rear paws. Yeltsin’s breasts and (erect) phallus are prominent (suggesting political potency?), more exposed than his face. His visible ear is long-lobed and pointed. Gorbachev also has both breasts and a (flaccid) penis (for political impotence?), and a pointed, long ear. He grasps a large egg in the curve of his elephantine trunk, and most of his face is covered by a medium sized wine glass. He holds two circles in his crossed human hands, and his crossed paws each cover a black or white square.

The *Bestiary* series demonstrates irreverence for those in powerful positions including politicians and artists, but also an element of mysticism. Prigov, like Komar and Melamid, places powerful figures on a mythological plane by transforming them into hybrid creatures, but adds the aura of saintliness. After his death, Prigov’s *Bestiary* series inspired a 2008 event at the National Centre for Contemporary Arts in Moscow. The press release for the event advertises a “multimedia action,” in which the “plot is based on the Bestiary theme with the individual mythology of D. A. Prigov representing the world and his immediate environment as cosmic animals… artists participating in the project associate themselves and people around them with certain animals (real or mystic) and their behavior” (NCCAM).

Prigov’s *Bestiary* differs from its model, a comprehensive encyclopedia of animals with detailed explanations of the physical characteristics, vital statistics, and allegorical meaning of each creature, in that it intentionally obscures the identity of each figure. Prigov’s subjects defy identification either as humans or as animals. The creatures are patchwork assemblages, made up of parts of different animals. Prigov’s “cosmic animals” are collages of physical traits redolent of the surrealist parlor game, “the
exquisite corpse.” In this game, a group of artists (usually four) was each given a part of the body to draw, and the parts lined up to form a complete figure. In Prigov’s drawings, each body part corresponds to its name and position in the body—each figure has a “head,” “torso,” “arms,” and “legs,” but the attributes come together as if they are part of a collage.

Reading the 78 portraits in the series is a kind of game wherein the viewer must first identify the subject by reading the exploded and hidden letters in their name. It is the name alone that establishes the identity of the subject. The drawings in the series are part of Prigov’s preoccupation with order and variation. His work contains several variations on alphabets and calendars. Prigov’s work is also full of names, which appear in poetry, or as text drawings, each carrying “the memory of the context from which it was borrowed” (Olskaia 47). In the Bestiary, the names trigger the viewer’s associations, but frustrate the process of identification. Reconciling the features of the grotesque monsters in the Bestiary with their subjects is challenging, and perhaps impossible. As the description of the Bestiary Opera explains, the cycle mines Prigov’s personal mythology, but he does not provide a key. Prigov’s wine glasses, eggs, and spheres provide little cultural “packaging” to help the viewer interpret the work.

---

208 The exquisite corpse originated with a word game in which participants provided different parts of speech to produce a sentence. This game produced its own name with an early variant: “le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau” (“the exquisite corpse drinks the new wine”). Conceptualist play with language and image has a strong precedent in the surrealists’ body of work.

209 See Breton and Adamowicz for more on the exquisite corpse and collage and how they are used in text and painting.

210 This number represents the portraits included in the retrospective exhibition at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in 2008, not the total number in the cycle.

211 Some of these objects appear in Prigov’s “Description of Objects,” wherein they are described in general terms that make them interchangeable. It is tempting to look for intertexts for these objects. Perhaps the wine glasses and spheres are quotations from Joseph Cornell’s Soap Bubble Set or the eggs borrowed from a Bosch altarpiece? Prigov provides no clues that to point to specific intertexts.
Prigov’s creatures are otherworldly, removing the subject from the mundane, real world of politics and art. They demand attention and create a space for meditation, an act central to Prigov’s artistic practice. For him, the act of mark making, composing, or reading poetry was tied to meditation. Several of his poems when read aloud took on a mantra-like drone. Prigov’s creatures grew out of his disciplined practice, and intentionally resist the assignment of meaning. The act of naming the subject does not necessarily indicate a relationship between the name and the image. Sign does not equal signified. The Bestiary defamiliarizes its subjects, and prolongs the process of perception.

**A Bestiary in the Summer Garden**

Olga Florenskaya’s *Taxidermy* project (discussed in chapter 1) includes *A Movable Bestiary (Передвижной бестиарий)* (1998), an outdoor installation set in St. Petersburg’s Summer Garden, featuring large stuffed animals in glassed display kiosks built by her husband and collaborator Alexander Florensky. The figures include a bear carrying a fruit and wine tray resembling a teddy bear in all but scale, an expandable metal fish, a boxing kangaroo, a military dog, and a round black cow with cuts of meat outlined on its flat skin. The series invokes various elements of the bestiary tradition, as well as Petersburg’s history, including Peter the Great’s *Kunstkamera*, the premier example of the Russian cabinet of curiosities, situated across the Neva River from the

---

212 For a sample of Prigov reading *Evgenii Onegin Pushkina*, drawing out the long vowel sounds, see http://www.soldatkuepper.de/puschkin.htm
213 I use the term kiosk in accordance with Florensky’s definition of large display cabinets in *Modest Architecture*, a project which coincides with this installation.
site of Florenskaya’s installation. Florenskaya explains that the motivation for her installation comes from the “old Russian tradition of setting up bestiaries, booths, and other animal-based attractions for the purpose of entertaining and educating the general public in places where the latter gathers in greatest number. In St. Petersburg during the times of Peter I and Catherine II there were aviaries and bestiaries in the Summer Garden and at Yekateringof, i.e. in places traditionally used by citizens for walks and relaxation” (“давной отечественный традиции устраивать разнообразные зверинцы, балаганы и прочие аттракционы с участием животных для развлечения и просвещения публики в местах ее массового скопления. Так, в петровские и екатеринские времена в Петербурге существовали птичники и зверинцы в Летнем Саду и Екатерингофе – традиционных местах гуляния и отдыха горожан”; Nicholson; Florenskaya 94-95). The attractions included, at different times, living and taxidermied animals.

Florenskaya’s Bestiary is a rich site of references, meanings, and associations set up in the public garden which is otherwise graced with statues of mythological and allegorical figures, adjacent to the Florenskys’ alma mater, the Mukhina Institute. The installation’s proximity to classical statuary imparts a mythological or allegorical significance to the sculptures. The figures play on associations with fantasy, storytelling,

\[214\] In 2000, the Florenskys were part of a group show in the wing of the Kunstkamera housing anatomical curiosities, in which they presented their sculpture Anatomical person in Peter’s Kunstkamera [Анатомическая персона в петровской Кунсткамере], a stylized human figure with an open abdomen stuffed with organs. The lungs inflated at the touch of a button (Romer). The piece references the anatomical theater in Peter’s Kunstkamera and the taxidermied human specimens that are part of the collection.

\[215\] Translated by John Nicolson.
children’s toys, Petersburg history, public sculpture, and taxidermy. The *Movable Bestiary* is a part of Florenskaya’s *Taxidermy* project, and like the other creatures in the group, the animals presented are not anatomically correct replicas. Like the medieval books describing and illustrating the creatures of the world both real and fantastic, as scientific phenomena and allegorical figures, Florenskaya’s *Bestiary* combines the demonstration of scientific knowledge with cultural associations. The animals included in Florenskaya’s bestiary are not all typical of medieval bestiaries. The dog and bear were frequently included, cattle bulls and fish were less frequently represented, and I know of no kangaroos in the traditional bestiary. While bestiary creatures had allegorical meanings, Florenskaya explains that her animals were chosen for the series of associations which arise unconsciously in the collective Russian mind at the mention of certain persistent archetypes… the bright, but sacrificial image of the working dog (ranging from “Pavlov’s dog” to the hero of the Soviet screen Mukhtar); the kangaroo-boxer (a circus figure in origin, but now an absolutely general type of character); the restaurant bear as depicted in Russian folk illustrations, an idiotic symbol of the Russian drinking party; the submissive ‘beef’, a potential source of ragouts and chops; and, of course, the sizeless fish—that unfailing hero of fisherman’s tales and stories” (Nicolson 95).

ассоциативным рядом, бессознательно возникающим в коллективном мозгу нашего соотечественника при упоминании устойчивых архетипов… светлый жертвенный образ собаки на службе у человека в диапазоне от "собаки Павлова" до Мухтара. Сюда же относятся и
"кенгуру-боксер", сугубо цирковой, но ставший уже общим местом персонаж; и лубочный ресторанный мишка, идиотский символ русского кутежа; покорная "говядина", потенциальный источник рагу и отбивных и, разумеется, безразмерная рыба—непременный герой рыбачьих баек и анекдотов (Florenskaya 94).

Thus, Florenskaya’s bestiary is not made up of scientifically accurate copies, but fantastic imaginative representations of culturally constructed abstractions. They look like toy stuffed animals and their relationship to cultural associations with their models is fully emphasized. Those associations are revealed in the catalog with documents relating to each animal. In particular, the catalog emphasizes each animal's significance in popular culture—the catalog includes a poster for a movie about a boxing kangaroo, photographs of heroic and experimental dogs, photographs of restaurant bears and stuffed toys, and a butcher’s map showing the different cuts of meat from Elena Molokhovets’ late 19th century housekeeping guide, A Gift to Young Housewives (Figure 19).
Florenskaya classifies stuffed animals, or “chuchelos,” according to four types: ritual, scientific, memorial, and household.\textsuperscript{216} Ritual chuchelos are those made with spiritual intent, such as mummies, or for a specific purpose such as frightening away spirits; scientific chuchelos are those used for study; memorial chuchelos are the preserved remains of famous or beloved animals; and household chuchelos include hunting trophies meant to exemplify the bravery of the hunter. Each of the figures in Florenskaya’s bestiary fits into more than one of these categories.

Florenskaya’s bear, a symbol often associated with Russia, has the dimensions and attributes of a real bear. It is four or five feet tall, with fur, claws, and teeth. Florenskaya’s bear is covered in soft, brown faux fur, and the contours of its body are rounded and stylized in the manner of a teddy bear. Its teeth and claws appear plush rather than sharp. Its eyes are plastic or glass. The bear appears to be smiling as it holds a silver tray with fake fruits and a bottle of wine, in imitation of the taxidermied bears who

\textsuperscript{216} In Russian, the word “chuchelo” is used for stuffed animals as well as scarecrows.
stood in restaurants and aristocratic homes in the 19th century. These bears were trophies, what Olga Florenskaya identifies in her classification of “chuchelos” as a household chuchelo. The bear calls to mind several intertexts, including the bear from *War and Peace*, circus bears, folk art, the bear in Tatiana’s dream in Puskhin’s *Eugene Onegin*, Russian cartoons, Platonov’s blacksmith bear from *The Foundation Pit*, and the 1980 Moscow Olympic mascot to name but a few. In Pelevin’s story, *Omon Ra*, when Henry Kissinger asks to go on a bear hunt—the authorities provide a canned hunt, with a soldier dressed as a bear. The bear is a symbol of Russian national identity for both Russians and others, used to represent Russia in innumerable political cartoons. Komar appears in the guise of a bear in one of the nostalgic socialist realism series.

Florenskaya’s bear fits into at least two categories—it is a household chuchelo (a trophy in that it represents a hunting exploit,) as well as a restaurant bear, and a toy teddy bear. It is a scientific chuchelo in its museum-like setting, in imitation of educational specimens. The stuffed bear is the ultimate fantasy of the bear as a domesticated animal, transformed into domestic décor.

---

217 According to Alexander Borovsky, Florenskaya’s restaurant bear references the bear that stood in the famous Palkin’s restaurant which was popular with Petersburg’s elite, including a fair number of writers and artists, in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Borovsky 96-7). Incidentally, the kitchen of that restaurant served fresh sturgeon from its in-house tank (Matich, “Nevsky”). Lev Tolstoy’s Moscow home (now a museum) contains a stuffed bear who holds a tray for visiting cards.
Florenskaya’s bear performs a human function and takes on a kind of human subjectivity as a waiter. The cow and fish are not theriomorphs, per se, but realizations of human fantasy, both related to food. The cow, a three dimensional butcher’s map, represents the desire for hygienic sanitary food and minimizes the violence of the slaughter (compare Figure 20 and Figure 22). The map on the cow’s body, as Mieka Erley points out, is a metonym of the city of St. Petersburg, laid out on a grid over natural space—imaginary order superimposed over nature (Erley, “Anatomizing Modernity”). At one time, she writes, the enterprising tourist could visit the Meat

218 Erley’s study of the cow as a map of St. Petersburg has an online component. A visitor to the website can navigate the city by clicking on various sections of a cow’s body in silhouette. The project is part of a larger study of Andrei Bely’s novel Petersburg, and the history of the city, and contains Bely’s description of the slaughterhouse, as well as representations of the meat industry by other artists. Erley mentions that consumers at the time, much like Petersburg’s contemporary residents who purchase their meat at meat
Museum on the outskirts of the city where the stockyards stood, to learn about the latest hygienic techniques of the slaughterhouse (Erley, “Meat” 262). The clean, neatly subdivided body of the cow was a reassuring illustration of cleanliness for the consumer. Florenskaya’s cow also questions language as a strictly human attribute, and as a useful tool for describing the world. The smiling cow solicitously sticks out its tongue, labeled “язык” (tongue, language). The cow, devoid of language, (thus, according to the traditional paradigm, inferior to the humans who name, partition, and consume it) is artificially divided up by words written directly on its body. As in Prigov’s Bestiary, the different parts are named according to cuts of meat—instead of “arm,” “leg,” and “torso,” the cow is divided into “neck,” “roast beef,” and “filet.”

The fish is a representation of the fisherman’s fantasy catch, the expanding mechanism proof of the veracity of the fisherman’s tall tale (I caught one this big, s/he says, holding his or her hands apart to demonstrate length). Like the bear, the dog and kangaroo fulfill human functions. The dog carries ammunition and telephone equipment, becoming a war hero in the process. This particular specimen, a stylized dog with pointy ears, reminds Florenskaya of the heroic dogs whose remains are preserved in museums, and who became part of Soviet popular culture (Florenskaya 25, 94). It is a memorial, household, and scientific chuchelo. The kangaroo enters an imaginary ring to counters and supermarkets in cellophane or paper wrappers, had no notion of where their meat came from, much less the anatomy of the animal.

219 A Kabakov drawing shows a cow in pieces, like a puzzle, with the inscription, “Telenok?” (calf?) as if to reverse Magritte’s assertion. Instead of Magritte’s negative statement, “This is not a pipe”, Kabakov gives us the question, “Is this a calf?” At the same time, the image calls to mind children’s puzzles and educational materials.

220 The map of the cow’s body contains a national element, too. Butcher’s maps from different countries label and apportion the cuts differently.

221 In the medieval bestiary, dogs were thought to have healing powers.
do battle with a human opponent. Dressed in boxing gloves made for human hands and wearing a participation number, the kangaroo enacts human desire. The human fascination with sport and competition is superimposed upon the kangaroo.

Florenskaya’s boxing kangaroo has its basis in popular images. Typically associated with Australia, the boxing kangaroo is an oddity indeed in St. Petersburg. The idea of the boxing kangaroo grew into a popular culture cliché following its appearance in sideshows and films. Florenskaya references these popular images in particular, and adds racing stripes to the kangaroo’s back, and a competition number on its chest. Placing a kangaroo in the ring with a human puts the two on equal footing. However, placed on display as a specimen and work of art, the kangaroo raises ethical questions and issues related to humans forcing animals to act out their whims and to play a human’s part.

Florenskaya’s sculptures both subvert and reestablish the Bestiary theme. She transforms a traditionally written and illustrated form into sculpture and does not offer an allegorical reading. Like the bestiary, the figures provide a narrative of national identity and human domination over other animals, even as they put such associations and assumptions into question.\footnote{Zurab Tsereteli, a sculptor patronized by Russian leaders, created a series of animal sculptures depicting folktales which are on display not far from the Kremlin in Moscow. These sculptures seem evidence enough of the relationship between animals and national identity, in this case, a revival of the past as evidence of a new order. Balina, Gosciło, and Lipovetsky write about the political uses of the folktale in their book \textit{Politicizing Magic}.} The sculptures take up public space in the place of monuments, and throw the constructed quality of animal and human identity, and of nation, into bold relief.
The Life, Politics, and Economy of Insects

Artist Ilya Kabakov uses the idea of the museum collection in his installation *The Life of Flies*. The piece brings into play the idea of taxidermy on a very small scale, with the bodies of dead flies grouped together for display. The piece takes place on both a small and grandiose scale—small in that it treats the fly as subject, large in that it takes up multiple rooms filled with a large quantity of objects; global in scope in that the piece deals with flies as if they were humans and treats them as a global population. The flies are displayed in four rooms, each of which deals with one or more aspects of fly society—economics, finance, politics, fine art, civilization, “tabular poetry,” and music. The installation, saturated with official documents and statistics about the fly population, is a parody of the provincial museum, a smaller version of the natural history museum (sometimes functioning as several museums in one, incorporating science, history, art, and technology), and a cousin of the cabinet of curiosities.

Kabakov, who worked officially as a children’s illustrator during the Soviet period, began his unofficial work making albums—collections of drawings with a narrative structure to be performed, often dealing with alternate identities or worlds. They include *The Flying Komarov*, part of the *Ten Characters* series of albums he drew in the early 1970s, in which city dwellers take to the sky and float in a circle amid everyday objects such as coat racks and tea cups. He is also known for installations, beginning with apartment exhibitions, in which he created spaces for imagined characters out of found objects, such as *The Man who Never Threw Anything Away* (1985-88)...

---

223 “Komarov” comes from the Russian word for mosquito. Many of Kabakov’s human characters fly, whether by unexplained means or with the help of technology.
room with carefully labeled pieces of garbage hanging from the ceiling and walls; and

*The Man who Flew into Space from his Apartment* (1984)—a room with a mattress and launching apparatus (a giant slingshot), lined with propaganda and scientific drawings. His work transformed everyday Soviet space into a framework for fantasy, and changed discarded items into art.

Kabakov is among the most successful Soviet émigré artists, and also one of the most prolific. Criticism of Kabakov is so abundant that one reviewer called the response to his diverse body of work, the “Kabakov Phenomenon” (Schlegel). Critics often comment on his multiple identities as a Ukrainian-born Jewish artist from Moscow who lives in New York City and who travels and exhibits internationally, and tie his motifs of collecting and escape to his conflicting émigré desires to remember and to forget his past. Svetlana Boym, in particular, ties the evocation of Soviet space in his “total installation”—the method by which he transforms the white box of the gallery into dimly-lit, narrow passages with duotone paint that evoke Soviet public interiors (communal apartments, bathrooms, and museums)—to nostalgia. The fly, one of Kabakov’s most frequent subjects, is the exemplar of banality, but capable of

---

224 *The Man who Never Threw Anything Away* deals with the cataloguing of objects, a common theme in Kabakov’s work. The collection of garbage reveals the emptiness of signs—anything may be valuable or insignificant, but the collector is unable to read the signs, and “since he doesn't know what anything means, he keeps everything” (Graham-Dixon). Narbikova references this installation in *Okolo Ekolo*—Petia, Kostroma, and Dyl find a suitcase with Soviet medals in Kostroma’s grandfather’s house, in which everything is labeled.

