

Intelligentsia and cynicism: Political metamorphoses of postmodernism

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A Short History of Cynicism in the Soviet Union

The Great Soviet Encyclopedia explained, and the internet dictionaries blithely repeated after it, that “Cynicism has a dual origin as a social phenomenon. Firstly, it is ‘C. of power’ typical of the dominant groups exploiting the population and using their power to enrich themselves in a blatant and amoral fashion (fascism, cult of violence, etc.). Secondly, the term refers to the rebellious attitudes and actions (for instance, vandalism) observed among social strata, groups and individuals suffering from the oppression, lawlessness and the moral hypocrisy of the exploiting class yet finding no relief from their predicament and succumbing to the feeling of spiritual emptiness.” The encyclopedia entrée notices that “communist morality opposes C. in all its forms” (BSE 1978, p. 570).

The cynicism of power has secured a foothold in contemporary Russian politics, as my colleagues will readily testify. I suspect that contemporary – “liberal morality” – is also opposed to cynicism in all its manifestations, but as a student of culture I would like to explore the functions of cynicism in late Soviet and post-Soviet culture, focusing in particular on the link between the cynicism of the powerful and the cynicism of disempowered protesters.

Aleksei Yurchak wrote a book *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Yurchak 2006:126) where he identified a telling symbol of the late Soviet Culture – a Yong Communist League meeting with the members voting for the most repressive resolutions while secretly reading Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*. According to Yurchak, what we witness here is the performative transformation of late socialism. Starting in the late 1970s, official discourse was completely calcified, with political loyalty becoming an empty ritual (like voting) and the intelligentsia’s real life taking place outside official social forms.

“Living *vnye*” is the term Yurchak uses to identify a wide range of relevant activities like frequenting a popular café “Saigon” in Leningrad, taking part in the rock movement or literary studios, belonging to the informal circle of theoretical physicists, or participating in nonconformist artistic groups such as “Necro-realists,” “Mitki,” or “Moscow conceptualism.” All these forms of living outside or living apart, Yurchak shows, stood in opposition not only to the official culture but also to the dissident movement. Nonconformism of this kind was situated outside the political sphere. Its practitioners shared a discourse distinguished by a mocking style known in Russia as *styeб*, which comically mimicked and rhetorically overextended authoritarian formulas, creating an impression that one embraces official verbiage while undermining it by stripping it of its habitual context (Ibid, 349-354). During perestroika, *styeб* emerged as a common journalistic device and defining stylistic feature of the post-Soviet era in which one can discern a popular version of postmodernism that had begun to make rounds in the stagnant 1970-1980s.

Yurchak uses these cultural developments to explain how “the last Soviet generation” – those born in the 1960s – effortlessly transitioned to post-Soviet capitalism, how young communist leaguers stepped into the roles of oligarchs. The Soviet system that once seemed invincible was indeed taken in stride by those weaned on the cynicism of the bygone era, which, in retrospect, tended to evoke mostly the feelings of nostalgia. Soviet culture, in other words, laid the groundwork for the sudden collapse of the Soviet system by teaching its last generation how to balance sincerity and cynicism, how “to be neither completely ‘serious’ nor completely cynical and uninterested about the constative meaning of Komsomol work” or any other official business (Ibid., p. 113).

Yurchak investigates how Soviet citizens carved out a private niche for themselves in the cultural sphere. But the living *vnye* phenomenon has an analogue in the economic domain where advancing your agenda outside the official framework gave rise to what in Russian is identified as *blat*. This is the province of “shadow economy” distinguished by vigorous if surreptitious economic activity that flourished under the Soviet regime. The authorities used to denounce in public and occasionally punish illegal exchange schemes, shadow operators and *blatmeisters*, while they tolerated if not promoted them in practice. Alena Ledeneva who studied this practice (Ledeneva 1998, 2000) showed at length that *blat* and kindred forms of activity are not peculiar to the late Soviet era, as many critics assume, but define the communist regime from the start. In fact, such non-systemic and even anti-systemic processes go to the heart of the Soviet economy. Not only do they allow Soviet citizens to obtain the goods they are entitled to in theory but lack in practice; such shadow exchanges make the “planned socialist economy” possible through the tireless work of shadow mediators (*tolkachi*), informal suppliers, and special distribution networks in large retail stores.

Unlike Yurchak, I interpret these phenomena as the manifestation of cynicism. Not in its ethical sense as an “open and shameless disregard for moral norms, good faith, and universally respected conventions” (Drobnitskii and Kon 1975: 342), but in a different – philosophical – reckoning suggested by P. Sloterdijk in his well-known book *Critique of Cynical Reason*. According to Sloterdijk, “universally diffuse cynicism” is a popular form of mastering the Enlightenment project in the culture of 20th century (Sloterdijk 1987, p. 3). Starting from the Marxist perspective on ideology, Sloterdijk defines cynicism as “enlightened false consciousness” (Ibid., p. 6). That’s to say, cynicism only pretends to be ideological; it offers the modern subject a strategy of pseudo-socialization that reconciles the individual’s interests with the requirements of society and its ideology by dissolving subjectivity into unstable, alternatively authentic and false masks (personas) through which the cynical subject can realize itself.