225 Kabakov has been presented as an American artist at the Whitney Biennial, a survey dedicated to American Artists, in 1997, and represented Russia at the Venice Bienale in 1993 (Wallach, “Lost” 80). Wallach’s “Lost” details Kabakov’s rise to fame in the United States, while “Prodigal” describes Kabakov’s return to Russia in 2004 as an event worthy of paparazzi. Loughery describes Kabakov’s work as a dismal meditation on communal living, and cynics such as Kuspit argue that Kabakov is out of his element beyond the iron curtain, or that he borrowed his methods from Western artists (even though he began using his techniques long before he left the Soviet Union) (Melikian). Russian critics applaud his exhibitions in Russia, and bemoan his continuing cult status there in comparison with his reputation abroad (Eremena and Samosenko, Bavil’skii “Retrospektiva”).
transcendence through flight, and the perfect analog of the Soviet citizen. Boym writes, “flies in Kabakov’s installations are subjected to infinite taxonomies and systems of State control. They are accused of sabotage and international conspiracy, dissected, disempowered, immobilized, aestheticized and extinguished…. Yet, the flies have an infinite capacity for evading regulations and circulating without a visa from one world to another” (Boym, Future 320). Boris Groys and Kabakov argued as to whether Kabakov’s installations represented the simulacrum of Soviet space or a separate reality. While Groys argued that the installation revealed simulation, Kabakov asserted that the work created two real spaces: the “real” of the physical objects, and the “real” space of the artistic work (Lipovetsky, “Russian Literary Postmodernism” 35). Kabakov’s installations create a space between the real and the simulated, where a mundane space is built within another space to create an imagined reality.

Kabakov’s 1992 installation in Cologne, The Life of Flies (Das Leben der Fliegen or Жизнь мух), transforms the everyday into fantasy. He placed images of flies in various arrangements around each room, along with information about the politics, philosophy, and economy of the creatures, written in a didactic tone. Much of the information also referred to Soviet society, but some to global culture. Dead flies hung in formations in each part of the installation, and each of the four rooms was filled with fly artifacts and fly data. Room three—“The Civilization of Flies”—contained a table and framed documents, as well as a swarm of flies suspended from the ceiling. Room four—“The Fly as a Subject and Basis for Philosophical Discourse”—contained a wall of framed documents, and a long table and chairs with reading materials. One critic complained that the sheer quantity of objects on display indicated a self-importance
disproportionate to substance on Kabakov’s part, but quantity is part of Kabakov’s *raison d’être* (Kuspit). The exhibit is exemplary of Kabakov’s concept of the “total installation” wherein the installation transforms the space itself rather than simply fitting into an existing “white walls” room. His plans for the installation include lighting, sound, and structural elements, immersing the viewer in the experience of the installation. The world of the flies is meant to be a microcosm of our own. The flies take on human roles, but, from the official point of view, they function as objects for statistical evaluation. This is anthropology for flies. This parody of the provincial museum raises the question of what such displays can tell us about ourselves. In addition to being a place of empty, didactic facts devoid of real meaning, the provincial museum reenacts the process of nostalgia by gathering unrelated and banal objects and constructing a narrative around them. In Vladimir Nabokov’s story “Visit to the Museum” such a museum serves as the portal through which the narrator makes a return to his native land, full of both nostalgia and fear. Boym asserts that, “what Kabakov’s projects ‘install’ is not space, but time. If Past and Future are embodied in the installation in the shapes and location of the objects, the Present is personified by the visitor… [who] catches herself thinking that time has stopped, and periodically asks herself a metaphysical question: Where am I?” (Boym 326). Kabakov’s installations deliberately obscure the answer.

---

226 Kabakov outlines his ideas about the “total installation” in *On the Total Installation*, a manifesto of sorts.
227 The museum is also a self-reflexive metaphor for Kabakov’s own artistic practice of collecting and labeling objects.
228 Livers points out that Pelevin’s insects ask this same question, while only one asks “Who am I?” suggesting that location and origin are tied to identity, an idea often tied to memory and language in émigré literature.
Kabakov’s interest in flies carries over into his collaborations with other artists.\(^{229}\) He paired with experimental composer Vladimir Tarasov to create *Concert for Flies* (1993) as part of *The Life of Flies* exhibit, but the piece also functions separately. In the piece, a group of flies are positioned over a sheet of music, with additional notations on the side and bottom. The piece is accompanied by Tarasov’s soundtrack of the sound of flies buzzing. Kabakov explains, “Many think that the buzzing of a fly is monotonous and tiresome, almost unbearable to the human ear...between the monotonous humming of a fly and Bach’s Fugue in B Major there may be blood relations...” (Kabakov 113). As proof, Kabakov describes a scientific experiment in which computers analyzed the sound of buzzing and found it to be polyphonic (Kabakov 113). The work seems to suggest that the flies are capable of reading human musical notation, a human language. Moreover, Kabakov’s tongue-in-cheek comparison between the buzzing of flies and a bach fugue is a provocative assault on the notion of superiority over animals, especially insects. To add insult to injury, Kabakov proposes that flies are capable of producing music equal to that of a genius (a human superior to other humans). True, the “monotonous” buzzing of the fly might be compared to the repetition and variation of the polyphonic fugue, and the fluttering of wings to the vibration of the piano strings, but the equivalency undermines the use of music and art alongside language as justifications of human dominance over other animals.\(^{230}\) In Kabakov’s invented worlds, humans and flies are one and the same.

\(^{229}\) He appeared in a film by Jan Fabre dressed as a fly to Fabre’s beetle. Fabre is known for making sculptures with jewel beetles, sometimes covering large surfaces such as decorative ceilings with thousands of them. He also works in theater (Searle 14).

\(^{230}\) Of course, animals are often depicted playing instruments in folk imagery and children’s books, particularly the violin-playing cricket.
The performance took place at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), as part of a series allowing visual artists to take over multiple aspects of a performance (Wallach, “Lost”).

Kabakov’s paintings and installations often feature bits of overheard or imagined conversation.
The dance itself describes a love story between two flies, the disapproval of the fly community, and ensuing scandal (Rule number six forbids the incitement of scandal). The argument grows until the frenzied residents attack the romantic couple, transforming them into human-fly hybrids with fly heads and human bodies. The pair dance a pas de deux to music meant to evoke Romeo and Juliet (148). Following this interlude, the action picks up again, then ceases as a single fly attempts a balletic leap, fails, and falls “like the ‘dying’ swan” (149). The flies act out the scripted love story of the human ballet, while the old women remain rooted to the spot throughout. In Kabakov’s libretto, even the individual fly who strikes out on its own is doomed to play a pre-written role, unable to escape. Viktor Pelevin’s insects find themselves trapped in similar roles, playing out scripted human dramas.

In Viktor Pelevin’s novel The Life of Insects (Жизнь насекомых) (1994), insects also play human roles. They discuss business ventures, fall in love, and brood over existential questions, taking on a kind of human-insect subjectivity. The novel quotes liberally from films and literature, and the characters act out roles according to the actions of their predecessors (Genis, “Borders”; Livers, “Bugs”). One vignette leads into the next, with elements of one story leading into the next, and one world contained within another. Characters pass one another on the way to the beach, fall under another insect’s deadly heel, mistake fireflies for distant lanterns, or hide out in the tube of someone’s marijuana-filled papyrosa. Human figures transform into insects, and

---

233 The Dying Swan (1907) is a short solo choreographed by Michel Fokine for the celebrated Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova.
234 According to Genis, these intertexts include Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” Karel and Joseph Capek’s From the Life of Insects, Buddhism, and Ivan Krylov’s “The Dragon-Fly and the Ant.”
235 A Russian style of cigarette, a hollow tube with a flattened end, partly filled with tobacco.
several characters transform from one type of insect to another—an ant becomes a fly, a
cicada becomes a cockroach (and attempts to transform back again), and a moth becomes
a firefly.

The fact that the characters are insects is disguised at first through the
defamiliarization device of describing them in human terms for the first several pages.
The story begins with three businessmen discussing opportunities in the Crimea—two
Russians and an American—Arnold, Arthur, and Sam Sucker. The figures transform
unexpectedly into mosquitoes after a few pages of dialogue. Pelevin breaks the illusion
of realism abruptly, not pausing to describe the transformation process. The characters
simply leap over a balcony and transform into (or reveal themselves as) mosquitoes
(Pelevin Zhizn’ 158-9). The product under discussion turns out to be human blood, and
the foreign Sam makes the mistake of sampling too much tainted product, the cologne-
infused blood of a sleeping Russian—a national cliché.

The novel parodies and samples multiple genres and tropes, here the story of a
foreign businessman on a bender who falls in love with a Russian girl (Natasha, an ant-
turned-fly). After drinking the cologne, “Russian Forest”—a travesty of Russian national
mythology linking the forest with the Russian soul, as Livers points out—Sam becomes a
nationalist fanatic (Livers “Bugs” 5). Sam accuses Arthur of parasitism, saying, “You
suck Russian blood, don’t you?” (“...ведь сосешь русскую кровь”Bromfield Insects 14;
Pelevin Zhizn’ 167). The accusation resonates with Russia’s history of xenophobia, but
in Pelevin’s hands, the threat has a humorous side—these are mosquitoes, after all—of
course they drink Russian blood. Livers argues that the use of “Russian Forest” as a

236 Translated by Andrew Bromfield.

190
cologne reveals the falsehood of signs (5). Sam’s outrage has nothing to do with reality. Sam falls in love with the Russian girl Natasha, who was born an ant but opted to transform into a fly in an act of rebellion against her long-suffering mother. She and Sam have a whirlwind romance (including a brief erotic interlude in the overwrought style of a romance novel). Natasha perishes tragically in a flypaper accident.

Other insects also experience tragedies and setbacks. A young dung beetle witnesses the grisly death of his father and mentor under the heel of the red shoe of Marina, Natasha’s mother. His is a coming of age story—he steels himself and moves forward, pushing his ball of dung before him. Mitya, a firefly whose reckless youth as a light-seeking moth brought him close to danger, has existential conversations about the meaning of light with his friend Dima leading up to a midlife revelation: “There’s just one thing I don’t understand,” he says, “Have I just turned into a firefly or was I always one?” (Вот только одного я не могу понять. Я стал светлячком только что или на самом деле был я всегда?]; Bromfield, Insects 86; Pelevin Zhizn’ 246)]. Archibald, an ailing mosquito who drinks preserved blood cocktails from a glass bottle, apologizes to his disapproving friends, “my mother was a ladybug and my father was a cockroach. I’ve no idea what I am” (“Мать была божья коровка... а отец таракан”; Bromfield, Insects 91; Pelevin Zhizn’ 252). Livers points out that Archibald’s identity crisis and subsequent search for self is devoid of real meaning—a cliché (Livers 6). In a vain attempt to reclaim his mosquitohood, Archibald flies out to sea with his friends and is swatted out of the sky by the fly, Natasha.

Two of the stories reveal the pre-made fantasies to which Pelevin’s insects fall prey: the story of Marina, who plays out the drama she sees in a French film in her own
life, and Seryozha, a cicada who immigrates to New York in search of paradise. Marina, new to town, decides to go to the movies, where she sees a French film on a large television screen. She sees a model of happiness in the film, a romantic story with a strong male lead, and inserts herself into its narrative. Pelevin writes, “the man loved a lot of women… Marina could see his back was very reliable (in her imagination she even pressed her own cheek against it), but he always left his women weeping in hotel bedrooms on foggy mornings, and somehow this didn’t affect the reliability of his back in the slightest.” (Мужчина любил очень многих женщин… Марина ясно видела, что спина у мужчины очень надежная (она даже сама мысленно припала к ней щекой), но, с другой стороны, он только и делал, что туманным утром бросал заплаканных женщин в гостиничных номерах, и на надежности его спины это не сказывалось никак; Bromfield Insects 35-6; Pelevin Zhizn ’ 189-90). Marina decorates her mundane surroundings in preparation for the happiness shown in the film.

She builds her burrow, she waits for a mate to appear. When Nikolai, an ant and military officer finally finds his way to her burrow, she sees the man of her fantasy: “it was him, or almost him, only his hair wasn’t brown, it was ginger, and instead of a sheepskin coat he was wearing a military coat dusted with snow and featuring a major’s lapels” (“Это был он или почти он, только не брюнет, а рыжий, и вместо дубленки на нем была заснеженная шинель с майорскими погонами; Bromfield Insects 68; Pelevin Zhizn ’ 226. Marina's reality continually falls short of her desires, but she continues to reenact the film's script until Nikolai perishes during a night at the theater when he falls down the stairs. His fellow ants, unable to save him, consume and dismember him, wrapping his limbs in newspaper for Marina to eat later. Livers writes
that in eating her husband, “Marina satisfies not so much a literal hunger as she does her
nostalgia for a 'paradise lost'—a purely imagined state of happiness and past wholeness”
(Livers, “Bugs” 15). She regrets that her life did not turn out like the movie, but soon
moves on to a different script. She gives birth to a daughter, Natasha, and reads the pages
of the newspaper in which her husband’s limbs were wrapped, which contain an
ideologically motivated essay on motherhood, emphasizing the three pillars of biology,
citizenship, and national pride. The essay, in Livers' view, “demonstrates the extent to
which the projections of ideology misrepresent the reality of the body” (13). Marina is
unable to live up to the expectations of the essay. It does not provide an adequate
narrative for her to act out, and instead, she quotes passages from the article throughout
the remainder of her existence. Marina’s quotation of the ideological text underscores the
limited existential choices of human beings, particularly in a society wherein signs are
devoid of meaning.

Marina’s cockroach compatriot, Seryozha, digs his way through an underground
city, unearthing various objects which indicate different stages in life. His life, digging
through “the soft Russian loam (which one day turned out to be the noble black earth of
Ukraine),” leads him to breakfast, work, lunch, and home again; (в мягком российском
суглинке (который однажды утром неожиданно оказался благодатным
черноземном Украины” Bromfield, Insects 138; Pelevin 304). The daily grind
disturbs him and changes him physically: he grows extra limbs, and decides to grow a

---

237 Seryozha’s daily grind resembles the gameplay of Pelevin’s story “Prince of Gosplan,” in which the
hero navigates office space and game space simultaneously. He is locked in a similar loop of repetitive
gestures and levels. The reference to Russian earth becoming Ukraine is to the dissolution of the Soviet
Union. Ukraine declared independence in 1991, and many other states followed soon after. For Seryozha,
the earth is all the same regardless of country or political status.
mustache. His life is comfortable until one day, at a party, he is alarmed when his colleagues inform him that he has transformed into a cockroach. Distressed, he removes his mustache with a razor. In crisis, Seryozha consults a trusted friend who suggests he emigrate to America. He takes the advice seriously and bribes his way to an invitation and visa. Once settled and comfortable in New York (he unearths an office everyday, as in Ukraine), he learns that he has once again turned into a cockroach, and once again shaves his mustache. Upset, he digs his way to a bar, where he realizes that he must dig upward. On his way, he unearths an advertisement with the word “PARADISE” written on it, and finally realizes that he has been striving toward death his entire life.

Pelevin’s characters do not enact dramas on our behalf with a didactic moral or message, but rather, act out our scripted dramas. Pelevin frustrates the expectations of a public accustomed to reading Aesopian language for meaning by making his story metafictional. It is a game with generic markers and quotations from other texts. A mysterious, silver-cloaked (or winged) figure comes to clean up the mess of Natasha’s flypaper-bound body. “Let me through please” the figure asks, “And if you’re feeling sad, try rereading page 51” (Разрешите пройти... А если вам стало грустно, перечитайте страницу двести шесть; Pelevin Zhizn’ 350) on which the philosophical duo Dima and Mitya are having a hypothetical discussion about a fly stuck on flypaper: “if you show a dead man a fly stuck on flypaper with music playing, and you make him think for second that this fly is him, then he’ll burst into tears out of compassion for his fellow corpse” (если мертвецу показать... муку на липучке под музыку, да ещё заставить на секунду почувствовать, что эта муха -- он сам, то он немедленно заплачет от сострадания к собственному трупу” Bromfield Insects 50; Pelevin 206).
This joke isn’t exactly vaudeville. Pelevin’s joke is metatextual, a reminder of the constructed nature of the text which only collapses back on itself. The text begins to quote itself as if restricted to a limited set of narrative possibilities. The segment, contrary to its emphasis on human identification with the fly, undermines this very process by demonstrating that Natasha—and her tragic death—are nothing but a quotation.

As the novel progresses, the substitution of insects for humans becomes less noticeable; their shifts from one insect to another cease to surprise. Locked into their prefabricated narratives, the insects are unable to escape, even through physical transformation. The stories are familiar, and it is easy to superimpose human identities on insect bodies. The singular character who might be said to manifest “spiritual” transformation is Mitya, who spends the narrative talking philosophy with his friend Dima, who he realizes belatedly is himself (the Russian habit of shortening names briefly obscures the fact that both young men [or insects] are "Dmitrii"). While Mitya/Dima’s story is a travesty of the Lacanian mirror, Mitya, as Livers points out, is the only insect to ask “who am I?” rather than “where am I going?” as the others do. Locked into their assigned narratives, the insects inevitably become less self-aware as they act out their roles.

Pelevin’s insects are both theriomorphs and shapeshifters. They play human roles as insects, sometimes inhabit human bodies, and change from one type of insect to another. The insects’ ability to transform from one thing to another places them in the category of shapeshifters, though the shift is often devoid of meaning. It may be not the shift itself that is important to Pelevin, but rather the fact of transformation. After all,
Pelevin’s interest in shapeshifters is longstanding, beginning with a story about werewolves—another investigation of self-discovery through transformation.

*Reservoir Dogs: Shapeshifters and Animal Embodiment*

Pelevin's story “A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia” (“Проблема верволка в средней полосе”) (1998) deconstructs the werewolf story.\(^{238}\) The story follows Sasha, a city boy who finds himself on the road to the provincial village of Konkovo, home to the Michurin collective farm, a nearly empty place with a plaster statue of Lenin at the gate. He is prompted to visit Konkovo when he finds a color photograph of the village in his children’s encyclopedia, and decides to travel to it, in hopes of living out fantasies taken from village prose.\(^{239}\) Village prose, exemplified by the writing of Valentin Rasputin, Vladimir Soloukhin, and Vasili Shukshin, among others, focused on rural life. Frequently these authors told the story of one character’s homecoming after a long absence. This kind of writing, a "retreat" from the urban stories of the previous generation, became popular during Khrushchev’s *thaw*, and often depicted village life in an idealized light, with a nationalist subtext: in the depths of Russia, in the hinterlands, "true Russia" could be found, where good people lived in harmony with nature, or at least would if the government and history would just leave them alone. Like other works of socialist realism, these stories contained stock characters—characters that condition Pelevin's character Sasha’s expectation of meeting kind old men and women in Konkovo, people who resemble such "righteous ones" as Solzhenitsyn's Matryona in his famous

\(^{238}\) For more on Pelevin and folkloric themes, see Etkind, “Stories.”
\(^{239}\) For more on the nationalist leanings of village prose, see Parthe, *Village.*
story "Matryona's Home" (first published in 1963). Pelevin, uninterested in patriotism, nationalism, or ideology in any form, in his "Werewolf Problem" parodies the style, characterization, and motifs of the heartfelt stories of village prose writers.

Sasha imagines that he will hitch a ride with “that mythical driver, the kind you encounter in newspaper stories and films, who would stare silently through the dusty windscreen of his truck at the road ahead for the entire journey and then refuse any payment with a curt shake of his head” (обещанного многими газетами и фильмами шофера, который всю дорогу молча будет взглядываться в дорогу через пыльное ветровое стекло грузовика, а потом коротким движением головы откажется от денег”; Pelevin “Problem” 2; Pelevin “Problema 65). The image of the driver, a character who appears frequently in village prose and in the films featuring such actors as Shukshin himself, is so well established in Sasha’s mind that he even envisions an old photograph of a group of paratroopers, presumably the driver’s comrades-in-arms, posted above the steering wheel. However, the drivers headed toward Konkovo do not behave in accordance with Sasha’s pre-written narrative. Instead, his hopes are dashed: every passing vehicle leaves him in the dust, and one driver even takes the time to give him the finger. His disappointment grows as he nears the village. Pelevin writes,

He had imagined his trip would be quite different… there would be half-crazy old women sitting peacefully among the sunflowers, and clean-shaven old men playing chess quietly beneath the broad yellow discs of the blossoms…. He would make his way to the edge of the village to find a forest basking in the sun, a river with a boat drifting by it or some country road cutting through an open field, and whichever way he walked, everything would be simply wonderful: he
could light a fire, he could remember his childhood and climb trees… In the evening he would hitch a lift to the train (Pelevin “Problem” 3-4)  

В воображении поездка представлялась совсем иначе… мирно сидят выжившие из ума старухи, кругом растет подсолнух, и под его желтыми блюдцами тихо играют в шахматы на дощатых серых столах бритье старики… вот он выходит на окопицу, и открывается прогретый солнцем лес, река с плывущей лодкой или разрезанное дорогой поле, и куда ни пойди, всюду будет замечательно: можно развести костер, можно вспомнить детство и полазит по деревьям… Вечером – на попутных машинах к электричке (Pelevin “Problema” 67-8).

Sasha’s list of imagined options is, again, borrowed from village prose and from films that access the same mythic rural Russia, as is his expectation of happiness. He wants to insert himself into the text of village prose, with a limited set of existential options. Instead, he finds himself in the village club, watching avant-garde French film. Such entertainment is possibly the antithesis of village prose—not only experimental and technologically advanced, but foreign. It has no business in the village of Sasha's imagination.

After watching the film, he leaves the narrative space of the suspended idyll and crosses the folkloric *chur*—in folk belief, the protective borderline between safety and supernatural danger. In so doing, he enters the narrative space of folklore—the forest. By crossing into the forest, Sasha triggers another genre, the supernatural werewolf tale. This use of the liminal marker is not surprising; as Alexander Genis has argued, “in Pelevin’s stories everything takes place on the ‘windowsill,’ the boundary between
different worlds” (Genis, “Borders” 217). Genis ties Pelevin’s writing on the boundary to surrealism reality shift rather than to Bakhtin’s idea that liminal spaces such as thresholds are the zone of disorder and conflict. In this story, there is a little of both—the lines between reality and fantasy are unclear, and Sasha becomes embroiled in a fight in the public square—the kind of scandal scene that takes place in liminal spaces.

In the forest, Sasha encounters a group of frightening people and loses his way. He finds himself among a separate gathering of people with cars who offer him a sandwich and a magic elixir. These strangers, who should be uncanny or frightening in the tradition of the supernatural tale, are relatively friendly, at least in their human incarnations, where their existences are fairly mundane. They drive cars, listen to the radio, eat sandwiches, and serve on committees. These strangers in the forest behave as the villagers should have according to Sasha’s fantasy. But beware of strangers offering food and drink: having swallowed a dram, Sasha and the others transform into wolves. Sasha casts a wolf’s shadow, while the others cast human shadows. After defeating a former member of the group in a fight, returning him to a shameful, human state, Sasha takes his place and becomes a member of the group. He now casts a human shadow while in wolf form, like the others. Sasha is between two worlds, reality and fantasy.

His transformation into a wolf is far from the grisly depictions in popular culture. Pelevin writes, “All that was left of him was the stretched skin, swaying in the air, which began slowly sinking back down to earth. He fell… until he finally felt solid ground under his feet. It felt so good that Sasha wagged his tail vigorously in pleasure and gratitude, got up from his belly onto his four paws and howled gently” (“Теперь от него

See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics.*
осталась лишь стянувшаяся оболочка, которая, покачиваясь в воздухе, стала медленно спускаться к земле. Падал… и наконец почувствовал под собой твердую поверхность. Это было настолько приятно, что от наслаждения и благодарности Саша широко махнул хвостом, поднялся с брюха на лапы и тихо завыл"; Pelevin, “Problem” 14; Pelevin “Problema 82). In werewolf form, he is able to observe the falseness of human life. “The humans’ little painted houses with the TV aerials and chicken houses stuck to them and the crooked parthenon of the club building seemed less like a stage set for the reality which had focused itself in the center of the square than a parody of a stage” (“крашеные домики людей, облепленные телевизионными антеннами и курятниками, гаражи с ворованной жестю и косок парфенон клуба, перед которым брел в никуда отвергнутый вождь, – все это казалось даже не декорацией к реальности, сосредоточенной в середине площади, а пародией на такую декорацию; Pelevin “Problem” 20; Pelevin “Problema” 91). Continuing with this theme, one of the older werewolves tells him, “You must always remember that only werewolves are real people. If you look at your shadow you’ll see that it's human. But if you look at people’s shadows with your wolf eyes, you’ll see the shadows of pigs, cocks, toads….” ("ты должен помнить, что только оборотни – реальные люди. Если ты посмотришь на свою тень, ты увидишь, что она человеческая. А если ты своими волчьими глазами посмотришь на тени людей, ты увидишь тени свиней, петухов, жаб..."); Pelevin “Problem” 20; Pelevin “Problema” 110). Others mention spiders, flies, bats, monkeys, rabbits, and goats (Pelevin “Problem” 33).241 Werewolves are not the only shapeshifter species in the tale. There is a were-cobra who helps the group, and a

241 All of these are animals with negative folkloric or allegorical associations.
parliament of were-owls who serve as the wolves’ enemies. Following his first encounter with the village werewolves, Sasha hitches a ride with a veteran back to Moscow, finally realizing his fantasy. In crossing over into the forest where he becomes a werewolf, Sasha becomes part of a fictional world that embraces fantasy, and is thus able to inhabit the world he desires.

Pelevin’s reprised the werewolf theme in his *Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (Священная книга оборотня) (2004), which is presented as the memoir of a were-fox. The novel, layered with intertexts, uses the term “*oboroten*” rather than “*vervolk*” as a more flexible term to designate a shapeshifter. The novel contains a were-fox who appears in the guise of a fourteen year old girl, and a werewolf, a powerful FSB officer, who becomes a dog instead, following an accident. Pelevin’s werewolf stories play upon various cultural ideas pertaining to foxes, wolves, and dogs. Associations include the folkloric trickster fox, Peter and the wolf, werewolf stories, and popular images of dogs, such as the cosmonaut dogs, Laika, Belka and Strelka, as well as Bulgakov’s homeless dog Sharik in his 1925 *Heart of a Dog*.

Pelevin’s werewolves are often superior to their human counterparts, but common wisdom holds that animals are inferior. Therefore, to become an animal is, for a human, debasing. Alexander Genis explains that the beast’s “complementary alterity allows the author to reverse the usual direction of metaphysical quest—not up but down the evolutionary ladder. The animal is also an ‘other,’ possessing a separate consciousness and sharing with us not only living space but also the mystery of our being in it” (Genis “Borders” 219). Performance artist Oleg Kulik embodies this “degradation” by becoming a dog through his performances in which he barks, howls, and walks on all fours like a
dog. In doing so, Kulik challenges the notion that animals are a lesser species than humans.

Though Kulik is best known for his performances as a dog, he also embodies or interacts with other animals such as birds and fish, and hybrids. By performing animal identities, Kulik becomes, in effect, a shapeshifter, able to transform into an animal self through embodiment. As part of the reasoning behind his ongoing project, he cites Petr Chaadaev’s statement, “Russia is not part of humanity but exists only to teach it a lesson” ("Россия не часть человечества, она существует, чтобы преподать ему урок"; Kulik Nihil 43). Under the banner of the Russian tradition of spiritual evangelism, Kulik transforms himself into an animal in order to better teach his lesson to humanity. This didactic role is one he has embraced in a number of ways. For example, Kulik sometimes appears in the guise of a preacher. He once baptized a tank full of fish on a Moscow street corner. In 1994, he gave a sermon on top of a Moscow meat counter dressed as “a mutant Jesus Christ,” complete with crown of thorns, in which he mooed while cradling a dead suckling pig in his hooves. The commentary to the photos documenting the action in Kulik’s monograph reads, “the consumerist space of the market easily transformed Kulik’s protest into a sort of commodity advertising” (Kulik, Nihil 52). The performance not only engages the idea of animals as spiritual beings, but the idea of art as a marketable product. The piece specifically targets Joseph Beuys’ 1965 performance How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt) in which the artist, who could be viewed through a window, explained the

---

242 Several critics comment on Kulik’s performance as a dog as a degrading, humiliating, or self-effacing act (Drews-Sylla 238, Acconci).
images lining the walls to a dead hare which he cradled in his arms. In contrast to Beuys, Kulik appears in the public sphere, and addresses the crowd using human imitation of animal speech.

Kulik’s first animal transformation took place during the Deep into Russia (В глубь россии) (1993) project, a collaboration with writer Vladimir Sorokin. The result of the project is a portfolio of photographs of Kulik in simulated pornographic poses with animals and a tree, and, most significantly, inserting his entire head into a cow’s vagina. His explanation of the event reads, “This action took place on [a] hot day in the presence of eight witnesses… Kulik’s head penetrated the vagina of a cow in an attempt to be born anew. After this tormenting action he stated “I have closed the theme of reality for myself…. Inside the cow I realized that there is no reality and that means that reality is still to be discovered.” (Акция состоялась в жаркий полдень в присутствии восьми зрителей...Кулик проник головой в вагину коровы, желая родиться заново. После мучительной акции он заявил: «Я закрыл для себя тему реальности.... Внутри коровы я обнаружил, что реальности нет, а значит ее ещё предстоит открыть»; Kulik Nihil 38). The project was at once a performative rebirth for Kulik and an attempt to disrupt established ideas about Russian identity and art. Kulik compared his act to looking at Malevich’s Black Square—the painting that “brought an end to painting.” Kulik’s reported experience of epiphany within the darkness of the cow’s body repeats several interpretations of Malevich’s work as a deathly portal into another reality, the

---

243 Kulik’s claims of environmental activism, whether real or pretense, may well be in response to Beuys’ activities on behalf of environmentalist causes.

244 The title may be a reference to Napoleon’s campaign into Russian territory, or indeed to the politics of the village prose writers.

245 Malevich’s influence on Kulik is clear in his glass works—large panes of glass with squares and other geometric shapes cut out.
apocalyptic final word on painting. While painting survived the black square, Kulik works outside of the realm of easel arts, and the groundbreaking work of Malevich and others like him that have made it possible for Kulik’s work to be viewed as art, by challenging fixed assumptions about what art can be.

In performing the action in the Russian countryside, Kulik breaks down the village idyll, the idea of the village as a spiritual stronghold of simple, good people, uncorrupted by the harmful influences of the city, indeed connected to the Russian earth. Belying the usual pure meaning of such a relationship, Kulik shows the village as a sexually charged space in which man and nature are not simply close, but intimate. Kulik mocks proponents of the peasant as the savior of Russia in works by literary giants such as Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn. In fact, Kulik has made wax figures of the iconic Russian author of rural life, Tolstoy, writing at a desk with a chicken coop above his head to represent Tolstoy’s tenuous position between nature and culture. Tolstoy himself understood that he could not merge with nature, although he had his characters strive for such merging, as in the scene where Levin mows hay in Anna Karenina. But Kulik, in his postmodern performative act, trumps his predecessor, penetrating the cow in hyperbolic fashion to highlight how far one might go to achieve enlightenment through nature.

In setting his first action in the countryside, Kulik follows the tradition of performance art in the Soviet Union. Much as exhibitions were held in the private space of apartments in order to avoid attracting the attention of the authorities, actions often took place in the countryside or on the outskirts of the city, with only a few witnesses and photographic documentation. Kulik’s grainy black and white photographs of the
Kulik is one of the first Russian postmodern performance artists to gain notoriety after the fall of the Soviet Union. This international fame acts as a kind of armor for the artist in his homeland; Kulik is able to perform in public spaces in Russia without fear of arrest (though he has been arrested for his performances in Western Europe more than once). Kulik’s performances as a dog, which often take place outside of galleries or museums, present a challenge to the contrast between open, public space and the private, controlled space of the museum. Performance art in the West has a strong tradition of actions both in the street and in the gallery. Kulik positions himself between the two, and, in effect, preserves the boundary of private space designated by the museum. In doing so, Kulik attempts to bring conventional ideas about art into question.

Kulik’s first performance as a dog was a collaboration with artist Alexander Brener in November of 1994. *The Mad Dog or Last Taboo Guarded by Alone Cerber* [sic.] [Cerberus]. In this performance, a bearded, naked Kulik was lead into the street wearing a studded brown dog collar and packing tape on his hands, knees, and feet. Attached by a length of chain to the belt of Alexander Brener, who wore short black shorts and boots, Kulik ran into the street in front of the M. Guelman Gallery where he tugged at his chain, pushed and bit members of the crowd, and chased after passing cars, bringing a halt to traffic. Kulik’s catalog explains that he “was guarding deprecated values, personified by Alexander Brener, rebel artist and poet: 'art,' 'masterpiece,' 'talent,' 'educated public' etc.” (Kulik *Nihil* 59). In this first performance, Kulik runs after

---

246 Kulik is profiled along with other internationally recognized performance artists in the book *Live: Art in Performance*, the catalog of a show by the same name at London’s Tate gallery. The book places Kulik in an international context that includes a history of radical interventions on the body including self-mutilation and tests of physical endurance such as performances by Chris Burden and Franko B..
onlookers on two legs like a human, but walks or rests on all fours, like a dog. As his dog performances developed, he became more proficient and began to run like a dog on all fours, standing on two legs only to jump up and tackle passersby.

The desire to protect art is the stated motivation behind all of his performances as a dog. His 1995 piece *Reservoir Dog* took place outside of the Kunsthaus in Zurich where Kulik stood guard at the doors, charging at spectators entering or exiting the building.247 “This unexpected appearance of … the dog-artist at the entrance of the ‘Swiss Bank of Art,’ was his protest against the transformation of an artist’s life into material value, against art as a commodity” (Kulik *Nihil* 85). Kulik was arrested by police after spending some time outdoors, howling, barking, chasing and tackling onlookers. The video document of the piece shows the officers calmly discussing what to do, then arresting Kulik, not as a human, but as a dog. They do not shackle his hands but simply lead him by his collar to the waiting paddy wagon. Once caught, Kulik is obedient, as if domesticated.

Kulik’s most infamous appearance as a dog was in Stockholm during the Interpol exhibit in 1996. Kulik lived in a dog house in the Center for Contemporary Art & Architecture for a day, surrounded by a border of caution tape and warning signs that the dog was “dangerous.” The video document for this piece shows him getting between visitors and works by other artists. As in his other actions as a dog, Kulik is protecting the art. His borderline, marked by two long strips of tape, represents the artificial private space of the museum. Kulik was arrested after tackling and biting an art critic on the leg,

---

247 *Reservoir Dogs* is the title of a 1992 film by Quentin Tarantino. The film tells the story of a jewel heist gone bad, and is a pastiche of heist movies. Kulik’s use of the title is a joke about his own persona, and the idea of a “Swiss Bank of Art” relying on the viewer’s knowledge of the film’s plot.
this time with his hands behind his back like a human.  

Kulik explains, “The audience was warned that any communication with the artist who denounced the language of culture is dangerous and that no one should cross the borders of his territory” (Kulik 125). *Fourth Dimension* (Vienna, 1997), a fourth “guarding the museum” piece, bridged the space between the museum entrance and the gallery through technology. Spectators inside the museum could watch Kulik’s actions from his perspective through a body-mounted camera as he interacted with those attempting to enter the museum. The piece finally bridged the border between museum and public space, and Kulik was able to be inside and outside at the same time.

Kulik issued an apology for the Interpol incident as a condition of his participation in *Manifesta I*, in Rotterdam. During his 20-day performance for the event, entitled *Pavlov’s Dog* (1996), he lived in a laboratory environment where he was observed and tested according to a schedule every day. He was fed, taken for walks in the street, put through a maze, placed on an enormous rolling cylinder, and asked to push buttons in a sequence in order to receive a bowl of water. The tests with the rolling cylinder measured his physical responses to activity. In another test, he looked at slides of famous works of art, and machines measured his responses. Gesine Drews-Silla reads Kulik’s performance as Pavlov’s dog as a critique of language. She writes that, for *Pavlov’s Dog*, Kulik “renounced human language… and shifted from a ‘reflecting being’ to a ‘being with reflexes…’ to be confronted with the products of human culture; the

---

248 Kulik’s compatriot Alexander Brener was also arrested for destroying Wenda Gu’s *United Nations-Sweden & Russia Monument: Interpol*, an 84-foot tunnel made of panels of woven hair collected from Swedish barbershops. Brener has made a name for himself by vandalizing several works of art and gallery spaces. Wenda Gu’s reaction to the event is available on his website (Gu). For a critique of Kulik and Brenner after Interpol, see Tupitsyn, “Batman.”
experiment’s results were to enable better communication between the species" (Drews-Silla 239). Kulik’s renunciation of language is an attempt to transcend human language through art, and through the body. Monitoring Kulik-the-dog’s reactions to works of art establishes the canine as an animal with a sense of aesthetic pleasure. Kulik becomes critic. The primary means of communication, however, is the body. Drews-Silla explains that in Kulik’s artistic system, communication is to be established on a purely bodily level, based on the system of instincts and reflexes and a rejection of any possibilities of language as a medium different from the body (Drews-Silla 239). She ties this idea to Pavlov’s own idea of language as a function of the body and reads Kulik’s quest for communication beyond language as a utopian project. Indeed, Kulik proposes the creation of a hybrid species, part-human, part-dog (Drews-Sylla 242).

Kulik’s action also engages Mikhail Bulgakov’s story “Heart of a Dog” (Собачье сердце), in which a Pavlov-like doctor experimenting with rejuvenation implants a human pineal gland (thought by Descartes to be the center of the soul) and testicles into a dog. The dog, Sharik, transforms into a human (gaining the suffix -ov to his name, a common name for a dog, to demonstrate that fact linguistically). The human Sharikov’s behavior undermines the idea that humans are superior to dogs, reversing the direction of degradation from human-animal to animal-human. The homeless dog Sharik was sweet, but as a human Sharikov’s behavior is atrocious, because the pineal gland—gleaned from a deceased alcoholic criminal—contained a corrupt soul. For Kulik, too, the soul of the dog is morally superior.

In the piece I Bite America and America Bites Me (1997), Kulik reenacts Joseph Beuys’ famous 1974 performance of his I Like America, America Likes Me at the Rene
Block Gallery in SoHo, in which Beuys spent three weeks in a room with a coyote. Kulik spent two weeks in a room with bars on the windows acting like a dog with a somewhat unpleasant disposition. Robert Smith reported on the event for the *New York Times*:

> To watch a human impersonate a dog as thoroughly as Mr. Kulik is extremely disconcerting. One's inclination to respond to his sheer dogginess, while also reading human emotions and intelligence into that dogginess, grates against the rational knowledge that he is actually human….Finally, Mr. Kulik's deficiencies as a dog – his hairlessness, his lack of padded feet, or a tongue intended for lapping – underscores how poorly adapted humans are to their environment. It suggests the whole of human invention as a grandiose, if quite effective, act of compensation, while also stressing the extent to which humans have survived through the exploitation of other species. (Smith)

Kulik’s action in New York serves as a footnote to his other performances. Having become part of the artistic establishment, Kulik lives inside the gallery, locked in a cage of his own making. Some onlookers enter the cage, but they are only permitted to enter one at a time, and only if they wear protective clothing. There is no longer any need to arrest him, as he is already caged, protecting only himself (and presumably his right to perform his art). Kulik situates himself as an international artist, the counterpoint to Beuys, coming to New York not to live with an animal, but to live as one.