“[T]he present-day servant of the system can very well do with the right hand what the left hand never allowed. By day, colonizer, at night, colonized; by occupation, valorizer and administrator, during leisure time, valorized and administered; officially a cynical functionary, privately a sensitive soul; at office a giver of orders, ideologically a discussant; outwardly a follower of the reality principle, inwardly a subject oriented towards pleasure; functionally an agent of capital, intentionally a democrat; with respect to the system a functionary of reification, with respect to *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld), someone who achieves self-realization; objectively a strategist of destruction, subjectively a pacifist; basically someone who triggers catastrophes, in one’s own view, innocence personified... This mixture is our moral status quo. (Ibid., p. 113)

Sloterdijk more or less ignores Soviet experience, equating cynicism with *bourgeois* modernity. He is less naïve than Bertrand Russell, however, who in 1929 observed (in a manner reminiscent of contemporary New Left critics): “Young men in Russia are not cynical because they accept, on the whole, the Communist philosophy, and they have a great country full of natural resources, ready to be exploited by the help of intelligence. The young have therefore a career before them which they feel to be worthwhile. You do not have to consider the ends of life when in the course of creating Utopia you are laying a pipeline, building a railway, or teaching peasants to use Ford tractors simultaneously on a four-mile front. Consequently, the Russian youth are vigorous and filled with ardent beliefs” (Russell 1929).

Zizek, it appears, was the first to apply Sloterdijk's insights to Soviet realities, although he confined his analysis to the logic of power. Thus, comparing Stalinism and Nazism in his book *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), he wrote that "The paranoid Nazis really believed in the Jewish conspiracy, while the perverted Stalinists actively organized/invented 'counterrevolutionary conspiracies' as pre-emptive strikes. The greatest surprise for the Stalinist investigator was to discover that the subject accused of being a German or American spy really was a spy: in Stalinism proper, confessions counted only as far as they were false and extorted..." (Zizek 1997, p. 58). In another book, Zizek (2001) spelled out in greater details how in the Soviet political system "a cynical attitude towards the official ideology was what the regime really wanted – the greatest catastrophe for the regime would have been its own ideology to be taken seriously, and realized by its subjects." (Zizek 2001: 92)

Rather abstract speculations by Zizek dovetail with the historical studies of Soviet experience. In his book *The Accuser and the Hypocrite: A Genealogy of Russian Personality*, Oleg Kharkhordin¹ focused on the political purges and their impact on the formation of the Soviet personality. This is how Kharkhordin describes the long-term impact of this formative process: "Their double-faced life is not a painful split forced upon their heretofore unitary self; on the contrary, this split is normal for them because they originate as individuals by the means of split... One of the steps in this long development was individual perfection of the mechanism for constant switching between the intimate and the official, a curious kind of unofficial self-training, a process that comes later than the initial stage of dissimulation conceived as 'closing off' (*prityvorstvo*) and one that we may more aptly call dissimulation as 'changing faces' (*litsemerie*)" (Kharkhordin 1999: 275, 278) – and, we might add, as its summation – cynicism".

In her book *Tear Off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*, a noted social historian of Stalinism, Sheila Fitzpatrick (2005), didn't make any use of Sloterdijk, but she plowed through a mass of documents from the 1920s and 1930s to demonstrate how the evolving logic of class discrimination forced everyday Soviet citizens to manipulate their identity and rewrite one's biography in an effort to negotiate a place in the official and unofficial systems of social relations. The point she makes is that the simultaneous participation in these seemingly antagonistic accounting systems was a precondition for survival in those years. One of the chapters titled "The World of Ostap Bender" is devoted to the many impostors and con artists populating that era: "Soviet con men, as virtuosos of self-invention, had their place in the great revolutionary and Stalinist project of re forging the self and society. In a prescriptive sense, to be sure, Bender was scarcely a New Soviet Man – but in a society of Old Pre-Soviet People struggling to reinvent themselves, who was? Bored by the construction of socialism, Bender and his fellow conmen were exemplars of self-construction. This makes us look more closely at the building metaphor (*stroitel'stvo sotsializma*) that was at the heart of prewar Stalinism. Was impersonation, the tricksters' specialty, its flip side?" (Fitzpatrick 2005: 280-281). In other words, the perfect artistic embodiment of cynicism was Ostap Bender, the main protagonist in the Ilf and Petrov's famous duology (1928, 1931/33). Indeed, Bender offered the most viable survival model of adaptation in Soviet modernity. This is not to say that all Soviet people, let alone the *intelligent*, were cynics. Still, I venture to assert that cynicism was the most popular and attractive blueprint for the modern Soviet subject.

¹ The English version of this book came out in 1999 under the heading *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*; the original Russian publication appeared in 2002 as *The Accuser and the Hypocrite: A Genealogy of Russian Personality*.

Ostap Bender, a beloved fictional trickster, is but one of many characters of this kind that populated Soviet society and that enjoyed popularity in the official and unofficial circles, among adults and children alike. You can add to this circle of literary tricksters Khulio Khurenito and Benia Krick, Krovyev and Behemoth, the old foggy Shchukar and Vasyli Terkin. Equally memorable in this genre are cinematic characters from the movies of Petr Alejnikov, Kostia-the-Shepherd from Alexandrov's *The Happy Bunch*, Aponia of Danelia, *Munchausen* from the motion picture of Gorin and Mark Zakharov, to say nothing of Buratino, the old man Khattabych, Neznajka, Cippolini, Carlson, Winnie the Pooh in his Soviet version, the old lady Shapoklyak and Electronic-Syroezhkin. Who else if not tricksters were the stock figures of Soviet anecdotes – Lieutenant Rzhnevsky and Stirlitz, Chapaev and Petka, Cheburashka with the crocodile Gena, jokes about Rabinovitch and the Armenian Radio. In a properly reworked form, trickster is repurposed in the underground literature: Venichka and Gurevich in the stories of Veniamin Erofeev, all the way to the authors who had performatively fashioned themselves after the literary characters they invented (Abram Terz, D. A. Prigov, Mitki).²