Kulik’s performance also references the first postmodernist artists to appear on the international stage in a cage. A television clip from a news program shows Kulik the
man attacking a correspondent, transforming instantly from human-artist to dog, in a
gallery. They are standing in front of a photograph of Valerii and Rimma Gerlovin’s
performance of Zoo at the Venice Bienniale in 1977. Thus, Kulik places himself in the
history of Russian artists in the international context. The image documents a
performance in which the nude Russian couple sat in a cage labeled Homo sapiens:
Самец и Самка (male and female). The Gerlovins position themselves as humans in a
zoo to be observed by other humans, as the final creatures in the bestiary. Having
taken the animals, Adam must categorize himself.

As the end of the millennium approached, Russian artists found themselves
dealing with a hybrid of a new kind—the cyborg. Media, including advertising,
propaganda, television, and the Internet, became part of human identity. Kulik,
attempting to stave off the negative influence of mediated language, staged a
confrontation between his animal self and a mediated, speaking, human self in the 1997 I
Bite America piece, pitting hybrid (human animal) against hybrid (human media). But
while beasts, insects and animals featured in a fascinating era of postmodern visual and
literary art, developments in mass media in the coming decades would bring about a
fundamental reconceptualization of the human body and of human identity.

---

249 This simple interpretation is only a start at looking at this performance. Among other issues, the piece referenced John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s work, and commented on the lack of artistic freedom in the Soviet Union, a problem Kulik never encountered. For more on the Gerlovins, see Russian Samizdat Art, and www.gerlovin.com
Chapter 3: Flesh Made Data: Media, Cybernetic Technology, and the Body

Cogito ergo sum.
-René Descartes

Think different.
-Advertising slogan for Apple computer, 1997

As postmodern culture has brought the representation of identity into question, popular media such as advertising, television, and computer technology have gained influence in defining what it means to be human. Human beings developed each of these media to enhance lifestyle, communication, and productivity, but these media also exert control over humans by informing us of who we are. Postmodern Russian culture treats media as delivery systems of simulacra which suggest identity, often expressing it through or superimposing it upon the body. One result is a new kind of posthuman identity in which mind and body are transformed into data.

In posthumanist thought, a discourse born out of developments in cybernetic technology and genetics, the body is data. Media dictate physical identity by overwriting or overriding reality with simulacra. As I discussed in the section "reading the body" in my introduction, in postmodern literature and art, the investigation of human identity has given way to the demonstration of self-expression or documentation. A person is equal to the surfaces or objects which represent him or her. Such representations may include
clothing, furnishings, computer avatars, and internet profiles. While Russian writers and artists have focused on appearances and external details (Pushkin devoted lines to Onegin's fingernails, his library, his hat; Gogol wrote a more detailed description of the overcoat than of the tale’s hero; and Stalin's white coat appeared in a panoply of paintings), they have done so in order to reveal some element of personality or character (shallowness, modesty, trustworthiness). Postmodernism favors surface over depth, and exposes only the emptiness beneath. In posthumanism, identity gives way to information and can be filled up with or broken down into bits. In this chapter, I will review expressions of human identity reduced to documents and transformed into cybernetic data.

The fusion of humans and data is epitomized by the concept of the cyborg,\textsuperscript{250} or cybernetic organism, comprised of human and/or animal features, and fused with machine technology. Such hybrids are familiar staples of science fiction, and include replicants (robots fused with human biological material, indistinguishable from organic humans), and hackers (humans able to enter into a digital realm through some physical apparatus) among other variations. The lines between human and machine are brought into question, but rarely blurred.

\textsuperscript{250} Donna Haraway, author of "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" writes, "The term 'cyborg' was coined by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in 1960 to refer to the enhanced man who could survive in extraterrestrial environments…. [but] Here the machine is not other to the organism, nor is it a simple instrument for effecting the purposes of the organism. Rather, the machine and the organism are each communications systems joined in a symbiosis that transforms both" (Haraway, Reader 299). Haraway's cyborg, on the other hand, was meant as a socialist feminist reorientation of identity, open to multiplicity and contradiction. While Haraway's cyborg was centered on women, the idea of the cyborg has shifted dramatically over the years. This shifting idea of the cyborg, not Haraway's initial feminist concept, is the subject of the current discussion.
In contrast, the dominant theoretical concept of the cyborg, proposed by Donna Haraway in her 1985 "Manifesto for Cyborgs," was an attempt to disrupt rigid categories of identification by declaring a new identity capable of multiplicity. Her vision addresses nearly every aspect of the body in postmodern representation (gender, medicine, hybridity), while resisting categorization. Haraway later noted that the cyborg has been relegated to cyberspace, restricted to human interaction with computers (qtd. in Heuser 213). This chapter will refer to this tame, cybernetically-linked version of the cyborg as the primary representation of the combination of the human with media and cybernetic technology in Russian postmodernist literature and art. For this kind of cyborg, identity and behavior are sometimes chosen, but often dictated.

The socially and legally enforced restriction of behavior and self-expression is by no means a new theme in Russian culture, but in postmodernism, identity is increasingly envisioned as subject to inscription or to erasure. Identity can be overwritten by media, including propaganda, advertising, television, or through interaction with cybernetic technology. The process of fusing identity with media is one of bodily transformation which often renders the body itself insignificant, and the identity a writable medium for information. Human identity and consciousness are disembodied, transformed into data. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate how the relationship between the body and information media is articulated in Russian postmodernist culture.

251 It is worth noting that Soviet authorities were successful in erasing the evidence of political enemies' existence through the destruction of physical documents. See David King, The Commisar Vanishes for a well-illustrated discussion of this phenomenon. While this occurred during the Stalinist era, it was not addressed in art until the 1970's by artists such as Komar and Melamid.
In the first section of this chapter, I explore the concept of the simulacrum, its relationship to media, as well as changes in the definition of the body, particularly in relation to cybernetic technology. I consider media carriers of simulacra which are capable of bringing about a physical transformation, or a shift in human subjectivity. This section traces representations of human existence as data in Russian postmodernism from state-issued documents to the disembodied cyborg. I define the simulacrum and its relationship to media, and demonstrate how human identity is supplanted by media-based simulacra.

In the second part of this chapter, I investigate how artists and writers address the substitution of human subjectivity with simulacra through pervasive media, television, and advertising. I also consider the role of Soviet propaganda and Russian artists’ appropriation of and play with it. Several artists and writers, including the art teams Komar and Melamid and the Mit’ki group, writer Viktor Pelevin, and film director Sergei Loban, confront advertising and television, as these media overtake identity, treating consumers as bits of demographic information. At the center of this discussion is Viktor Pelevin's critical assessment of advertising and propaganda via the spirit of Che Guevera, in his novel Generation II (Generation P). He describes a portion of humanity as complacent consumers of media, incapable of acting independently of it. In contrast, artist Oleg Kulik stages ambivalent confrontations with media, using his or his viewer's body to engage an alternate digital self.

In the third part of this chapter, I focus on cybernetic technology and its impact on the way people interact with perceived reality. Human (cyborg) representations in videogames act as bridges between technology which treats humans as passive receptors
(television) and that which allows for interaction and participation (virtual reality and cyberspace). The works under analysis will include Viktor Pelevin's story "Prince of Gosplan,” Alexei Balabanov's film Brother, Dmitrii Prigov's flash animations, and Pelevin's novella The Helmet of Horror.

What these artistic and literary visions share is an emphasis on the posthuman theme of human beings transformed into data. This shift in consciousness is brought about through the imposition of simulacra via media. In the chapter, I trace the movement from print media to digital media and address how Russian postmodernist artists and writers approach the transformation of the body into data.

**Simulacra and cyborg subjectivities**

In a digital illustration created for the magazine NLO (Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie) by conceptualist poet and artist Dmitrii Prigov, an unplugged television floats against a white background, with a single, elongated antenna, labeled “God” (Бог) (Figure 23). The image suggests that this machine has overtaken spirituality, or indeed replaced spiritual practice with an electronic god on a living-room altar. More significantly, the television may be read as "God" the creator. As my discussion of Pelevin's Generation P will show, the television may be read as the locus of human identity through its programming which is designed to manipulate reality. Advertising, television, videogames, and the Internet are capable of the distribution of simulacra, and have increasingly become both the subject and means of artistic expression.
Figure 23. Television as God
Prigov's piece illustrates the centrality of television in everyday life, and its intrusion into spiritual practice in its ritual function. The idea is complicated by the placement of the word "God" next to the antenna – where is the information coming from? As Pelevin's Ouja-board incarnation of Che Guevera explains, the television is simply a conduit for information made by producers. Once switched on, the television feeds this information to the viewer, who, once connected to the system, is removed from reality. The viewer's reality is replaced by a world made up of programmed simulacra.

In contemplating media's relationship to human identity, it is instructive to consider Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum as expressed in his essay, "The Precession of Simulacra." Here, he traces the development of the concept of the simulacrum from a reproduction of reality to a copy that replaces the existing reality, creating what he calls the "hyperreal." In its final stage, the simulacrum "has no relation to reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum" (6). It is at this stage that the simulacrum reaches the level of hyperreality. Simply put, the simulacrum is an illusion in the place of reality.

The simulacra produced by television and other media such as advertisements, video games, and websites, are indeed hyperreal – copies without originals. While the world of Generation P revolves around advertising for consumer products, it becomes clear that no "real" product may exist, and that the advertisements themselves have no relationship to reality. As Edith W. Clowes writes in her article "Simulacrum as S(t)imulation? Postmodernist Theory and Russian Cultural Criticism," the “third-order

252 For a discussion of Nietszche, Plato, and their musings on simulacra, see Giles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum."
simulacrum of simulation that Baudrillard claims is dominant in the United States today emphasizes not the product itself but the proliferation of its image on the electronic media and the computer" (341). I contend that in Russian postmodernist discourse, media-produced simulacra move beyond third order imitations to the hyperreal.253

Television, advertising, and computers are not only creators of simulacra, but, through human interaction, centers of human/cyborg identity. Posthuman theorists including N. Katherine Hayles have noted the collapse of the humanist sense of identity and the blurring of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman.254 Hayles contends that the posthuman is

a point of view characterized by the following assumptions. …. First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated

253 In 1995, Clowes argued that, "Now what exists is neither Baudrillard's so-called "second-order" simulacrum of industrial "production" and replication of goods—at most there are in Russia the tiniest sprouts of a "first-order" culture of basic reproduction and trade" (Clowes 341).

254 See also Jeffrey Deitch, Post Human, and Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, Posthuman Bodies.
with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.

(3)

Among the most significant of the boundaries moved by posthuman developments is that between humans and technology. For millions of technology users, a fundamental distinction between the two has ceased to exist.

In this new technology-driven phase of the simulacrum, the human body as the center of being is in the balance, overlaid with a grid of information. In his book, Reading Simulacra, M. W. Smith argues that with the development of mass communication and the media, a new form of subjectivity emerges in which individuals become saturated with the ecstatic form of the real: information, images, and simulations. Without distance, they become pure screens, or switching centers for the influent networks, circuits, simulation models, systems of recording and all surfaces of inscription (69).

In other words, the humanist concept of identity, including the Cartesian distinction between the mind and the physical body, no longer matters. The human being in a media-driven environment is, essentially, an information system, made up of data. The human as data is a different kind of cyborg, not connected to technology through wires or implants, but integrated as part of an information network.

---

255 This is not to say that such a distinction no longer exists. Indeed, in much technology-centered postmodernist discourse, particularly in cyberpunk fiction, the mind is treated as superior to the body which is looked down upon as "meat." Lyotard gives a critique of this mind-over-body point of view in his essay, "Can Thought go on without a Body?"

219
Literature and visual art have shaped the idea of the cyborg as much as science. However, in many ways, what science has realized differs from the possibilities imagined by writers and artists. Cyborgs in fiction are often depicted as humans with high-tech implants featuring memory upgrades (as in William Gibson's story "Johnny Mnemonic"), eye implants (Molly Millions from William Gibson's pioneering cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*), integrated weapons systems (as in Neal Stephenson's prophetic imagining of web-based alternate worlds, *Snow Crash*), or life-support suits (such as the one worn by Darth Vader in *Star Wars*). While these examples are not typical in real life, it is not uncommon for pet owners to have their pets implanted with RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags, and many people have surgeries which render them cyborgs. Some, however, are more cyborg than others. As Hayles points out in *How we became Posthuman*,

Cyborgs actually exist. About 10 percent of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug-implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin. A much higher percentage participates in occupations that make them into metaphoric cyborgs, including the computer keyboarder joined in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided by fiber-optic microscopy during an operation, and the adolescent game player in the local video-game arcade. (115)

The cyborg is very real, right now. These metaphoric cyborgs are the primary focus of this chapter, though I conduct some investigation of the concept of wearable technology in Russian postmodernist art.
The artists Komar and Melamid have a playful response to developments in wearable technology, especially those related to the medical field. In a 1975 photography portfolio, *Superobjects – Supercomfort for Superpeople*, they present a series of wearable devices they created to improve their subjects' lives (Figure 24). The images were inspired by Western mail-order catalogs, whose products promised to improve the consumer’s life (Ratcliff 88-9). Two objects, each resembling a hose with a plunger on the end, allow the user to smell or to listen to themselves, and are supposed to help release the user's spiritual and creative potential, respectively. Another "superobject," the “Olo,” a ring connected to a white sphere, is meant to gird the user's tongue to guarantee that he speak the truth. The caption reads, “your every word—a pearl!” (Ratcliff 89).

“Charog 15,” a cage or grate, worn as a mask, guards the purity of its wearer's thoughts. Both of these images reveal the price of becoming a Soviet “superperson.” The “Olo” guarantees that the user speak the truth, but, at the same time, hampers his movements, rendering intelligible speech near impossible. The device works as a kind of automatic censor, guaranteeing that no speech, true, false, dangerous, or officially sanctioned, can be heard and understood. Thus, Komar and Melamid mock official truths, indicating that, as in Yurchak’s definition of “block language” official language is meaningless. The “Charog” meant to protect the wearer, serves as a personal iron curtain, disrupting communication in both directions.

These "superobjects" reveal a cyborg sensibility coupled with a strong sense of irony and skepticism. The artists conflate the promises of medicine with the suspect practice of advertising, incorporating the language of sloganeering into the photographs. "It sounds proud!" is the accompanying text for one such device, the “Stong,” a spinal
attachment with a metal neck brace for improving self-esteem, with the implication that it will do so by amplifying flatulence. The text makes light of a well-worn quote from Maksim Gorkii—“Man—that sounds proud!” (Человек--это звучит гордо!). The image mixes crude scatological humor with the Soviet desire to create a new, better, human being. Text and image signal the work's irreverence. While the text appears in English, and the images were displayed in the Feldman gallery in New York, Komar and Melamid produced this portfolio while were still Soviet citizens, and the works can probably be considered critiques of the claims of Soviet science as much as capitalist hucksterism.256 These representations of medical technology appear impractical yet declare their usefulness, and indicate a distrust of prescribed truths, and a sense of uncertainty regarding developments in medical science. At the same time, they are explorations of the possibilities offered by a posthuman future, in which human beings are able to create, control, and modify the body through wearable technology, genetics, and surgery to such an extent that it is no longer possible to define it as strictly human.

256 It should be noted that Komar and Melamid are also skeptical of the promises of art. One print shows a map of an art museum with different artists marked as cures for various ailments.
More than three decades later, wearable technology is becoming ever more pervasive as part of our everyday interactions with one another and with our bodies. Developed in both university laboratories and garage workshops, wearable technology is
currently used in many applications. Examples include wearable sensors which allow the wearer to control a series of computer-based music loops by manipulating her body, a jacket for cyclists which senses and displays the wearer's speed, or incorporates turn signals, and wearable objects that monitor the wearer's sighs, respond to environmental stimuli, or display scrolling L.E.D. messages.\footnote{http://www.sonami.net/lady_glove2.htm, http://www.mykle.com/msl/?p=10, http://blog.makezine.com/archive/2009/05/sigh_collector.html, and http://web.media.mit.edu/~alyssa/about.html, http://web.media.mit.edu/~leah/grad_work/projects/bracelets/bracelet.html} One wearable device, the Berkeley eLEGS, becomes an active part of the body, restoring bipedal mobility to a user who is unable to walk without the assistance of its strong, responsive exoskeleton.\footnote{http://bleex.me.berkeley.edu/research/exoskeleton/elegs. This is the newest development in a series of exoskeletons produced for military, medical, disaster relief and recreational uses. Performance artist Stelarc has also created an octopod exoskeleton as part of a long-term project to expand the human body.} Another popular (and controversial) device can be attached to a hat or jacket and used to turn off a remote-controlled television in the wearer's vicinity, if the cyborg wishes to momentarily short the information circuit and resist being programmed by the television, a process that has relevance for Pelevin’s \textit{Generation P}.\footnote{http://blog.makezine.com/archive/2008/09/tvbgone_hoodie.html}

Experiments in wearable technology reflect our changing relationship with electronics. Technology is central to the lives of many individuals (who, as Hayles points out, remain a global minority). We are connected to machines, but mostly by external devices (iPods, smartphones, and personal computers, to name but a few). Hayles writes, it is important to recognize that the construction of the posthuman does not require the subject to be a literal cyborg. Whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity emerging from such fields as cognitive science and artificial life imply that even a biologically unaltered \textit{Homo}
sapiens counts as posthuman. The defining characteristics involve the
construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components (4).

It is this (re)construction of subjectivity that facilitates the transformation of the human
into information.

Several factors contributed to a shift in the contemporary Western conception of
subjectivity, including developments in cybernetics and biological science.
Developments in genetics changed how humans thought about themselves and their
bodies. DNA revealed a way of seeing the body as code. Professors Robert Mitchell and
Phillip Thurtle write in their 2004 book *Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information*,
vital for the history of information was physicists Erwin Schrodinger and George
Gamow's repeated, and successful, attempts to position Crick and Watson's
discovery as a question of "coding"; that is, as a problem of transmitting
information from one system to another…. the problem of life, thereafter, became
a problem of "information transfer" and of "cracking the genetic code". Modern
genetics was thus born when… researchers began to describe organisms and
molecules as information transfer systems (8).

The view of the body as genetic data storage and transport system led to other
reconstructions of the body's meaning. The body also came to be viewed as part of a
cybernetic system in which the brain functioned as a supercomputer and regulated the
body's systems.

---

260 This title and my chapter title are references to William Gibson's vision of computer code as a three
dimensional world in *Neuromancer* (1984): "...it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data... information
interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market."
At the same time that Crick and Watson were exploring the body as code, structuralist thinkers such as Yurii Lotman and Roman Jakobson were investigating language in terms of code. As Jakobson writes in his 1956 essay, "Two Aspects of Language," a "given utterance (message) is a combination of constituent parts (sentences, words, phonemes) selected from the repository of all constituent parts (the code)" (emphasis in original; 99). Society was viewed as one information system, and language as a means of exchanging information much like a cybernetic network. Their ideas would influence the poststructuralists and the decentered, constructed self that pervades postmodern thought.

Developments in cybernetics lead to the expansion of the conceptual boundaries of the human body (to include tools, machines, etc). Hayles writes,

Of all the implications that first-wave cybernetics conveyed, perhaps none was more disturbing and potentially revolutionary than the idea that the boundaries of the human subject are constructed rather than given. Conceptualizing control, communication, and information as an integrated system, cybernetics radically changed how boundaries were conceived. … cybernetic systems are constituted by flows of information. In this viewpoint [a blind man and his cane] join in a single system, for the cane funnels to the man essential information about his environment. (84)

In a sense, the human being is the prime exemplar of physical computing, able to collect, calculate, and react to data in a physical environment. In the cybernetic view, the brain operates like a computer, making hundreds of calculations every second and communicating with the environment through the body. The comparison between
computer processors and the brain was made explicit in cyberpunk literature in which the brain can be connected directly to hardware. In her book, *Virtual Geographies: Cyberpunk at the Intersection of the Postmodern and Science Fiction*, Sabine Heuser writes, "the human brain becomes the central processing unit, a storage device on a more abstract level for information which is readable and writable by both humans and machines" (219). Here, the Cartesian hierarchy of mind over body is intact. In cyberpunk literature, the body is often referred to as "flesh" or "meat," the physical world as "meatspace," and the hero often connects his brain to the computer by means of chips, wires, and electrodes, leaving his physical body behind in order to temporarily enter the digital world. The virtual reality helmet was a staple of cyberpunk literature already in development.

However, it is not necessary to be implanted with chips or fitted with specialized equipment in order to communicate with computers. An individual can also write or be inscribed through interaction with media based simulacra. Media and cybernetic technology are the new generators of simulacra, and the technology user becomes part of the hyperreal network of advertising, television, and computers precisely through the body. Indeed, it is the body, still the seat and physical representation of identity, that is most susceptible to inscription by these media based simulacra.

**Body, Soul, and Simulacrum**

In his 2003 novel, *Pattern Recognition*, American-Canadian author William Gibson, known for his futuristic tales in the cyberpunk genre in which microchip-implanted and technologically modified cyborgs are the norm, broke form by setting the
story in 2002, and focusing on widely available real-world technology limited to video, personal computers, and Internet chatrooms. The main character, Cayce Pollard, is allergic to brand names, logos, and advertising, and takes pains to dress her own body in the plainest possible clothing, removing any indication of branding from them. She is representative of a new kind of cyborg (technologically inscribed but not implanted). She is unique in that she feels intensely the assault on identity through advertising and technology and resists it.261

Her mission is fraught with difficulty. Advertising is everywhere, including the human body. Brand names are written on clothing, and logos are emblazoned on nearly every product. People maintain blogs and personal webpages (Facebook, MySpace), in essence advertising themselves, and creating virtual reproductions or reinventions of themselves. Representation replaces identity. The human is both product and consumer. The marketplace does not advertise to individuals, but is closely attuned to demographics. Products are conceived, and commercials produced and aired differently for an 18-year-old male than for a 65-year-old woman. Habits and preferences once seen as tied to identity have been reduced to numbers and demographic information.262

While it may seem that some of these phenomena are strictly Western, in fact Russia has over the past two decades developed parallels to every virtual existence in the Western world: everything from vkontakte.ru (a Facebook-like site) to the Russian chat version of "ratemyprofessors.com." Indeed, Russians are at the heart of many of these

261 See also Barbara Kruger’s photo collage critique of beauty standards and call for women’s reproductive rights “Your body is a Battleground.”
262 Komar and Melamid explore demographics and art in their "Most Wanted" series, using information collected by a professional data collection agency. The results, art by poll, produced strikingly similar pieces for the majority of countries involved.
processes. Thus the fact that Russian postmodernism is peculiarly concerned with advertising and demographic data should not surprise us. Russian postmodernism has at its heart sots-art, a movement which arose in the 1970s as a counterpoint to Socialist Realist doctrine. In rejecting Socialist Realist principles, it appropriated the imagery of Socialist Realism and was, in this sense, analogous to pop art. Both borrowed or played upon images from popular culture to create new work with a strong sense of irony. Russian postmodernists also view advertising with ironic distance, seeing that propaganda and advertising both have the capacity to produce simulacra. The same is true of computer technology. As Donna Haraway notes, "microelectronics is the technical basis of simulacra, i.e., of copies without originals" *(Reader 24)*. She further comments on the pervasiveness of computers in everyday life, in both public and private spheres.

Russian postmodernists reacted to social, economic, and political transition by playing upon simulacra in Russian culture. As Mikhail Epstein, argues, simulacra have existed in Russian culture for a long time, as part of a program to exert political power through illusion. Conflating simulacrum as illusion with the postmodern simulacrum of the hyperreal, Epstein asserts the primacy of Russian postmodernism over Western postmodernism, writing that, "although postmodernism has been a topic of discussion in the West since the early 1970s and in Russia only since the early 1990s, it is in essence, like many such movements nominally adopted from the West, a deeply Russian phenomenon. One may even maintain that Russia is the birthplace of postmodernism" *(Endquote 4)*. In his book *After the Future*, Epstein argues that everything from the imposition of Christianity to the construction of Potemkin villages is part of the Russian
tradition of simulacra by which culture, community, and even place could be artificially imposed. He argues that reality in Russia was subjugated to ideas, which were supposed to produce reality. Epstein writes, "The most grandiose simulacrum…. that expressed the simulative nature of Russian civilization was, of course, St. Petersburg…. the reality of the city was composed entirely of fabrications, designs, ravings and visions, lifted up like a shadow above rotten soil, unfit for construction" (Future 192). St. Petersburg has long played a role in Russian mythology as a city of falsehood. For Epstein, it is an example of the primacy of ideas over reality—an ideal model of a city built on a swamp, the manifestation of Peter's will.

According to Epstein, society itself was refashioned as a simulacrum following the Bolshevik Revolution. He writes:

…after the Bolshevik Revolution, the simulative nature of reality became even more pronounced in Russia. All social and private life was subordinated to the ideology, which became the only real force of historical development. Signs of a new reality of which Soviet citizens were so proud in the thirties and fifties, from Stalin’s massive hydroelectric plant on the Dnieper river to Khrushchev’s decision to raise corn and Brezhnev’s numerous autobiographies, where actually pure ideological simulations of reality. This artificial reality was intended to demonstrate the superiority of ideas over simple facts. (Future 194)

Epstein suggests that Socialist Realism, established as the sole creative form for Soviet writers and artists in 1932, marks the beginning of Russian postmodernism precisely because of this preference for ideology over reality. While Epstein is right to point out a common thread of simulation in different historic periods, he relies on simulation as the
key element of postmodern representation. While Potemkin villages and Socialist art may represent simulacra of a kind, they lack the irony and critique which are at the core of postmodern literature and art. Epstein himself notes the difference between realists who expose falsehood and conceptualists (postmodernists) who represent the "reality of signs with disrespectful humor" (Future 93).

Soviet imagery gains ironic perspective only with the work of visual artists such as Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. Much of their work involves the manipulation of identity and the creation of reality (illusion) through propaganda and power. Their work deals in postmodern irony by appropriating the imagery of both advertising and socialist realist art, and combining it with a variety of forms, focusing particularly on classical painting techniques. They see Soviet propaganda as analogous to advertising in its manufacturing of illusions. They imitate through technical mimicry, carefully reconstructing the brushstroke, composition, and lighting of academic painting. Their work parodies Socialist Realist art in style and tone, mimicking the pomp and stagecraft of paintings with crimson draperies and smiling, benevolent dictators, notably Stalin.

Komar and Melamid subvert illusions through performance, inserting themselves into paintings as Soviet heroes or pioneers as in their Double Self Portrait paintings (Figures 25 and 26). In these pieces, they painted themselves in profile as heroes of the revolution, in imitation of ubiquitous official art featuring the profiles of Lenin and Stalin. A 1980 design by a fellow sots-artist Alexander Kosolapov demonstrates the analogy of propaganda and advertising by the placement of the Coca-Cola slogan "It's the real thing" next to Lenin's profile (Figure 27). The image was distributed on
postcards, and proposed as a billboard in New York City's Times Square in 1982. This humorous juxtaposition of Soviet leader and capitalist consumer product produces a sense of play with signs. Product and slogan are flexible, as is meaning. Indeed, not long after, former premier Mikhail Gorbachev appeared in advertisements for Pizza Hut, and, more recently, for Louis Vuitton. Kosolapov signals an awareness that the ideology of the Soviet state is no different than the product Coca-Cola in the way that it is marketed or produced.

Figure 25. Komar and Melamid as Stalin and Lenin (1973)

Figure 26. Komar and Melamid as Pioneers (1982-3)

---

264 In 1997 and 2007, respectively.
As students of both art history and political history, Komar and Melamid demonstrate that the stakes of advertising and propaganda are the human body and human identity. In their plays on advertising, both body and soul are addressed as an object for improvement. Indeed, the connection between the body and advertising is present in the earliest postmodern work. British artist Richard Hamilton's 1956 collage, *Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*, widely considered to be the first work of pop art (a movement seen as presaging postmodernism), demonstrates that the body and identity are malleable targets for advertisers (Figure 28).
A male bodybuilder stands in the foreground while a partially nude female reclines on a couch. Models of gendered, constructed, and performed human identity appear in the background. A man's aristocratic portrait hangs over the television set, while a newspaper lies open on an armchair. A poster on the wall advertises a comic book with a woman held in a man's protective grasp as another man looks on. The title reads "Young Romance." A woman's head on the television set mimics the female figure's pose, hand behind head. Through the window a billboard advertising the movie *The Jazz Singer* looms. Another woman demonstrates the convenience of using a canister vacuum while advertisements are hidden in household objects—a barbell becomes a tootsie pop, and a lampshade bears the Ford motors crest. This piece demonstrates the power of advertising.
and media to shape identity by suggesting ways of attaining happiness through conspicuous consumption and role play, as well as the possibility of manipulating the body, and thereby, identity, through altering its appearance (whether by means of bodybuilding or blackface). Advertising sells products as well as the idea of the ideal body, and has for decades. A look at a mail order catalog from the late 19th century or early 20th century will show a focus on hygiene products, hairpieces and corsets, along with elixirs and devices to improve a person's appearance or demeanor.

Postmodernism views advertising's attempts to realign identity in terms of commodity with ironic distance. At the same time, these artists and writers recognize themselves as participants in the exchange of commodities, aware of their complicity in the systems they critique.\textsuperscript{265} Critiques extend to political systems as well, as governments lay claim to citizens (and their hearts, minds, and bodies) through propaganda and official records.

Komar and Melamid, who faced arrest by Soviet authorities and met considerable opposition to their petition to emigrate, are sensitive to the claims of a government or corporation on an individual's identity or body.\textsuperscript{266} They demonstrate this in one early series entitled \textit{Ideal Document} (1975) in which they calculate the square roots of twelve Soviet documents to produce a standard document, in the form of a red square (Figures 29 and 30). The piece at once erases individual identity by arriving at the ideal, makes fun of the number of documents that a given Soviet citizen might be required to carry, marks Soviet authority (the color red), and pays homage to Kazimir Malevich (the

\textsuperscript{265} See Hutcheon, \textit{The Politics of Postmodernism}, for her discussion of complicitous critique.
\textsuperscript{266} Komar and Melamid created "Ideal Document" in 1975, petitioned to emigrate in 1976 after authorities refused to allow them to attend an exhibition of their work in New York. Their application was denied in 1976, and granted in 1977. They emigrated first to Jerusalem, then to New York in 1978.
square), father of suprematism and hero of avant-gardists and unofficial artists. That one's identity could be systematically erased by authorities was still a real threat in the 1970s, and the menace of incarceration or punitive psychiatric hospitalization loomed over ideological "enemies" of the state. Incidentally, it is worth noting that the term "identity theft" refers to the theft of information contained in one’s documents, not to a person’s physical body or intangible subjectivity. In Soviet Russia, "identity theft" had a much more broad significance.

Figure 29. *Ideal Document*, stage 1

Figure 30. *Ideal Document*, stage 3
The following year, Komar and Melamid created a musical composition based on the information contained in a passport in which the data was treated as a code which could be translated into music. This was part of a larger series of "code" pieces in which slogans and official documents were also interpreted in code, but suggests an attitude toward identity in keeping with the cybernetic and genetic view of the body as data. At the same time, the piece represented a reclaiming of personal information through its transformation into art.

Komar and Melamid made further attempts to reclaim identity with their 1977 TransState project (Figure 31). That year, the artists (who experienced difficulties with the authorities as Jews and as dissident artists) petitioned to emigrate to Israel. Their petition was rejected and their passports confiscated.267 In response, they pioneered a utopian concept of single-person countries, made up of "the total area of the body surfaces of all the members of the Federation, freely living and moving in space," known as TransState. “Upon joining, one becomes an "I-State,' a sovereign nation to be addressed as 'State Komar,' 'State Melamid,' 'State Smith,' or 'State Jones'" (Ratcliff 98). The charter of TransState stipulates that, "Each member-country of the TransState federation is identical to its single citizen. Conflicts between individuals and government vanish as selfhood absorbs statehood” (Ratcliff 98). According to critic Carter Ratcliff, this reverses the “totalitarian state's policy of engulfing the individual," as suggested in Hobbes's Leviathan (Komar and Melamid 82). The project includes a set of handmade documents, including a passport, a constitution, money, an invented language, and a

267 A chronology of the artists’ joint works can be found at komarandmelamid.org
border post indicating TransState in four directions. The artists’ claim of individual statehood constitutes a protest—an insistence upon the sovereignty of the body.

Figure 31. A TransState advertisement

If the state's consumption of the individual can be reversed, then the same may be true of advertising's claim on the body. Komar and Melamid changed their focus to consumerism and capitalist advertising in their project *We Buy and Sell Souls*. After moving to the United States in 1978, they established a company which bought and sold, or held on consignment, hundreds of documents giving the purchaser the rights to the seller's soul. Andy Warhol's was the most famous in the catalog. The artists engaged in
mock capitalist enterprise by running print advertisements and a lighted billboard in Times Square which read "A Soul is the Best Investment," and "Have You Sold Your Soul?," holding an auction in Moscow in which the documents were sold housed in small cages, and finally, a going-out-of-business sale.\textsuperscript{268} Their concept, however tongue-in-cheek, indicates an attitude towards that which is widely believed to be the seat of human identity (the soul), which renders the soul (and, by extension, human identity) a commodity. Komar and Melamid explore the possibility that if human identity is determined by consumption, the individual might also become a commodity. It is here that the artists explore the potential of advertising to produce identities as products, or simulacra. Komar and Melamid's use of the body as a territory, (transformed through documentation) and with the soul as product, create irony-tinged simulacra. Their work serves as a key to viewing the body as information in further work.

\footnote{Curiously, the advertising campaign for the 2009 movie \textit{Cold Souls} is not far from this line. Magazine advertisements, a street poster campaign, and website all proclaim relief from the burden of a heavy soul, through a new form of self-storage. The film shows a trade in souls between the U.S. and Russia. \url{http://thesoulstoragecompany.com/}}
In contrast to Komar and Melamid's *TransState* project, wherein the individual citizen defines himself as a state, some Soviet artists perform roles which might be assigned to them by the state. Prigov, associated with the Moscow Conceptualist movement, became known for performing his poems in the guise of several set identities, most notably a police officer, a servant of the state. Likewise, the Petersburg art collective known as the "Mit’ki group" challenge the state's claim over its citizens' bodies, not by declaring their independence, but by assuming and performing the qualities and behaviors assigned to dissident intelligentsia by the authorities.\(^{269}\) As mentioned in the introduction, the Mit’ki’s strategy of performing an assigned collective

\(^{269}\) For more on the Mit’ki see Mihailovic “Boiler Room”; and Volkov.
identity is part of what Alexei Yurchak calls a “politics of indistinction.” Rather than engage directly in politics, artists sought status outside of politics, and operated outside of the ordinary strictures of Soviet citizenship. The Mit'ki are characterized by their costume, "striped sailor shirts (the Soviet bohemian uniform inherited from the Leningrad neorealists), old quilted jackets, Russian felt boots, and mangy fur hats with earflaps," and by their unique vocabulary, which consists largely of stock phrases and quotations (Volkov 530). The Mit'ki engage in behavior which is a kind of reverse samotvorchestvo. They take on the roles assigned to them by the government (i.e. they do not create their own identities), and act them out in "ritualized" behavior. In the Mit'ki manifesto, Vladimir Shinkarev proposes a lexicon and set of behaviors for a new popular youth movement analogous to hippies or punks. Participants in the movement are obliged to call themselves "Mit'ki" in honor of its founder and classic exemplar—Dmitrii Shagin (лексикона и правила поведения для нового массового молодежного движения вроде хиппи или панков. Участников движения предлагаю назвать митьками по имени основателя и классического образца - Дмитрия Шагина…"; Mit'ki 7).

The Mit'ki capitalize on their limitations, creating a literature of quotation. The writings of the Mit'ki are filled with quotations from Soviet films and novels. Shinkarev writes, “The Mit'ki, whose use of long quotes from TV miniseries is characteristic, prefer quotations of a mournful or tender character” (Для митька характерно использование

---

270 See Yurchak, “Necro-Utopia”
271 Self-creation. The process of creating a public image through artistic production, public behavior, and physical appearance.
длинных цитат из многосерийных телевизионных фильмов; предпочитают цитаты, имеющие жалостливый или ласковый характер"; Mit'ki 13). So central are the miniseries to Mit'ki culture that they have a holiday to celebrate the programming of certain films on television. Shinkarev describes the holiday:

There is a holiday known as the Day of Mit'ki Equinox (This incomprehensible name arose historically). The holiday is not observed on set dates, but may be observed once a month, once a week, or every day. It often coincides with television screenings of Mit'ki teleclassics (true, on such days there are other holidays, for example, "His Excellency's Aide Dry"—a viewing of the miniseries without drinks, or "His Excellency's Aide Wet"—with drinks)"

Есть такой праздник - День Митьковского Равнодействия (это непонятное название сложилось исторически). Праздник не отмечается по определенным датам, он может отмечаться и раз в месяц, и раз в неделю, и каждый день. Часто он совпадает с показом по телевидению митьковской телеклассики (правда, на эти дни есть свои отдельные праздники, например, "Адъютант его превосходительства сухой"- просмотр телефильма без выпивки, или "Адъютант его превосходительства мокрый" - с выпивкой.) (Mit'ki 91).272

The Mit'ki's appropriation of Soviet film is subversive, as is the idea of a holiday for their showing on television. The films and miniseries quoted by the Mit'ki were shown with great frequency on television, and marking them with a holiday—particularly while

272 His Excellency's Aide was a 1969 Mosfilm miniseries which told the heroic story of Pavel Makarov, a secret agent for the Red Army in 1919.
drinking—played into the Mit'ki's image as drunks and loafers. At the same time, they mimic and extend the Soviet practice of showing certain movies on certain holidays. The Mit’ki undermine the Soviet heroic narrative by attempting, but failing to carry out heroic acts such as attempting to rescue a woman from drowning, not knowing how to swim. This particular example also recalls the drowning death of Red Army hero Vasilii Chapaev, the subject of another film classic, who became both a hero and target of humor in Soviet popular culture, including in Mit’ki productions.