The trickster plays a dual role in Soviet culture. On one hand, it legitimizes and elevates Soviet cynicism, its deceptive survival strategies for navigating a shadow economy, and confronts a sense of guilt in practitioners who knew their actions run contrary to official ideology eschewing materialistic values as the manifestation of bourgeois morality (*meshchanstvo*). On the other hand, charming literary and cinematic tricksters took away the stigma that Soviet ideology attached to cynical techniques of economic and social manipulations by turning such performance into joyous playacting that managed to lay bare the contradictions endemic to the political system itself. In its purest form, this agenda transpires in one of the most important novels of the Soviet period *Master and Margarita*, featuring the hierarchy of Soviet cynics, along with their historical precursor – “eternal cynic” Pontius Pilate and a company of crafty tricksters headed by the trickster-moralist Woland.

In a way, Soviet tricksters represented the only viable alternative to the Soviet cynic. As Sloterdijk reminds us, cynicism is immune to all rational and emotional critique. Idealism and moralism look silly against the backdrop of inspired tricksters' paly. Which is why Sloterdijk juxtaposes to cynicism its counterpart – *kynicism*, which goes aback to Diogenes of Sinope: “Cynicism can only be stemmed by kynicism, not by morality. Only a joyful kynicism of ends is never tempted to forget that life has nothing to lose except itself” (Sloterdijk 1987, p. 194). Kynicism emerges as a jubilant and impractical aspect of cynicism, and it is the power of kynicism that the beloved Soviet tricksters have embodied with such artistic power. For these characters, tricking others is not a means for attaining a pragmatic end – in fact, Bender's life loses its meaning once he managed to obtain his millions. It is the manifestation of freedom under stifling social conditions.

To continue this line of reasoning, we can surmise that the cult of “living *vnye*” – *blat*, partaking in the shadow economy, and other gambits that flourished under the old regime – offered a real alternative to Soviet cynicism (“C. of power”). This alternative allowed the actor to remain equidistant from politics in its official (communist) and unofficial (dissident) forms.

Is there a link between this cultural phenomenon and the intelligentsia, both in its Soviet and post-Soviet manifestations? Very much so. For it is precisely the intelligentsia that refined the cynicism and its antithesis (the trickster's mode of being in the world), and that gave them a sublime aesthetic form. Stories about the legendary Soviet tricksters like Sergei Mikhalkov, Leonid Leonov, Grigory Aleksandrov, Yakov Elsberg, Valentin Kataev, Konstantin Simonov

² See Lipovetsky (2011) for more detail.

and others can rival the narrative describing the spectacular exploits of the *intelligenty* who fashioned themselves as tricksters in their everyday lives – Faina Ranevskaya and Nikita Bogoslovsky, Mikhail Svetlov and Nikolai Erdman, Viktor Shklovsky and Andrei Sinyavsky... The line separating these two categories of tricksters was hardly carved in stone.

If cynicism is endemic to the Soviet intelligentsia, especially in the final years of the Soviet state, it is because its members were close to power and enjoyed the privileges accorded to the elite while at the same time positioning themselves as critics, opponents, and main victims of the system. This is what Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin had to say about the late Soviet era intelligentsia: “The intelligentsia’s existence was marked by a paradox: the strata that defined itself in opposition to the bureaucratic hierarchy, also depended on this bureaucracy and stood to lose its distinctive character and ability to function if it is no longer connected to it” (Gudkov, Dubin 2009: 247). The dissident *intelligenty* who gave up their privileges and openly dissented from the officialdom were in the minority; the mass of the intelligentsia found little profit in this position. As Yurchak showed, those living *vnye*” were maintaining their distance from both official ideology and dissident activity: “They were equally uninterested in overt support of, or resistance to the Soviet system... The discourse of the dissidents (before 1986) left them indifferent: ‘We never spoke about the dissidents. Everyone understood everything, so why speak about that. *It was not interesting [neinteresno]*’” (Yurchak 2006: 129).

This stance underwent a momentous transformation in the postsoviet era. With the loss of government support, the intelligentsia that initially welcomed the anticommunist revolution of the late 1980s grew increasingly resentful and nostalgic for the Soviet past. In the mid-1990s, as Dubin and Gudkov demonstrated, the uncertainty and hidden cynicism of the post-Soviet intelligentsia cost it its authority and ultimately lead to its disintegration as a coherent group.³ As it turned out, such *intelligenty* became chief consumers and sponsors of neo-traditionalist sentiments and eventually openly antiliberal politics that valorized the nationalist agenda inimical to globalism and liberal culture. Later such *intelligenty* detected their archenemies in postmodern culture with its undermining of all hierarchies, binary oppositions, and “metanarratives,” multiculturalism, as well as support for the rights of minorities (sexual, national, religious).