The Mit’ki identify not as individuals, but as a group. A popular group portrait shows five Mit'ki in fur caps sharing one large sailor's shirt (Figure 33). By performing prescribed behaviors and conforming to a group of identity, the Mit'ki subvert power through their sense of play and irony. They achieve transformation of body and identity through conformity, partly through costuming. The Mit’ki costume became synonymous with a dissident attitude, and anyone with nonconformist credibility could become a Mitiot by simply donning the uniform and adhering to Mit'ki speech and behavioral patterns. The Mit'ki claim favorite poets such as Lermontov and Pushkin as their own (while David Bowie is reviled as a symbol of Western falsehood). The two Russian writers make frequent appearances in the group's art, often enjoying a bottle of vodka with the others. Contemporaries are also represented. A 1994 poster shows Moscow conceptualist and fellow unofficial artist and poet Dmitrii Prigov in Mit'ki garb, an indication of the Mit’ki’s respect (Figure 34). Currently, admirers are invited to attain Mit'ki status through self-representation as a Mit’ki. A 2007 retrospective at the Museum of Religion in St. Petersburg featured group portraits on wooden stands with holes cut out for the viewer to place his or her face in the tableau and become part of the group.
Despite the fall of the Soviet Union and the attendant decline of political and social pressure to play the role of the productive Soviet citizen, the Mit'ki continue to perform their assigned parts although the political context has changed. In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the dissidents have become somewhat heroic figures and are treated as cultural authorities.²⁷³

Figure 33. A Mit’ki group portrait

Figure 34. Prigov as Mitiok

**Viewing the Virtual Subject**

In some ways, life for cultural figures like the Mit'ki and their admirers was more simple than for their post-Soviet counterparts; one could choose the path of a dissident (artist, writer, or simply hanger-on), or one could distance oneself from that path.

²⁷³ Dmitrii Shagin was crowned carnival king in 2007 for the St. Petersburg carnival, and the group’s work is often included in exhibitions and critical works.
remaining on the straight-and-narrow within the confines of the Komsomol and/or conventional Soviet culture. Viktor Pelevin's novel *Generation II (Generation P)* imagines what becomes of promising youth brought up as future dissident intelligentsia who were too young to participate in dissident activity before the fall of the Soviet Union. The hero, Vavilen Tatarsky, a graduate of a literary institute, plans a future for himself in which he churns out official prose by day, and—inspired by Boris Pasternak—composes unofficial verse by night. However, the fall of the Soviet Union radically alters his plans, and he finds himself first selling cheap goods in a kiosk, and then climbing the corporate ladder as an advertising executive. Over the course of the novel, the hero receives insight into his profession through experiments with drugs and occult activities. He purchases a Ouija board capable of recording text with a pen or printer from the aptly named shop, *Путь к себе* (The path to yourself), and channels the spirit of revolutionary Cuban leader Che Guevera. From the mystical Ouija board Tatarsky receives an analysis of the effect of advertising and television upon the viewer entitled, “Identialism as the highest stage of Dualism” (*ИДЕНИТАЛИЗМ КАК ВЫСШАЯ СТАДИЯ ДУАЛИЗМА*). This text within a text provides a key to the postmodernist and posthumanist view of the body as a conduit of information, controlled by images, and transformed into data.

---

274 The name Vavilen is an artificial construction made up of a combination of the names Vasilii Aksionov and V.I. Lenin. Pelevin mocks the artificial Soviet enthusiasm for revolution suggested by hybrid names based on revolutionary heroes, a popular practice, and also suggests something about Tatarsky's identity, in the tradition of speaking names. Aksionov was critical of Stalinism and composed literature with fantastic elements. His work was a precursor to contemporary literature, admired by postmodernists. Tatarsky's identity, like his name, is constructed and ambivalent.

275 See Brintlinger for a discussion of solipsism in Pelevin’s novel *Chapaev i Pustota*. 

245
The purported Guevera's thesis proposes that television is capable of exerting control over the human organism. He states,

When the individual viewed the television while it was switched off, the movement of his or her eyes and the flow of his or her attention were controlled by his own voluntary impulses, chaotic though they may have been. The dark screen with no image of any kind did not exert any influence over them… When it is switched on, a television almost never transmits a static view from a single motionless camera…. this image changes at an extremely rapid rate. Every few seconds there is either a change of camera angle or a fade into close-up on some object, or a switch to a different camera—the image is constantly being modified by the cameraman and the producer who stands behind him (Bromfield 79).

Когда человек разглядывал выключенный телевизор, движение его глаз и поток его внимания управлялись его собственными волевыми импульсами, пусть даже хаотичными. Темный экран без всякого изображения не оказывал на них никакого влияния или оказывал… Включенный телевизор практически никогда не передает статичный вид с одной неподвижной камеры… это изображение интенсивно меняется. Каждые несколько секунд происходит либо смена кадра, либо наплыв на какой-либо предмет, либо переключение на другую камеру – изображение непрерывно модифицируется оператором и стоящим за ним режиссером. (Generation, 133)

By focusing the viewer's attention and selecting what the viewer sees, the producer can
manipulate the viewer's thoughts. The individual cedes control to the producer, a process which Guevera calls Technomodification. The viewer’s attention is constantly redirected by rapid changes in the image, and he or she is forced to focus on the most interesting content. It is, in essence, the producer that manages the viewer’s attention by selecting content for him and presenting it in images. The suspension of will creates what Guevera calls a “virtual subject, which for the duration of the television programme exists in place of the individual, fitting into his or her consciousness like a hand into a rubber glove”; виртуальный субъект… который на время телепередачи существует вместо человека, входя в его сознание как рука в резиновую перчатку”; Bromfield 79; Pelevin, Generation 133-4). The virtual subject replaces the “real” and the viewer becomes a simulacrum of the self.

As Mark Poster writes in his article "Desiring Information and Machines" on the subject of television, "the relation of viewer to screen is one of fusion. The screen is thus a liminal object, an interface between the human and the machine that invites penetration of each by the other” (98). The individual as a cognizant, self-sufficient entity ceases to exist and fuses with the television. Guevera indicates that the body is not necessarily affected, but the human consciousness is gone. What is left is a shell, a conduit of information. Guevera describes the process:

This is similar to the condition of possession by a spirit. The difference lies in the fact that in this case the spirit does not exist; all that does exist are the symptoms of possession. This is a virtual spirit, but from the moment the viewer entrusts the programme-makers with redirecting his or her attention at will from object to object, he or she effectively becomes this spirit, and the spirit, which does not
actually exist, possesses this viewer and millions of others. What is taking place could appropriately be called the experience of collective non-existence, since the virtual subject that replaces the viewer's actual consciousness is absolutely non-existent – it is merely an effect created by the collective efforts of editors, cameramen and producers. However, for the individual watching the television, there is nothing more real than this virtual subject. (Bromfield 79-80)

The viewer's identity, then, is completely replaced by simulacra. Identity, once prescribed by the state, is now directed by television producers. The effect is the same, but with a different identity, and a different idea. Guevera dubs the viewers who are controlled by their televisions as if by a remote control a new species, Homo Zapiens, or
HZ, from the word “zapping,” or channel surfing. He explains, "coercive zapping, whereby the television is converted into a remote control for the viewer, is...the very foundation of television broadcasting, the major means by which the advertising-informational field exerts its influence on consciousness” (принудительный заппинг, при котором телевизор превращается в пульт дистанционного управления телезрителем, является... главным способом воздействия рекламно-информационного поля на сознание”; Bromfield 81; Pelevin, Generation 137).

Guevara goes on to discuss this new kind of organism in its basic terms as a monocellular capitalist organism called the Oranus which consumes and expels money. Its behavior is tied to that of Homo Zapiens who are programmed to consume. This may be a metaphorical metamorphosis, but it is one with real implications for human identity.

Tatarsky soon learns at work that all of the politicians in Russia and the USA (since Reagan's second term) are digital animations, the quality of whose rendering in Russia is subject to US sanctions. There are no heads of state; instead, the illusion of government is created by producers and supported by the persistent belief in the simulacrum. Boris Yeltsin is carefully rendered through motion capture technology using actors to play the part of his body in various stages of intoxication.

According to Tatarsky's boss, the digital Yeltsin is no less real than the man because:

---

276 The term “Oranus” is a portmanteau incorporating the words “oral” and “anus” meant to convey the endless cycle of consumer consumption in scatalogical terms typical of Russian postmodernism.
By his very nature, every politician is just a television broadcast. Even if we do sit a live human being in front of the camera, his speeches are going to be written by a team of speechwriters, his jackets are going to be chosen by a group of stylists, and his decisions are going to be taken by the Interbank Committee (Bromfield 166).

По своей природе любой политик – это просто телепередача. Ну, посадим мы перед камерой живого человека. Все равно ему речи будет писать команда спичрайтеров, пиджаки выбирать – группа стилистов, а решения принимать – Межбанковский комитет. (Generation 279).

In other words, the politician is just a persona, not an identity. He is like any other commodity, constructed, produced, and consumed. These lines reveal an underlying critique of political systems and a suspicion of the political process in general. If the image of the leader is so heavily mediated, the process itself may be a simulacrum in any society, communist or capitalist.

Pelevin's ideas about television are not restricted to capitalist society. His meditation on television in a Soviet context appears in his 1992 novella, Omon Ra. A parody of Soviet heroic narratives, Omon Ra is the story of Omon Krivomazov, a young man who dreams of becoming a cosmonaut.277 His dreams are realized when he is

---

277 The title plays on the Russian acronym for special forces police, OMON (Omon is so named by his policeman father), and the name of the Egyptian hybrid creator/wind/sun-god Amun Ra who travelled across the sky in a boat, an appropriate namesake for a cosmonaut.
selected to participate in a special mission which will require that he sacrifice his life in the line of duty.

He is charged with moving a moon rover seventy kilometers over the surface of the moon by bicycle power. He is to place a radio transmitter on the surface of the moon, which will transmit the words "Lenin," "Peace," and "U.S.S.R." into space. Following the successful placement of the device on the moon's surface, he is instructed to shoot himself with a revolver provided by the space program and loaded with a single bullet, because he will not be able to survive on the moon nor return to earth.

When Omon's gun misfires, he finds himself in a secret television studio hidden on an abandoned metro line. He discovers that the entire Soviet space program is a fake, made for television. The novella problematizes the system of state-controlled media. The audience has no choice but to believe what is presented to them. Or, knowing that what they see is false, they have no option but to defend it as the truth or be labeled enemies of the state. The novella shows disillusionment with the Soviet grand narrative of the heroic biography by revealing the mechanisms of illusion behind it.  

Another meditation on identity versus representation is Sergei Loban's film Пыль (Dust) (2005). In it, the technological simulation of an ideal body takes precedence over a man's "true" identity. Liosha, a homely, balding, overweight man, with thick glasses and unfashionable clothing, takes part in an experimental test in which he looks into a mirror and sees a handsome man with a muscular physique. In the beginning of the film, Liosha's grandmother dictates his identity as he tries on various pieces of clothing in a

\[278\] Disillusionment is a common theme in contemporary Russian literature, and similar strategies of dismantling Soviet grand narratives by revealing the stagecraft can be seen in the film *Hammer and Sickle*. 

251
thrift store. She chooses an amorphous, oversized white t-shirt with the kitschy image of a kitten on it. The shirt desexualizes and infantilizes Liosha. In the clinic, Liosha's identity is manipulated through technology which brings about a shift in self-image. Liosha sees himself as a virile, attractive man, and this image becomes superior to his original identity (Figure 36). Liosha seems to understand that the image in the mirror is not real. He begins to behave as his new self might, lifting weights at a gym and going out clubbing at night. He dreams of his other body, and tries to regain his new sense of self by performing as the other body (Figure 35). Nonetheless, he is unable to reconcile his new vision of himself with reality, and attempts to return to the room with the mirror in order to reclaim his imagined body. The mirror functions like a television screen, which, as M. W. Smith writes, "ritually 'informs' individuals of who they are, what makes them happy, what they fear and desire… So many of us are lured by the prospects of the perfect body or the perfect existence—all prefigured in a perfect simulacrum, our doubling within the circulatory and free-floating media scene" (Smith, 66). Dust presents a critique of this media-based control. Liosha is incapable of managing his own attention or identity. He needs the screen to tell him who he is.
Liosha’s attempts to return to his desired and constructed “body” are thwarted until he sneaks into the clinic dressed as a woman, wearing thick makeup and a head scarf. Undaunted by the doctor’s discouraging lecture and physical attempts to stop him, Liosha undresses to his boxer shorts and reenters the room, where he sits, happily watching his reflection flicker in the mirror/screen, eagerly waiting for his desired body to appear. The doctor solemnly presses the buttons of a remote control, and Liosha appears as a flickering phantom of his original body on his grandmother’s couch, laughing at the banal physical comedy of Evgenii Petrosian who dances and makes faces on the television screen. As the credits roll, the Kino song “We are Waiting for Changes” plays, accompanied by a sign language interpreter, a complement to the film ASSA (1988), which ends with the same song. The song carries a political message, and its use here implies a disappointment with the promises of post-Soviet society, and acts as an ironic gesture toward Liosha’s transformation. Liosha disappears into illusion, trading his
physical body for a disembodied image, which, despite his wishes, does not differ in appearance from his original body. He no longer exists outside of a world of screens, but is a screen image watching a screen, (which we view through a screen, integrating us into Liosha’s world).

While Liosha disappears into the screen, performance artist Oleg Kulik confronts the manipulation of the screen. Best known for his performances as a dog, Kulik interrogates the concept of the human by acting as or on behalf of animals. Many of Kulik's performances are videotaped, and, indeed, the video documents of each performance are works of art in their own right. In one of his performances, Два Кулика (Two Kuliks), Kulik stages a confrontation between his artist and animal selves using video projection. With a paintbrush strapped to his face (a "beak") he paints a self-portrait in red paint over the projection of his face on large pane of glass set on his easel. Tom Waits’ song “Russian Dance” plays in the background. The video projection or (human?) avatar admonishes the "real" (animal?) Kulik. He recounts, “Голос, который я слышу, олицетворяет обывательский взгляд на современное искусство, на меня. ‘Ты – бездарный художник, ты не собака, ты – говно, отпусти меня, надоело мне твое искусство...’” (Bavilskii 28) (The voice… represents the philistine view of contemporary art, of me. ‘You are a talentless artist. You are not a dog, you are shit. Let me go, I’ve had enough of your art.’”) Kulik breaks the glass on the easel by beating it with his head and hands, resulting in a deep laceration in his wrist, and a significant amount of blood loss. The video shows Kulik as he is transported to the hospital in an ambulance and as he receives a series of injections at the site of the wound. The unintentional injury (the breakaway glass should have shattered easily and without sharp
edges) thus becomes part of the final document. Kulik recalls, “thick streams of something black flow. A pool gathers on the floor, like from a pig. I look at my arm – it is cut right to the bone. I see layers of fat, flesh, and bone. The blood gushes”

(“широкими потоками льется что-то черное. На полу растекается лужа – как от свиньи. Я смотрю на руку – она разрезана прямо до кости, вижу слой жира, мяса, кость... Кровь фонтанирует; Bavilskii 27-32). This visceral memory (and the documentation of medical care in close-up) makes clear that Kulik’s human body, made of flesh, fat, bone and blood, survives, though injured, trumping the media-based simulacrum. His detailed description of that physical human body (with the invented verb "fountains" offering a kind of celebration of his human blood) reiterates the sense that the real can be discovered only through direct confrontation with the simulacrum.

The performance intentionally makes unclear which Kulik is real by staging the performed animal persona as the flesh-and-blood victor. Kulik states that the performance is meant to give the impression that the person on the other side of the screen has really been killed, though he is only a projection (Bavilskii 29). The winner of the confrontation is a flesh-and-blood Kulik, who has taken a heroic, dangerous stand against a simulacrum of himself. By destroying his video persona, he perhaps reclaim the right to control and to perform his identity, asserting his bodily self over the mediated image of himself. It is a victory of body over mind, real over simulacrum.
Kulik's installation, “В Глубь России” (“Deep into Russia”), part of a larger project, also incorporates technology, but places it in a gallery setting. The installation features a video monitor inside a papier mache sculpture of a cow. A video with images from Kulik’s *Deep into Russia* portfolio appears on screen, and the viewer is able to glimpse it through the cow’s open reproductive orifice. The viewer can listen to the audio through a pair of headphones. The involvement of multiple senses creates a crude virtual reality environment in which the viewer is immersed in the installation as well as integrated into it. It is a fusion of the human, animal and technological, as well as a fusion of artist and viewer. By watching the video, the viewer is forced to repeat one of Kulik's early performances in which he placed his head into the vagina of a live cow. This, he claimed, represented his rebirth as an animal. Technology affords a new kind of rebirth for Kulik who creates himself and reincarnates himself as a media entity. Kulik gains control over the medium by controlling the content. In the case of *Deep into Russia*, Kulik is the producer who controls and transforms the viewer. As evidence of the physical power of the screen over the body, in an interview with Dmitrii Bavil'skii, Kulik recalls the reactions of viewers who became nauseous after viewing the installation or who ran from the gallery (breaking Kulik’s information loop by escaping the influence of the screen) (Bavil’skii 121). It is worth noting that the preservation of much of Kulik’s performance work relies on video documentation. What remains of his ephemeral performances are manipulated, edited documents, limited and distributed by the screen. He is both performer and post-production critic and manipulator.

---

279 The title, "V Glub' Rossii" is a play on nationalist identity. The term evokes Kulik’s native Ukraine, considered by many the cradle of Russian culture, while Moscow is known also as Сердца России (the heart of Russia).
Second Life: Videogames and Cyberspace

In a landmark 1984 advertisement for Apple Computer, entitled “1984,” an athletic woman dressed in a track and field uniform bursts into a crowded theater in which rows of spectators sit, in identical uniforms, with shaved heads and blank expressions, watching an address from a man on the screen who recalls Orwell's Big Brother. The woman throws a sledgehammer at the screen, causing it to explode, and awakens the benumbed minds of the audience members who gasp with the apparent shock of self-awareness. Interpretations of the ad largely suggest that it is an attack on IBM as a monolithic corporate giant, meant to suggest that Apple breaks the status quo, and breaks the cycle of corporate control via information. A later Apple slogan from the 1990's—"Think Different"—supports the idea that computers affect how we think. But human interactions with the computer and with distinct operating systems have larger implications than requiring different command sets and programming codes. They each require a unique way of thinking, therefore directing the user's thinking, and, in the Cartesian scheme, way of being. Hence newer commercials from both camps wherein users proclaim either, "I'm a Mac" or “I'm a PC” suggest that computers determine human identity. We are what we use—and sometimes what we choose. These machines do cause users to think differently, to engage in an information feedback system with the computer, and, thereby, to transform from physical body into information.

As computers have developed, users—particularly gamers—have gained the illusion of self-control in that they can create their own avatar or virtual body, and control their experiences within a range of choices. Nonetheless, given the limited set of
command variables, the user or operator is restricted to a predetermined set of behaviors and actions. The operator is subject to operation.

Victor Pelevin explores the world of videogames and their effect upon gamers in his 1994 story “The Prince of Gosplan”), “Принц госплана” (which takes place in a semi-virtual, semi-real world. In it, the office duties of Sasha, a worker in a technical institute, are interposed with scenes from videogames. Most characters in the story are represented, in part or in full, by computer generated and animated avatars from popular games. Sasha is able to see avatars from other games and identify them, and is also able to move from one place to another using secret passageways, as in a game. As Sasha travels throughout his office, and ventures into the world beyond, he also travels through the levels of "The Prince," his chosen videogame, and witnesses others in the process of playing their own games. Multiple virtual worlds are superimposed on reality. As gamer theorist Mackenzie Wark notes, there is a difference between the game and gamespace. Each character must adhere to the rules of their own games while navigating the gamespace determined by their program (21). As such, they interact with the real world based on video game protocol. A dangerous obstacle for one character is nonexistent from the point of view of another. The action of the story takes place in an office environment onto which the gaming environment is superimposed. Events in the videogame world appear to have "real-world" consequences within the fictional world. Players die, disappear, reboot, dodge dangerous apparatus, and take shortcuts from one

---

280 Translated by Andrew Bromfield.
281 "The Prince" refers to the popular and graphically innovative side-scrolling game "Prince of Persia," (1989) which was the first to use rotoscoping—digital animation based on filmed action sequences to create more realistic gameplay. See http://jordanmechner.com/prince-of-persia/, and http://jordanmechner.com/old-journals/
level to the next in the mundane "real-world" landscape of office desks, escalators, and cafeterias. What is real for a player in one game has no effect on characters in other games. Sasha tries to dodge the deadly "body scissors" in *The Prince* while those who are not playing move through them unharmed (Figure 37). A co-worker asks him to light her cigarette from one of the torches that appear to him in his game; she cannot do it herself because she is not playing, and thus the torches are not "real" to her. Wark writes, "whether gamespace is more real or not than some other world is not the question; that even in its unreality it may have real effects on other worlds *is*... They encode the abstract principles upon which decisions about the realness of this or that world are now decided" (21). Game logic is superimposed on Soviet reality. In this case, the labyrinth of the *Gosplan* building, housing the organization responsible for central planning, which created simulacra of its own. As in the real world, gamespace contains hierarchies and the potential to advance based on established protocols.
Within “The Prince of Gosplan” each game is carefully controlled. There is a limited set of characters for each game, each with a clearly determined plot. Each game has only one or two heroes. Sasha runs into the plumbers from *Pipes*, evidently a parody of the video game *Super Mario Brothers*. Since choices are limited, single avatars may belong to multiple players. Two Darth Vaders appear in the cafeteria, multiple versions of the same fighter pilot hold a meeting, and characters switch avatars when they switch to a new game. The story mixes concerns with virtual reality and the video game world with existential panic and anxieties about Russia's new consumer economy. Sasha and his colleagues are obsessed with brand names, fast computers, and sharing information.
about videogames, but Sasha is also troubled by the question of his existence. He cannot remember why he wants to advance to the next level, and contemplates the purpose of life. He has the same thoughts over and over again, wondering, "Just where is it that I'm going?... I've already reached the seventh level—well, maybe not quite reached it, but I've seen what's there. It's the same old stuff, only the guards are fatter. So I'll reach the eighth level—but it's going to take so long. And what comes after that?") (А куда, собственно, я иду?... До седьмого уровня я уже доходил – ну, может, не совсем доходил, но видел, что там. Все то же самое, только стражники толще. Ну, на восьмой выйду. Так это ж сколько времени займет... Да и зачем все это?"; (Bromfield, "Prince," 175; “Prints” 177). Sasha is trapped in an endless loop, unable to choose his own destiny, either in terms of his work or his game, because of the nature of corporate labor and because of the logic of the game. The metaphorical corporate ladder is a set program of advancement, and Cybernetic logic is necessarily looped. Sasha’s fate is pre-written and pre-coded. The Prince of Gosplan managed to fill the flat and fictitious framework of the game with himself: his individual path, his pain, losses and revelations. By this means he transformed the simulation into a reality of his own, free and authentic (for him) (Lipovetsky Russian Literary Postmodernism 45).

The story is not controlled by the user, and the reader is subject to the player's point of view. Under this constraint, "the borders and limits of the two worlds are never clearly delineated and the reader is never given enough information to decide whether the hero is a state bureaucrat daydreaming at his computer console or an animated 'prince' periodically slipping into the mundane world to escape yet another dragon" (McCausland 227). In the end, it does not matter. The two worlds are overlaid. They coexist
seamlessly, and there is no indication that the reader should seek an underlying truth or an exit from one world or the other. Rather "Pelevin invites the reader to enter the 'game' of the text, and to discover that there is never any end to the game, never any return to 'reality', and no possibility of winning" (Dalton-Brown 216). The story keeps its own internal logic.

In contrast to Pelevin's prince, who is subject to the coding of an absent programmer, the hero of American cyberpunk author Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* (1992), Hiro Protagonist, is a master of virtual reality (though, as his name indicates, a fictional construct, subject to the author's whims). He himself is a game coder and has created a virtual world and a virtual identity that he can control. Stephenson's novel prefigured the advent of user-generated and controlled internet content, particularly internet-based role playing games such as *Second Life*, or *World of Warcraft*. In such games, the player is able to customize and control his avatar, and to interact in real time with other players from any geographical location in a virtual world. For Hiro Protagonist, events beyond his control in the virtual world are limited to a virus, called "snow crash," which is powerful enough to destroy his avatar. The novel suggests a new kind of simulacrum in keeping with William Gibson’s definition of cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination"—one that is not externally created, but personally customized and chosen.282 It is not imposed by government and distributed through propaganda, nor produced by a corporation and disseminated through advertising. The user creates his own fantasy and chooses to participate in it. The player chooses to live in a virtual world. Wark writes: "As the gamer becomes attuned to the game, gamer and

---

282 From an interview in the technology magazine *Mondo 2000*, quoted in Hauser (Hauser 20).
game become one event, one battle, one action; an oscillating between the line dividing self from other and the line connecting them as one substance" (162).

The consequences of bringing game protocol to the real world are explored in Aleksei Balabanov's film *Brother 2* (*Брат 2*) (2000) which takes a critical view of media representations of heroic behavior. Here, Balabanov addresses the action hero genre in movies and video games. The hero of the film, Danila, has little interest in popular culture, but nonetheless casts himself in the role of action hero, meting out vigilante justice according to his own rules. In *Brother 2*, the camera follows his gun as he walks from room to room in the office area of a rock club, shooting everyone he meets. The camera angle mimics the perspective of first-person shooter videogames such as the genre classic *Doom*. Brigit Beumers writes, "Danila does not behave like a real person: he fires his gun in the club as though he is playing a .... computer game, where the enemy lurks around every corner and behind each door. Danila is playing a virtual game with a real gun. In this sense, Balabanov is taking a critical view of the American culture of video and computer games that encourage violence" (239). It is a critique in which Balabanov is clearly complicit as the creator of equally violent and influential movies. As Wark points out, on the other hand, death is only temporary in gamespace, writing, "there can really be nothing on the other side of a mere sign of death. These signs are digital, repeatable bits; death is not" (135). Danila and the viewer are both simultaneously subject to a point of view, produced by the makers of first-person shooter games, which renders the destruction of human life a game without consequences.

Death as a digital sign also plays a part in the work of poet and visual artist Dmitrii Prigov, one of the few Russian artists to create original content for the internet.
His site features a gallery in which the visitor can browse through his works. This in itself is not extraordinary. Web savvy artists such as Komar and Melamid, writer Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Pelevin, and others also have strong presences on the web. Prigov, on the other hand, created a series of flash animations, which he called his "сетевые проекты" (network projects), many of which show the body in a state of transformation.

Prigov’s short videos of himself reading his short "Obrashcheniia" ("Addresses") are clever updates of the original texts. In the early 1980's, Prigov wrote a series of very short poems all sharing the same format. They are all addressed to the "citizens," and signed "Dmitrii Aleksanych." Prigov posted these short poems on walls and posts in public places in Moscow. These public addresses contributed to his popular poetic persona. The internet recordings, short, looped videos, function as a kind of avatar, carrying Prigov’s digital persona into the computer age (Figure 38). These videos, along with other internet-based content, contribute to Prigov’s effort to reach the public en masse by using mass media and taking up public space. To use the terminology of Facebook, Prigov was "writing" on the "walls" of the internet, just as he once posted his poems on telephone poles and bus stop shelters. The advantage of internet content is that it seems to last beyond the author’s death, thus extending his "presence" in the digital world, and it is not subject to Soviet streetcleaners who might remove the texts from actual public space.
Prigov’s digital animations critique every aspect of media communication. One of his flash animations is a commentary on television as mechanism of control. A pair of eyes with square screen-like retinas move around as if watching something in motion. The text reads “продолжаем смотреть” (Let's keep watching). This recalls Pelevin's take on television's control of the viewer's eyes through the technique of montage.

Another flash animation reinforces the idea of television as an informant of identity. A skull faces a flashlight, which, when turned on, fills in the features of the face. Underneath the flashlight, the word "life" appears. It is a reverse diagram of how an eye or camera aperture works, allowing light to come in as a reflection of the image. Here the light creates the image, giving the suggestion that the figure does not exist unless it is being watched by a mechanical eye. It is the flashlight that sees and that gives life.

In other animations, Prigov reflects upon the insignificant nature of death in videogames. One series begins with the words “ВРАГОВ МНОГО” (there are many enemies). Five stylized human bodies appear, in solid black against a yellow background.
Each body turns red and disappears in sequence, followed by the words “BONUS СМЕРТЬ” (BONUS DEATH) which flash three times before the sequence repeats. The animation may be a meditation on the temporary nature of death in videogames. The use of staple images from videogames, including the word “bonus” and the bodies of enemies rendered as simple shapes, stages death as one object among many to be counted as losses and gains on a scale of goals to be achieved along the path to victory (vitality, food stores, money, strength, weapons and tools are vital statistics typically monitored in videogames by checking windows dedicated to tracking these details).

Another animation shows a stylized figure made up of black rectangles against a light blue background. A yellow recycling symbol spins around clockwise on the figure's abdomen. The head, a square with two eyes represented by smaller, empty squares, rises up from the body on an elongated neck, which is severed by a proportionally giant pair of red scissors. The head floats off into space, and the process repeats. There is nothing visceral about the event. No blood is shed. There is nothing realistic here. Squares retain the idea of bits, and the recycling symbol indicates the cyclical nature of digital death. An avatar, once killed, can usually be resurrected, reused, and recycled. This is the virtual subject, suffering a virtual death.

In other animations, Prigov comments on the computer and its meaning as part of human life. One animation shows a series of ones lined up like binary code which reverse and turn red to form the word "Я" (I). In binary code, a single “1” is equivalent

---

283 Prigov's tongue-in-cheek commentary for this piece is, "А вы слышали, что с 2003 года компьютеры переходят с двоичной системы на 2.5-ичную систему? ДАП" (prigov.ru)
to the number one. It maintains the singular. Perhaps, the human being has become so dependent upon media that individual identity can be expressed in binary code.

A still image features a computer dialog window with the words "Жизнь прекраааааснааааааа!" (Life is wooooonderfuuuuuuul) in the dialog box. Beneath it are buttons reading "OK," "Cancel," and "Help". The window features a "close" button as well. The user, having transferred his existence to the computer realm, has a set of existential options written as simple commands. The user may reject the statement by closing the window or canceling it, accept it by clicking "OK," or pull up a help menu. This is a new kind of existence, reflecting the limited selection of choices combined with truly limited user choice presented by the computer. This way of thinking and of being is, in fact, rather limited.

While Prigov 's animations are a kind of metacritical look at technology, Pelevin uses Internet-inspired formatting to look at Internet users. His work acknowledges that there is an increasing possibility of life lived on the Internet. MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) allow users to communicate with one another across continents and language barriers, and to create idealized or fantastic virtual bodies, or avatars. Pelevin deals with the predecessor to virtual gamespace, the chat room. He takes as his central metaphor the labyrinth.284

The concept of user choice is in play in Pelevin's take on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, The Helmet of Horror (Шлем ужаса) (2006), written in the form of an Internet chat-room conversation. There are eight characters in the chat-room, whose

---

284 For Pelevin and his fellow postmodernist writers, Borges' labyrinth-as-(hyper)text is an important intertext. The internet functions as both hypertext and labyrinth.
usernames—Ariadna, Monstradamus, Nutcracker, Organizm, IsoldA, Romeo-y-Cohiba, UGLI 666, and Sliff_zoSSchitan—operate as avatars which presumably provide some information about their respective owners. Organizm asks of another user, "did you invent your views to match your name or was your name invented to match your views? (а ты себе взгляды придумала под имя или тебе имя придумали под взгляды?"; Bromfield Helmet 32; Pelevin, Shlem 32). However, the characters complain in their posts that they have not chosen their names, but have been assigned them. Moreover, they appear not to be in a "real" chat-room, on the "real" Internet, but in a maze, each in a similar cell with little more than a computer in it. They cannot find each other, but describe the world around them to one another via the chat-room. Organizm explains of their predicament, "("seems this isn't the Internet, just looks like it. You can't link to anywhere else from here… The screen design is an imitation of the 'Guardian' site. The heading is the same—'Guardian Unlimited'. And the chat area looks the same. The difference is there are hundreds of threads there. But we've only got one" (кажется, это не интернет, а только выглядит как интернет. Отсюда некуда перейти… По дизайну то, что на экране—имитация сайта газеты "гардиан." Там такая же шапка—"Guardian Unlimited." Разница в том, что там сотни тредов. А у нас только один; Bromfield, Helmet 2, 41; Shlem 8, 39). Organizm and Nutcracker further point out other violations of chat-room protocol. The characters are able to type messages in real time, are unable to share personal information or to swear, presumably under the watchful eye and control of a moderator-censor, and make no spelling errors, unless permitted or forced by the same moderators (Helmet 8, 44-5)). The labyrinth in which the Minotaur lies at the center thus doubles as a panopticon with the controlling eye of the censor at
the center. This level of outside control violates the interactive, user-generated and controlled nature of the typical Internet chat-room (the limitations on spelling and grammar are another intrusion, as Russian chat-room participants often revel in playful usage). Pelevin presupposes a world in which the characters are not the generators of the fantasy, but the victims of some kind of elaborate setup.

However, there is no means of establishing truth in this text. There is no reason to assume that this is not a real chat-room on the real Internet in which the users do choose their content, and that this is not a shared fantasy of the eight voices or avatars involved. Monstradamus casts suspicion on the existence of other characters, using Ariadna as an example, writing, “феноменологически она существует в виде неясно откуда берущихся сообщений, подписанных 'Ариадна'” (Shlem 40) ("phenomenologically speaking, she only exists in the form of messages of unknown origin signed 'Ariadne'" (Helmet 42-43)). Pelevin's conceit turns the principle of the virtual world on its head, suggesting that the virtual world is more real than the myth of the physical world generated by the chat-room participants.

The novel's eponymous helmet refers not to armor, but to a virtual reality helmet, which the characters discuss in the context of their predicament. The wearer of a virtual reality helmet, called a Shlemiel, can be controlled to a certain extent, by controlling the information in his limited vision. Nutscracker explains, "когда шлем и шлемиль сливаются в одно целое, редактировать можно не только воспринимаемое, но и воспринимающего" (Shlem 85) ("When the helmet and the Helmholtz fuse into a single

---

285 In the English translation, Andrew Bromfield uses the term "Helmholtz" to preserve the pun. In Russian, the Yiddish word Shlemiel produces a pun on "Shlem". In English, the name of Hermann von Helmholtz, the scientist who studied perception, produces a pun on "Helmet."
whole, you can edit the reader as well as the book" (Helmet 99)). Pelevin's reader is in much the same predicament. We are privy only to certain information, and from the reader's limited point of view, reality is unknowable. It is as if, to quote Nutcracker, "we're all inside the Minotaur's head," subject to his control, and the Minotaur is Pelevin himself. The conclusion of the text drives this point home. Sliff_zoSSchitan asks, "Where did all of this happen? … and to who?"286 ("где все это происходило?... А скем?"). Monstradamus answers, "In the helmet of horror… [to] you (В шлеме ужаса… С тобой; Bromfield, Helmet 273-4; Shlem 223).

This metatextual twist is suggested in the preface to the English edition of the book. Pelevin writes:

Progress has brought us into these variously shaped and sized cubicles with glowing screens. But if we start to analyse this high-end glow in terms of content and structure, we will sooner or later recognize the starting point of the journey—the original myth. It might have acquired a new form, but it hasn't changed in essence. We can argue about whether we were ceaselessly borne back into the past or relentlessly pushed forward into the future, but in fact we never moved anywhere at all… but so far nobody has returned from the Labyrinth. Have a nice walk. (Helmet ix, xi)

In Pelevin's foray into Internet communications, the users of the format are caught in their own creation. The content may be user-generated, interactive, and socially-based (a

286 Here, we see the restoration of internet slang in the users' play with spelling and grammar, although this may be no more intentional than the enforced proper usage earlier in the text.
simulacrum of real world communications), but ultimately the user volunteers to take part in the creation, production, and proliferation of the simulacrum.

Pelevin's *Helmet of Horror* opens up a fundamental question of postmodernism: Is it over? While many of the texts I have discussed retain their cultural baggage, in this book it is stripped clean. The characters occupy no identifiable physical space and are not permitted to divulge any information about themselves which might reveal their cultural affiliations. Even their language is mediated through the chatroom interface. This lack of cultural specificity, together with the characters’ physical isolation, may be read as a metaphor for globalization, a phenomenon that threatens postmodernism. As Sally Dalton-Brown writes, “Postmodernism is about packaging” (217). It relies on the symbols, clichés, myths, and cultural detritus of the culture in which it is produced, and mines culture for its raw material. Its sources and reach have only grown with globalization which has provided more cultural material while allowing more widespread communication. But what will postmodernism become when its packaging is replaced by ones and zeros?

As technology continues to develop and become more accessible, it breaks down the barriers between cultures by allowing users in different physical locations to occupy the same space, and, to some extent, to communicate in a common language (some online environments have built-in translators, and, in general, users are expected to adhere to a set of agreed upon behaviors). Here, identity is ostensibly free of the claims

---

287 Whether or not postmodernism is over, the debate concerning when it ended, or when it will end, rages on. In her epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon dates death notices to as early as 1990, and gives a list of additional “obituaries.” Others cite different, later dates (Kirby). Whether any of these dates applies to Russian postmodernism is uncertain. We are not devoid of culture yet.
of state and the demands of citizenship. However, Pelevin’s inclusion of a moderator-censor makes clear the reach of government even into virtual life. That the Internet has been a gift to advertisers (and hackers) vying for attention through online shops and intrusive and sometimes invasive advertisements, such as popups, cookies, and malware, should also not be ignored. Nonetheless, a person’s participation in online simulation is most likely voluntary; and their online identity is not externally constructed, but produced and selected by the consumer, however limited the user’s choices may actually be.

Pelevin’s characters find themselves at the end of a series of social, economic, political, and technological transitions. They are trapped inside a labyrinth, perhaps of their own making. Programmed into cubicles, unable to verify their existence beyond the signifier or avatar, they are the product of a culture in transition, increasingly submissive to inscription by media, and to a life without a body.

The rise of Russian representation of the body as information reflects advancements in technology as well as the transition from Soviet to Post-Soviet culture. In Russian postmodernist literature and art, the human body as data is represented in many forms, with a host of implications. It is playfully shown in cyborg form, with prostheses in Komar and Melamid’s “Superobjects” series, raised as a protest against the state’s claim of sovereignty over its citizens’ freedom in their TransState and Ideal Document projects. Identity is performed according to state or media influence (Mit’ki, Daniil in Brother 2), and bodies transform into mediated information, screens and avatars (Pelevin’s oranus, Liosha in Dust, Kulik’s critical human face, the Prince, the labyrinth’s
chat-room participants). The body disappears, replaced—as in Prigov’s animations—by code.