The failed revolution of 2011-2012 had revealed that for all its metamorphoses, the intelligentsia retained its self-made as “creative class” (Richard Florida) with its anti-systemic stance and cynical attitudes toward the state while remaining largely dependent on the system it derided as inept. As we know, it was the reaction to the open cynicism of the authorities that provoked protests in the fall of 2011 and spring of 2012. Up to that point, the educated class in Russia made peace with the regime in spite of “the bitterly elegant aftertaste” (Sloterdijk) that the naked exercise of power left in its mouth. But after the sitting president (Medvedev) and the incoming one (Putin) announced that they decided to switch places (*rokirovochka*), the instinct for self-preservation gave way to a feeling of disgust. What is interesting is that the very language of protest revived the kynic tradition with its irreverent attitude toward the authorities expressed in the language heavily weighted toward “the lower parts of the body.” The apex of this protest was the performance and the subsequent show trial of the group “Pussy Riot” whose members once again brought to the forefront the figure of the trickster, albeit imbuing it with some new traits. The female trickster – “trickstar” as Marylyn Jurich called it – is extremely rare

³ In the same article, Gudkov and Dubin wrote, “The breakdown and disappearance of intelligentsia were inevitable because its inner conservatism blocked all possibilities of responding to the increasingly more complex reality...” (Ibid., 275).

in Russian culture, and it is symptomatic that it led to a fissure within the intelligentsia which found itself divided along several lines – gender and gender repression, religion and its relationship with the state and society, cultural dissent and cultural regulation via a system of standards and prohibitions, and the tangled questions of the limits of freedom. It is notable that such groups as Pussy Riot, “War,” and the performative art of Petr Pavlensky no longer glamorize the official cynicism; quite to the contrary, these tricksters rob the Soviet era cynicism of its glamor. Which is why such performances invariably evoked a strong reaction.

Sloterdijk was right when he predicted that kynic acts that trace their origin to the old opposition to state cynicism have a potential of evolving into “major demonstrations of aggressive cynical daring” that have the power not only to shock but also to enlighten. There is little reason to cheer, however, because the confrontation between Soviet tricksters and today’s kynics bode ill for the future. If Pussy Riot’s balaclavas are made of the same material as Ostap Bender’s hat, then we haven’t left the old – Soviet – paradigm based on cynicism as a philosophy that unites the authorities and society, defenders of the status quo and transgressors, the underground and the elite.

Perhaps this diagnosis is premature. To see how much weight we can put into it, let’s take a closer look at contemporary Russian cynicism. It has undergone significant changes in the last decade or so.

Postsoviet Metamorphoses of Cynicism

It was indeed Soviet cynicism that colonized the cultural and social mainstream in the 1990s. One consequence of this development was the bridging of the gap between self-perception and real life. The latter hasn’t grown any easier, though. Actually, Soviet cynicism lost a good deal of its charm once selfless tricksters yielded the centerstage to the likes of B. A. Berezovsky and V. V. Zhirinovskiy. A telling indicator of the changing realities was the failure of numerous attempts to revive the trickster’s classics in the 1990s and 2000s, be this V. Bortko’s epic rendition of *Master and Margarita* or a narcissistic account of Ostap Bender delivered by Oleg Menshikov in *Golden Calf*, a TV series produced by U. Shilkina.

Another argument in support of my proposition is the fact that post-Soviet capitalism resembled neither capitalism nor socialism; rather, it marked a kind of “negative convergence.” You would think that *blat* is bound to disappear when you can buy anything you want, yet as Ledeneva (2006, 2013) pointed out, the quasi-capitalist relations that replaced the Soviet economy did not supplant the “*blat* matrix.” This applies not only to the “wild nineties” but also to the Putin era when the shadow exchanges reached a new high. According to Ledeneva, we are dealing precisely with the Soviet *blat*-ridden pseudo-capitalism that swallowed up the entire economy.

There is one more piece of evidence to back up my argument. Putin’s “neo-traditionalism,” which in 2014 took the form of the right turn with a pronounced imperialist flavor, makes perfect sense if we consider it as the latest stage in the evolution of Soviet cynicism. The official political discourse that prides on negating the wild nineties operates in an openly cynical manner, using as a cover the reductionist conservative mythologies of all stripes. Efforts to stamp out past ambiguities resulted in the creation of such monolithic products as “unified history textbooks” and public spectacles designed to highlight the “unity of the authorities and the people.” The forced imposition of moral values, the prohibition of undesirable

beliefs via repressive legislative acts, harsh sentences meted out to the nonconformists, and pogrom-like mob actions now go hand in hand with the crassest corruption and conspicuous amorality among the powerful. Historians are well acquainted with such methods. To quote Sloterdijk (1987, p. 424-34) again, the kindred processes in the Weimar Republic were accompanied by the total theatricalization of social life reminiscent of the performative shift in the late socialism spotted by Yurchak (2006, p. 36-76).

With all that, I am far from asserting that Russia is sliding into a new totalitarianism. Quite to the contrary, we observe the cynicism of the powerful masquerading as a fight against cynicism, although this fight is halfhearted at best. Ilya Kukulkin describes the political course adopted by the Russian authorities today as “messianic cynicism”:

One of the main elements of the new social order (if such a chaotic state of affairs can be called an order) is open cynicism – in other words, seeing the world as a ruthless contest between peoples or states, where only the strongest can survive... Paradoxically, such discrediting of moral and idealistic motivations for political action is presented as a defense of Russia’s unique historical mission to implement universalist moral values forgotten by the “West.” Thus, it could be called *messianic cynicism*. (Kukulkin 2018, p. 225)

Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia is the international bestseller written by the journalist Peter Pomerantsev. Completed in 2014, his study shows how messianic cynicism evolved from “systemic cynicism” and took over the media and its masterminds – the heirs of the Soviet intelligentsia.