The idea of identity beyond, or without the human body is, in part, the result of the reconceptualization of the body itself as information in connection with developments in cybernetic technology wherein the body is envisioned as an expandable prosthesis integrated into the information circuit. In some cases, this idea allows for an expansion of human freedom – allowing the body to extend beyond the boundary of skin, and even granting the multiplicity of identity promised in Donna Haraway’s vision of the cyborg. In others, however, this idea condemns human identity to behavior encoded by machines and erases the potential for individual creativity and artistic interaction with and representation of the world. Developments in technology and the associated questions of identity provided a sounding board for a Post-Soviet society that has struggled to change.
Conclusion: Body/Language

In the first decade of the 21st century, postmodern artists and writers, formerly on the margins, found themselves in the mainstream. What began with arrests, exile, secret exhibitions, furtive performances, and samizdat publications has ended with international acclaim, television appearances, film adaptations, medals, prizes, laurels, and a carnival crown. These generally positive reactions have been tempered by critiques, protests, lawsuits, and calls for censorship.\(^{288}\) Vladimir Sorokin, the target of lawsuits and protests by the pro-Putin youth group “Moving Together,” perceived tightening restrictions on democratic processes and free speech, and government consolidation of news organizations, during Putin’s presidency. In response, he penned *Day of the Oprichnik* (День опричника) (2008), a satire directed at the government, depicting a future in which Russia returns to a Tsarist government with brutal secret police. Sorokin explained that he wrote the novel out of a sense of citizenship (Sorokin, “Authoritarian Empire”). Sorokin’s deviation from the “alternative politics” of Russian postmodernism is part of a broader transition to a new aesthetics in Russian literature and art. In this new phase, the open body in art and literature is no longer a nonconformist statement but part of a broad

\(^{288}\) Tolstaya has her own talk show on which Kulik has appeared, Dmitrii Shagin has a regular role on a television police drama (Graudt), and was the grandmaster of the St. Petersburg carnival in 2007. Sorokin’s 200x novel *Blue Lard* was met with protest, pornography charges, and demands for censorship.

274
spectrum of aesthetic choices including abstraction and “post-sots” reinterpretations of socialist realist themes.

In writing this dissertation, I set out to provide an overview of how artists and writers have redrawn the boundaries of the human body in postmodern Russian art and literature, with a specific emphasis on themes of violence, death, and resurrection, the combination of human and animal features, and the influence information and technology on human identity. I ask why artists and writers turned to the imagery of transformation as Soviet power collapsed and how the image of the transforming body is connected to social and political transitions from the thaw to the present. I connect the artists and writers to one another as part of a loose creative contingent, and tie them to the Russian artistic and literary tradition, including 20th century avant-garde innovation and socialist realism. Most significantly, I consider their work as a challenge to totalitarian discourse. Russian postmodernism is fundamentally about language and image, and the transformation of the body is a way of deconstructing and remixing multiple discourses. In concluding, I will consider how these discourses intersect with the open body, note areas of further research, and touch upon recent developments in Russian art and literature.

**Changes**

Artists turned to the imagery of bodily transformation during the waning years of Soviet power in part to undermine the official discourse of the Soviet system—a discourse which had attempted to celebrate the whole, socialist body in the New Soviet Man and Woman. Instead, this new generation of artists was inspired by the traditions of
the avant-garde, to which they had gained limited access during Khrushchev’s thaw. Exposure to Malevich’s Suprematist paintings, for example, helped these artists develop their own conceptualist thoughts. Just as Malevich broke down bodies and objects into their component parts (making his boldest and most influential statement with his incomparable *Black Square*), and Velimir Khlebnikov broke the sounds of poetry apart to create Transsense (*Zaum*) poetry, conceptualist artists and poets broke down images and words to focus on their conceptual aspects.

As Sinyavsky had hoped, the grotesque returned to literature. In 1966-7, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* was finally published in the journal *Moskva*. Though parts of the novel were censored, it provided a model for politically subversive fantasy. Fantasy and the grotesque were available through other channels as well, even in the dark days of stagnation. The work of Daniil Kharms was distributed through *samizdat*, and its unmotivated violence set a precedent for younger writers who used shocking and violent imagery to explode language from within, breaking apart images and concepts. In deconstructing language, these writers undermined the power of authoritative discourse, and revived the dead language of commonplaces and quotations. By changing the context in which the familiar, dead speech was used, these writers defamiliarized it, refreshing dead concepts by deconstructing them and thus showing them in a new light.

One of the ways in which Russian postmodernism attacks fixed concepts is by addressing language and imagery through the medium of the body. Writers and artists manipulate the body, and human identity, through language and image, quoting from a reserve of sources, in a culture that produced a surplus of images. In postmodernism, this
breaking down of images becomes a game of signs, opening up the image of the body in transformation.

While some artists and writers such as Komar and Melamid, Sasha Sokolov, and Ilya Kabakov moved abroad and became part of the international artistic marketplace, others remained in Moscow and St. Petersburg, participants in an underground art scene of apartment exhibitions and poetry readings. After emigrating to New York, Komar and Melamid continued to use the imagery of socialist realism in their work, advocated for the reuse of monuments after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and integrated the cultural symbols of the United States into their work. Ilya Kabakov recreated Soviet spaces in museums and theaters all over the world. Following the Bulldozer exhibition, Soviet artists began to exhibit abroad and to integrate the imagery of global culture into their work. The "iron curtain" had never fully been in place for artists; after all, Soviet authors were published abroad through tamizdat, their works smuggled out of the country by trusted parties. But during Glasnost, artists and writers were given increasing freedom, and the journals of the day increased their print runs and were still bought up almost instantly as the public eagerly devoured the latest in cultural developments. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, formerly dissident artists and writers, able to publish and exhibit freely, became cult figures and international stars, no longer the misfits of Russian culture, but its exemplars.

Written on the Body

The postmodern image of the body in a state of transformation was in some ways a reaction to the myth of the New Soviet Man—an immortal demigod with an
immovable moral compass, capable of great feats of physical and mental prowess—and, indeed, to his antithesis, *Homo Sovieticus*—the subhuman automaton that the restrictive state wrought in its quest for the new man—a lazy, bestial sort capable only of rote behavior. In their reuse of Socialist realist narrative, quotation of popular texts, and allusion to anti-Soviet satire, Russian postmodernists engage in an ongoing debate on the subject of human—as well as Soviet, and Russian—identity, and the utopian desire to create a superior human being. Postmodern investigation of the human body and identity stretches beyond the borders of the (former) Soviet Union, and engages a long history of discourse on the subject, from Descartes to posthumanism.

In this study, I have described the postmodern aesthetic of the body in flux as a rejection of totalitarian language, clichés, and fixed ideas. Postmodernist writers and artists including Sasha Sokolov and Komar and Melamid parody the possibility of transcending death and overcoming time by invoking an atemporal mythological space, in which contemporary history collides with the mythical past. Sorokin deconstructs the grand narrative of a superior human race as a fantasy possible only through violence, bound to fail in the end. Oleg Kulik and Olga Florenskaya show the body resurrected, but only through death and the illusion of the taxidermist’s craft—dead concepts brought to life. In the work of Victor Erofeyev resurrection fails, and in Tatyana Tolstaya’s fiction, world conflagration also fails to produce anything new, but rather, reinstates the past. These works demonstrate a distrust of grand narrative in true postmodern style, as well as a suspicion of utopian political projects.

---

Dissident writer Aleksandr Zinoviev coined this term in his 1982 book of the same name.
The array of animals, hybrids, and fantastic creatures in Russian postmodernism is a vivid demonstration of the grotesque reimagined through a postmodern lens. Prigov’s *Bestiary* situates itself within the traditions of iconography and portraiture and subverts the conventions of both, defamiliarizing the subject. Tolstaya, Komar and Melamid, and Valeria Narbikova similarly use grotesque imagery wherein grotesque creatures mimic the violence of totalitarianism. Kulik challenges the assumption that humans are superior to animals by embodying an animal identity, at the same time situating himself in the middle of the artistic marketplace, between the street and the museum.

Soviet science and developments in technology promised to create the New Soviet Man and have inspired postmodern meditations on the body related to media and technology. The wearable technology created by Komar and Melamid parodies the possibility of improving the human body through implants and attachments of various apparatus with ideological implications. Developments in cybernetics led to the reconceptualization of the boundaries of the body, allowing the body to become a conduit of information. In the postmodern imagination, human identity is thus overwritten by data produced by propaganda, advertising, and media. Identity is secondary to language, just, perhaps, as it was under the Soviets, but now with a parodic, ironic, and always anti-utopian twist.

The image of the body in flux crosses boundaries of categorization, sometimes encompassing multiple forms of transformation. While I have attempted to give an

---

290 Oleg Kulik’s *Memento Mori*, and Olga Florenskaya’s *Taxidermy* series blend the images of death with animal imagery, while emphasizing the animal over the human. Kulik’s performance *Two Kuliks* is both an investigation of the animal body and the technologically mediated human self, as is his *Pavlov’s Dog*, though to a lesser extent.
overview of images of the body in flux in Russian postmodernism, I have focused only 
on three possible modes of transformation: mortality (the injured, immortal, and 
resurrected body), hybridity (bodies that cross human and animal characteristics through 
mutation, experiment, or embodiment), and technological integration.

Areas of further exploration include the investigation of gender, reproduction, 
and surgical procedures. Among the writers and artists in this dissertation, several have 
created work in which bodies blur the lines of gender. Within the works I discussed here, 
Sokolov’s Palisandr is a hermaphrodite, Narbikova’s Petia and Dyl are both 
androgynous, Tolstaya’s Ivan Beefich and several of Prigov’s bestiary creatures combine 
male and female characteristics. Other explorations of gender include Viktor Pelevin’s 
story “Mid-Game” (“Миттельшпиль”) (1991), in which he stages a intimate scene 
between two post-operative male-to-female transsexual prostitutes who discover that 
they knew each other in their previous, pre-surgical lives as men. He reprised the 
subject of prostitution with the story of an asexual were-fox in his Sacred Book of the 
Werewolf. In the 1994 film Hammer and Sickle (Серп и молот), a woman undergoes an 
operation to become a man in order to better serve the Soviet cause, and later becomes a 
hero as well as the model for the factory worker in Vera Mukhina’s monumental

291 “Dil” is the name of a transsexual character in the movie The Crying Game, which came out in 1992, 
the same year that Okolo Ekolo was published, making it a possible intertext. The name “Dyl” in 
Narbikova’s book may also refer to the Turkic word meaning “tongue” or “language,” or evoke the word 
дылда (a tall, ungainly person), which may contain some phallic overtones.

292 This story parodied the burgeoning popularity of films treating the subject of prostitution following the 
1989 film Intergirl (Интердевочка), which painted the life of a call girl in bleak colors. On prostitution 
see Natalia Olshanskaya "From The Pit to the Spot: Prostitution and Trafficking in Russian Film and 
Society, in Angela Brintlinger and Natasha Kolchevska, eds., Beyond "Little Vera": Women's Bodies and 
Women's Welfare in Post-Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe, Ohio Slavic Papers, vol. 7 (Columbus, OH, 
2008).
sculpture, *Factory Worker and Collective Farmer*. The factory worker who makes up the male half of this sculpture is an emblem of masculinity and industrial power.\(^{293}\)

Reproduction and medicine (especially surgery) are both issues that appear worthy of further exploration. Sorokin’s story “4,” and its film adaptation by Ilia Krzhanovskii, feature layered references to clones. The story follows one clone among four produced by a Soviet experimental cloning program as she attends the funeral of one of her sisters. New methods of reproduction are everywhere, as are surgical interventions on the body. Surgical implants and modifications have long been a topic of postmodern discourse in Western literature and art in which people remake themselves in search of the ideal body, or get surgical implants to perform specialized tasks (such as the subcutaneous weapons or computerized memory systems in cyberpunk literature, or the implants and attachments essential to the work of performance artist Stelarc\(^{294}\)). In *Omon Ra*, Pelevin shows a group of young men— aspiring pilots— whose legs are cut off below the knee. Here the surgery is an end in itself, a quotation from the true story of the heroic WWII pilot Aleksei Mares’ev, who returned to service as a pilot after being injured in the line of duty and having his legs amputated below the knee. The story was romanticized

---

\(^{293}\) Lipovetsky points out that, for all the other characteristics of postmodernist discourse that Russia has embraced, “such important Postmodern discourses as feminism, multiculturalism, queer studies, and post-colonialism—all focused on the values of the Other—remain underdeveloped and frequently despised in the Russian cultural mainstream” (359-60). In this statement, he is writing about the 1990s, but his assessment holds true today. Lilya Kaganovsky provides a clear analysis of the film *Hammer and Sickle* in the epilogue to her book, *How the Soviet Man was Unmade*. The volume *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-century Russian Culture* addresses a variety of topics related to gender and identity, including prostitution, violence and gender in post-Soviet cinema, and gay identity. Helena Goscilo’s article “Posting the Soviet Body as Tabula Phrasa and Spectacle” explores a broad spectrum of images of the body, including Vladik Monro, an impersonator best known for his performances as Marilyn Monroe. Monro also impersonates other famous personages, film characters, and stereotypes, both male and female. His portfolio includes performances, videos, and photographs done in the manner of Cindy Sherman.

\(^{294}\) http://stelarc.org. One of Stelarc’s ongoing projects is to implant a third ear in his left forearm, complete with a microphone. He has attached prosthetic arms to his body, created a walking exoskeleton, and telepresence robot, among other projects. Deitch places cosmetic surgery within the context of postmodern bodies. See Pitts for a discussion of body modification in cyberpunk culture.
in Boris Polevoi’s *The Story of a Real Man* (1947), and the subsequent film by the same name (1948).

I have limited my discussion to a few exemplary artists and writers, most of whom have a fairly high profile in the West, but many others have dealt with the subject of the body in flux as well. Rimma and Valerii Gerlovin, conceptualist artists briefly mentioned in chapter two, have a portfolio of performances, text-based sculptures, and installations in which they use the body as a canvas on which to write texts that rely on word play. In several photographs, they use Rimma’s long braids to create the illusion of material objects such as ripples of water or the outline of an infant.295 The artist Grisha Bruskin incorporates demonic figures into his phalanxes of painted or sculptural figures—characters from his personal mythology based on Soviet stereotypes.296 In this dissertation I have of necessity all but ignored film, and left theater and dance out entirely, though this is a productive area for further research. For example, contemporary dance groups such as Derevo deal with the subject of the body in transformation.297 Again due to the need to limit this fascinating topic in some way, my discussion is focused on artists from Moscow and St. Petersburg, and does not touch on the work of artists in other Russian cities or in other parts of the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, I have scarcely touched the surface of Internet content. Most of the artists and writers profiled here have a presence on the web, ranging from blogs to archives and hypertexts. As technology advances, it will be interesting to watch how Russian artists use, respond to, and interact with it.

295 For a gallery of images featuring such illusions, along with essays and a chronology, see www.gerlovin.com
296 For an introduction to Bruskin’s work, see grishabruskin.com
297 More information about the company, including video, is available at www.derevo.org
As the memory of life in the Soviet Union recedes, the aesthetics and politics of Russian postmodernism are shifting. The “alternative politics” of non-engagement appear to be fading as even Sorokin, that most controversial of postmodernists, has taken up the mantle of citizenship to pen direct, politically-motivated satire. The pendulum has swung the other way as well; Lipovetsky notes a trend of socialist nostalgia in adaptations of Soviet novels and in new works set in the Soviet past, in such diverse texts as comic books, musicals, novels, and films, without the ironic distance of postmodernist double-coding. These “post-sots” texts quote from Soviet imagery, but do nothing to deconstruct the Soviet mythology surrounding them (“Post-Sots” 358). Indeed, Lipovetsky finds this rehabilitation of socialist realist tropes even in Vladimir Sorokin’s novel Ice, a novel I have explored for its postmodern exploration of the body in transition. He explains,

These works do not try to expose the absurdity or violence hidden beneath Socialist Realist mythology. The target audience for these texts does not include nostalgic die-hards; rather they are all aimed at pleasing the middle-aged generation for whom Socialist Realism is more associated with childhood memories, and they are especially addressed to the first post-Soviet generation, for whom this aesthetic is distant and even exotic (Lipovetsky 358).

---

298 Lipovetsky, “Post-Sots.” Lipovetsky also mentions Ivanova, Nostal’iashchee on this trend.
Thus, in the contemporary marketplace, socialist realist aesthetics have become fresh once again, the violence and control of the discourse neutralized. Meanwhile, the artists profiled in this discussion are presented in retrospectives and publications of collected works, and appear on television as celebrated representatives of cultural authority. They have, it seems, become representatives credible and well-respected paragons of culture because of their rebellious past. The methods and techniques of the avant-garde, and of the postmodernists have become fodder for imitation, and even adaptation. The 2011 film version of Generation "II" is fundamentally different from the book, a parody of the text itself, in place of Pelevin’s hip iconoclasm. It is a nostalgia film which recreates a stylized 1990s. Pelevin himself has become a pop figure.

Representations of the body, meanwhile, have not disappeared. A quick scan of recent exhibitions at museums showing contemporary art in Moscow and Petersburg yields a variety of artists from around the world, and art representing diverse styles and subject matter. Grotesque bodies stand beside abstract painting and nostalgic reimaginings of the past. Among the many exhibitions I visited while in St. Petersburg and Moscow from 2006-7, and one that I missed, some were in the “post-sots” vein, (with black and white photographs from the artist’s childhood alongside Soviet symbols\(^{299}\)), and no less than three (one at the Pushkinskaya 10 art center in St.

\(^{299}\) Pushkinskaia 10, an art complex in Petersburg associated with unofficial artists and musicians in the Soviet period, website at http://www.p-10.ru/; Garazh, an art center in Moscow, the project of Dasha Zhukova (girlfriend of oil billionaire Roman Abramovich, which prides itself on showing internationally recognized artists. See her profile in *The New Yorker* by Julia Ioffe, website at http://www.garageccc.com/exhibitions/; The Moscow Museum of Modern art, founded in 1999, has a collection of nonconformist art and shows contemporary artists, website at http://www.mmosa.ru/en/exhibitions/; The Tretiakov gallery, dedicated to Russian art, has a strong collection of nonconformist art, and changing contemporary exhibitions, website at: www.tretiyakovgallery.ru/, and the Russian museum in St. Petersburg put up a show based around Malevich’s *Black Square* in 2007. They also have rotating exhibits from contemporary Russian and
Petersburg, one at the Tretiakov gallery in Moscow, and one at the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg) dealt with variations on Suprematist themes, particularly Malevich’s *Black Square.*\(^{300}\) At the moment, postmodern texts, post-sots, and abstraction continue to coexist. What becomes of the body next, only time will tell.

---

\(^{300}\) Meanwhile, Kulik returned to his glass pieces, large panes of glass with squares cut out, in 2003, while continuing to explore multimedia projects.
References


286


289


Panzanelli, Roberta, Julius Schlosser, and Julius Schlosser. Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure. Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute, 2008. Print.

300


310

Appendix A: Copyright Information

Figures 1, 2, 3, 19, and 20 are, to the best of my knowledge, in the public domain.
Figures 7, 8, 14, 21, 22, 23, 28, 33, 34, and 38 are awaiting permission of the copyright holder. I have made every effort to obtain permission from the copyright holder.
Figures 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, appear with the generous permission of the artist.
Figures 18, 35, 36, 37 are my own photographs. Of these, 35, 36, 37 are still images of copyrighted materials.