In 2001, after graduating from Edinburgh University and gaining some job experience at British TV, Pomerantsev decides to try himself in Russia where he stays until 2010, working as a producer at the popular Russian entertainment TV channel TNT. Stays, because, as he explains, Moscow in these years “was full of vitality and madness and incredibly exciting”; it was “a place to be” (Castle 2015). While in Moscow, Pomerantsev produced reality shows, documentaries, and generally had to bring the “western” style to the “news-free” – i.e., supposedly apolitical – broadcasts of the TNT channel. *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* is in many ways a memoir about those years on Russian TV. The reality show was one of the genres Pomerantsev produced, so the metaphor of Russian politics as a reality show holds a central place in his book; the first part of the book is entitled: “Reality Show Russia.”

One of Pomerantsev’s first discoveries associated with these relatively free and diverse – years, concerns the blurring of the borderline between fact and fiction, between a staged show and the news, especially on the Russian national channels united by the term “Ostankino” (the major TV studio in Moscow). As a TV news producer from Ostankino explained to him, a young foreigner speaking fluent Russian and working on Russian TV: “Politics has got to feel like...like a movie!” (2015, p. 6). Pomerantsev’s explains how this motto works in practice: “[T]he new Kremlin won’t make the same mistake the old Soviet Union did: it will never let TV become dull... Twenty-first century Ostankino mixes show business and propaganda, ratings with authoritarianism... Sitting in that smoky room, I had the sense that reality was somehow malleable, that I was with Prospero who could project any existence they wanted onto post-Soviet Russia” (Ibid., p. 7). However, his own career on a Russian entertainment channel serves as an illuminating example of the limits of Prospero’s power. Pomerantsev describes how he had been producing a reality show about people meeting and losing each other at the airport.

Intentionally, he tried to avoid staged and scripted situations, seeking interesting characters and stories instead of sentimental effects. The result was quite predictable: “The ratings for *Hello-Goodbye* had sucked. Part of the problem was that the audience wouldn’t believe the stories in the show were real. After so many years of fake reality, it was hard to convince them this was genuine” (Ibid., p. 73). Furthermore, when Pomerantsev made several documentaries addressing societal conflicts and problems, they all were rejected by the channel on the premise that its viewers did not want to see anything negative.

Yet, this is only half of the story. In the second half of the book, Pomerantsev describes how he received a very tempting invitation to the federal First Channel. The head of programming, the best-selling author of self-help books (this is an important detail in the context of the book) offered him the chance “to helm a historical drama-documentary... With a real, big, mini-movie budget for actors and reconstructions and set designers... The sort of thing you make when you’re right at the top of the TV tree in the West...” (Ibid., p. 226). And the story was great: “about a Second World War admiral who defied Stalin’s orders and started an attack on the Germans, while the Kremlin was still in denial about Hitler’s intentions and hoped for peace. The admiral was later purged and largely forgotten. It’s a good story. It’s a really good story. It’s a dream project” (Ibid., p. 227). Most importantly, it was a true story that obviously defied the newly-rediscovered admiration for Stalin’s politics in Russia’s public and media discourse (these days Putin even speaks highly about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact). Yet, eventually Pomerantsev decided to decline this generous offer: “...I realise that though my film might be clean, it could easily be put next to some Second World War hymn praising Stalin and the President as his newest incarnation. Would my film be the ‘good’ programme that validates everything I don’t want to be a part of? The one that wins trust, for that trust to be manipulated in the next moment?” (Ibid., p. 231). In other words: “In a world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood,” as Guy Debord writes in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995, p. 14).

This is a very important realization, not only as the turning point in Pomerantsev’s Russian odyssey, but also as an insight into the logic of the Russian “society of spectacle,” itself resonant with Baudrillard’s almost forgotten concept of the “hyperreality of simulacra.” What seemed to be an almost grotesque philosophic hyperbole, appears to be Pomerantsev’s and his colleagues’ practical experience in *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*. As follows from this experience, the capitalist society of the spectacle, unlike Debord’s conceptualization, is not opposed to the communist social order but directly grows from it. Post-Soviet TV viewers remember and even nostalgically long for Soviet media where ideological images constantly produced their own spectacle, perhaps not as attractive as the capitalist one, but still capable of fulfilling its main function: “By means of spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise” (Debord 1995, p. 19).

As to the “hyperreality of simulacra,” it appears in Pomerantsev’s book not only as a result of capitalist market forces (images that sell better, dominate), but as a horizon in which public demand for captivating (or entertaining, or horrifying) images and the political and economic interests of the ruling elite meet and happily fuse with each other. As follows from *Nothing Is True*, the “hyperreality of simulacra” in its totality can be most successfully achieved not by capitalism alone, but by the blend of capitalism with post-Soviet authoritarianism, accomplished through the homogenization of the information flow. The TV narrative created by Russian TV in the 2010s, especially after 2014, becomes an ultimate reality symbolically

superseding immediate everyday experience. In other words, television offers neither a simulation of reality, nor a distortion of truth, but a parallel, and more real, world.

Baudrillard wrote about “the desert of the real” (Baudrillard 1993, p. 343), indicating that his hyperreality of simulacra was inseparable from the “metaphysical despair” evoked by “the idea that images concealed nothing at all” (Ibid., p. 345). On the contrary, Pomerantsev’s non-fictional characters – representatives of the post-Soviet intelligentsia, if not “creative class” – TV producers and “political technologists” feel no despair whatsoever. Rather they enjoy their power over the “real” and celebrate the disappearance and malleability of any and all imaginable truth. In the formulation of Gleb Pavlovsky, a Soviet-era dissident, who became a leading “political technologist” of “the Putin system” (although eventually he was expelled from the circle of the Kremlin viziers): “The main difference between propaganda in the U.S.S.R. and the new Russia...is that in Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth.’ Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything. Create realities” (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2015, p. 9).

At the same time, as one can see from the example with the offer received by Pomerantsev from the Ostankino boss, this system recognizes truth and even effectively absorbs discourses that might be uncomfortable for the dominant ideology. Yet, here these elements of credibility are instrumentalized as mere means for the performance of reality, a performance that neither its producers nor its consumers seem to judge by its truthfulness. Here, some other criteria matter more. In the post-Soviet hyperreality of simulacra, truth is triumphantly defied; it has been *openly* manipulated through the process of constant constructions, negations, and reconstruction in front of the viewer’s eyes. This is why an emphasis falls onto the flamboyance and virtuosity of the (reality) performance, be it the Olympics or the public burning of tons of imported cheese from countries sanctioning Russia. This may be the Achilles heel of contemporary Russian politics. If performance supersedes reality, then invisible economic sanctions on Russian leadership are much less painful than would have been a boycott of, say, the Football World Championship of 2018.

This cultural regime requires cynicism for its functioning – one cultivates and institutionalizes the other. But it’s a new type of cynicism. Throughout his entire book, using very dissimilar examples, Pomerantsev demonstrates the functioning of one and the same cultural (political/social/psychological) mechanism: the coexistence of mutually exclusive ideologies/beliefs/discourses in one and the same mind/space/institution – which is indeed, a very accurate definition of contemporary cynicism. More accurately, it is not their co-existence, but the painless and almost artistic shifting from one side to the opposite; a process, which never stops and is never reflected upon as a problem:

Before I used to think the two worlds were in conflict, but the truth is a symbiosis. It’s almost as if you are **encouraged** to have one identity one moment and the opposite one the next. So you’re always split into little bits, and can never quite commit to changing things... But there is great comfort in these splits too: you can leave all your guilt with your ‘public’ self. That wasn’t you stealing that budget/making that propaganda show/bending your knee to the President, just a role you were playing: you’re a good person really. It’s not much about denial. It’s not even about suppressing dark secrets. You can see everything you do, all your sins. You just reorganize your emotional life so as not to care (Pomerantsev 2015, p. 234, emphasis in the original).

Having recognized the genealogical connection between late Soviet cynicism and the present day triumph of cynicism of the Russia's elites, Pomerantsev offers the following diagnosis: "Seen from this perspective, the great drama of Russia is not the 'transition' between communism and capitalism, between one reverently held set of beliefs and another, but that during the final decades of the USSR no one believed in communism and yet carried on living as if they did, and now they can only create a society of simulations" (Ibid., 234). This new hybrid cultural and political condition Pomerantsev defines as "postmodern authoritarianism" and even as "postmodern dictatorship." He respectfully cites the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska saying: "This isn't a country in transition but some sort of postmodern dictatorship that uses the language and institutions of democratic capitalism for authoritarian elites" (Ibid., p. 50).

In 2011, Pomerantsev published in *The London Review of Books* the article "Putin's Rasputin" that now reads as a seed from which the book was born (slightly altered, this text would be included into *Nothing Is True*). The article describes Vladislav Surkov, a former deputy head of the President's administration, Putin's aid and vice-premier, the inventor of the concept of Russian "sovereign democracy" and builder of the United Russia Party; currently, one of the chief coordinators of both the "hybrid war" in Ukraine and its orchestrated representation in the Russian media. In Surkov, who is also known as a novelist and song-writer, Pomerantsev sees (with good reason) the main designer of contemporary Russia's political and societal system. Surkov, he contends, has fused authoritarianism with postmodernism, creating a completely new political system, which Pomerantsev defines as "postmodern authoritarianism":

Newly translated postmodernist texts give philosophical weight to the Surkovian power model. [Jean-] François Lyotard, the French theoretician of postmodernism, began to be translated in Russia only towards the end of the 1990s, at exactly the time Surkov joined the government. The author of *Almost Zero* [a postmodernist novel allegedly written by Surkov] loves to invoke such Lyotardian concepts as the breakdown of grand cultural narratives and the fragmentation of truth: ideas that still sound quite fresh in Russia... In an echo of socialism's fate in the early 20th century, Russia has adopted a fashionable, supposedly liberational Western intellectual movement and transformed it into an instrument of oppression (Pomerantsev 2011).

Although this way of reasoning seems to be a little naïve (one man's cultural convictions cannot be directly reproduced by the entire country or just Moscow), the question remains: how can one so easily marry postmodernism and authoritarianism? Similarities between what Pomerantsev depicts in his non-fiction and postmodernist theoretical models, as well as Russian postmodernist fiction are too obvious to be ignored, but the question, nevertheless, remains unanswered. The global effects of Russian politics, especially accompanied by Trump's politics of "post-truth", makes even more relevant.

Is conservative postmodernism possible at all?

Pomerantsev is hardly alone in his take on the contemporary political situation in Russia which, looked from the global perspective merits the label "postmodernist." Here are a few citations.

[S]ociety got stuck in transition. Not a comfortable place to be in, which is why society is casting about for an imperial exit, a kind of pseudomorphosis. The house is about to collapse but the connecting staples and beams are still there – a postmodern state indeed (Prigov, cited in Shapoval 2006/2014, p. 124).

It looks like postmodernism has been domesticated. And what is especially interesting is that postmodernism has been absorbed into politics, with its stylistic features exploited by a raggedy bunch of political technologists (Rubinstein, 2007).

Everything around us is postmodern. However, you don't see any real philosophers. But then, postmodernism might not require an outstanding personality... The United Russia party is postmodern. Berezovsky is postmodern. Abramovich is postmodern. Those who haven't adopted the postmodern stance are backward or dumb (Dugin, cited in Nekrasov 2011).

Postmodernism in Russian politics has been especially tangible in the nationalist discourse after Russia started its war against Ukraine and annexed Crimea, and it reached an apex after Trump was elected the U.S. president. One should note that political postmodernism wasn't unique to any one group, that it was mixed with other orientations. We observe a curious unanimity on this subject, with the wise practitioners of postmodernism like Prigov and Rubinstein sharing their views with those familiar with postmodernism only through hearsay. Which are the traits commonly attributed to the postmodernist phenomenon? Here are a few most frequently mentioned ones:

- Dispensing with the categories of “truth,” “reality,” and “fact” and replacing them with the notions of “hyperreality,” “simulacrum” and performance, with concerns for the real subordinated to esthetic considerations.
- Eclecticism, blending heterogenous stylistic, discursive and ideological elements;
- Immoralism, contempt for ethical considerations, value judgments and moral priorities;
- Eschewing logic and causal reasoning, fascination with the absurd;

This is the backdrop against which postmodernism emerged as a synonym of flagrant deception (associated with the figures of tricksters, freaks, conmen, and so on.). Does this perception bear scrutiny?

To begin with the most common “postmodernist” characteristic (dispensing with the categories of “truth,” “reality,” and “fact” and replacing them with the notions of “hyperreality,” “simulacrum” and performance), Baudrillard theorized “hyperreal simulacrum” fed by media images, but his analysis had more to do with postmodernism as a certain period in history rather than a discourse system. The same goes for F. Jameson's take on postmodernity as a third, globalized, postindustrial phase of capitalism. Notably, in a recent interview Jameson commented on his classic book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), “it would have been much clearer had I distinguished *postmodernity* as a historical period from *postmodernism* as a style” (Jameson 2016, p. 144, emphasis in the original).

Besides, all critics of political postmodernism appear to make the same mistake: they confuse constructivism, which is indeed key to postmodern logic, with “elimination of reality.” The following observation by Sasse and Zapetti is relevant here:

Theorists of postmodernism offered different accounts of how social constructs function (religious, political, ideological, racial, gender-related). They clearly are not the authors of those constructs, however. Moreover, they deconstructed these constructs, as Derrida did, or subjected them to criticism as a form of discourse in a manner of Foucault... To suppose something to be constructed is not the same as to declare it unreal. Theorists of postmodernism don't do that. And why should they? Take religion, for instance – they are real constructs which existed for thousands of years and that continuously generate new realities (Zasse and Zapetti 2017).

As for eclecticism, absurdism, a feigned immoralism – they belong to modernism and the avant-garde rather than to postmodernism proper. Oxymoron and catachresis are known to be dominant tropes of avant-garde writing. The OBERIU group used absurdist esthetics in Russian culture long before the invention of postmodernism. Immoralist challenges to public conventions are a norm for all avant-garde and modernist currents (e.g., Nietzsche, but others as well). Tricksters, as we saw, are the central character in Russian modernism.

These features are prominent in Russian postmodernism because of certain historical conditions, namely the need to compensate for the broken evolution of the Russian avant-garde, and also because of the countercultural thrust of the avant-garde which played a formative role in Russian postmodernism. But these features do not set postmodernism apart from modernism or determine its peculiar esthetics and discursive logic. What is missing in the list of traits peculiar to postmodernism⁴ is the fundamental quality, namely “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard 1993). The difference is that Lyotard had in mind metanarratives of the Enlightenment such as progress, rationality, and freedom, whereas Russian postmodernists took issue with the metanarrative of two particular kinds: (a) mythologies of communist ideology and socialist realism, and (b) myths of “high culture” debunked by conceptualism and neo-Baroque.

The strategy best embodying the “incredulity toward metanarratives” is the deconstruction of binary oppositions as a form of cultural repression (Derrida). This strategy aims to destroy, reverse, or mock such fundamentals of human culture as binary oppositions (high/low, male/female, center/periphery, etc.) since one member in each of oppositions is always privileged while the other is downplayed or vilified – hence the liberating pathos of postmodernist discourse. We see this strategy in the poetics of *Moskva-Petushki* that aims to destroy metaphysical oppositions, in Sots Art objects mocking the political oppositions of socialist Realism, in the stylistic juxtapositions of Rubinstein's “index card” poetry that deconstructs oppositions of “common sense,” as well as in the cultural explosions of Sorokin dealing with all these binaries taken together. The same logic is at work in political postmodernism, which connects with the discourses of feminism, LGBTQ, multiculturalism, and cultural relativism. (It is worth noting that the word “postmodernism” appears in the Russian political and politics-saturated domains mostly in reference to *Gayropa* and American political correctness).

The critique of binary oppositions is also tied to postmodern constructivism or anti-essentialism which exposes binary oppositions as anything but natural and eternal, shows them to be historical constructs rather than national mentalities, products of specific cultural processes

⁴ This is a short summary of the concept of postmodernism that I develop in great detail elsewhere (see Lipovetsky 2008, pp. 1-769, 221-284).

undergoing transformation. The anti-essentialist currents in Russian literary postmodernism are not that prominent. We can cite here late Prigov, Nikolai Baitov, and Pavel Pepperstein, and to a lesser extent Sorokin and Pelevin.

That anti-essentialism is quite painful to the authorities and official “discourse-mongers” (to use Pelevin’s term), we can judge from the rhetoric of Russian spirituality and the nation’s imperial mission, frequent references to the “spiritual staples” of the Orthodox tradition supposedly safeguarding the “national cultural code.” But it also has a different strand that came to the fore in a novel *Ultrnormality* written under the pseudonym Nathan Dubovitsky, which hints at the authorship of Surkov. In it, the author inveighs against the pernicious constructivism endowed with the power to reformat and control reality. Events described in the novel unfold in 2024 when a menacing professor of linguistics describes the basics of constructivism as a ruse or a means of manipulating natural language and thought. Instructive here is the example of “race” as an object of constructivist manipulation. In postmodernist discourse exposing the social and historical nature of such allegedly natural phenomena as race and ethnicity aims to undercut the essentialist assumptions and repressive consequences. In Dubovitsky-Surkov’s novel, by contrast, the anti-essentialist critics are slammed as impostors trying to get a foothold in politics: “Isn’t it how vegetarians, ecologists, and pedophiles legitimized themselves in Europe and are now making their way into our politics?” (Dubovitskii 2017)

While postmodernism constructivism is deployed as an analytical tool, in “patriotic deconstruction” political expedience comes to the fore. Paradoxically, such instrumentalization of constructivism goes hand in hand with essentialism insofar as it treats constructivism as “polit-technology” that obscures the fundamental, ahistorical – natural – reality. In this treatment, constructivism turns out to be little more than an inventory of magic bureaucratic formulas that hypnotize the audience. This function is more or less what the spokesmen of Putin’s administration accomplish. Take, for instance, Putin’s aid Anton Vaino, creator of “nooscope” and the author of the treatise *Capitalization of the Future*. Vitaly Kurennoi who subjected to philosophical analysis Vaino’s works, pointed out that the author’s blather about controlling “metaphysical substances” of space, time and life via “protocols” and “game rules” formulated by the “elite” or “superclass” is but a “locally produced philosophical postmodernism” that parodies the theories of Georgy Shchedrovitsky (Kukulin 2007):

Theorists of postmodernism aimed to achieve a worthy goal of emancipation, of liberating us from the givens we take for granted and obey... Who could have thought that Russian theorists would apply these ideas to governance practice and use them to dispense with reality altogether and replace it with constructed realities that could be conjured up in line with the arbitrary developed games and rules? (Kurennoi 2016).

What I am saying is that the postmodernism practiced by neoconservative politicians has nothing to do with historical postmodernism. This confusion follows Russian literary prototypes which tend to mash up postmodernist and avant-garde poetics, or else miscast as postmodern common traits of the current historical era. Moreover, we can detect here the political and cultural reaction, for these misappropriations of postmodern rhetoric serve to fend off liberal discourse under the guise of fighting the “postmodern dictatorship.”

To illustrate this point, we can deploy the concept “pseudomorphosis” used by geologists to describe the process in which one mineral replaces another while retaining the form of the original material (let’s set aside Spengler’s use of this concept). Russian postmodernism

underwent pseudomorphosis in the first two decades of the 21st century. A superficially similar yet substantially different (if not contrary) discursive phenomenon assumed its shape and effectively neutralized the critical potential of postmodernism. In the course of this mutation, postmodernism morphed into cynicism, effectively legitimizing it culturally and furnishing it with the fashionable discursive and media strategies to achieve its nefarious agenda.

What can the intelligentsia juxtapose to the “cultural logic” appropriated by toxic populism and nationalism?

In lieu of the conclusion: What are the alternatives?

In his article about “messianic cynicism,” Ilya Kukululin cites the poet and critic Stanislav Lvovsky: “[O]nce asked whom he would identify as the contemporary descendants of Soviet dissidents, [he] answered: those who resist cynical ‘common taste’ and ‘common sense’ in Russia” (Kukululin 2018: 226). This is true as far as it goes, although this strategy had already been appropriated by the official culture. Notable in this regard is an article by Surkov “The Crisis of Hypocrisy. ‘I hear America singing,’” published on the RT site to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution on November 7, 2017. Here, the creator of “postmodern authoritarianism” castigates American, and more broadly Western, hypocrisy: “[D]ouble standards, sanctimoniousness, duplicity, threefold standards, political correctness, intrigues, propaganda, flattery, and slyness are widespread not only in politics.” Hypocrisy, in his reckoning, merges with performativism, whereas the hero of our age is declared to be “a trickster, a cheat, a deceiver, and a player.” That’s to say, we are dealing with political postmodernism, even though this word is not used in the article. Stung by his public image popularized by Pomerantsev, Surkov disclaims any connection to “postmodern authoritarianism,” positioning himself as the opponent of postmodernism:

In general, hypocrisy is disgusting, effective, and inevitable. But hypocritical discourses, languages in which lies are told, and metaphors of hypocrisy periodically become outdated. Camouflaging phrases depreciate due to frequent repetition, discrepancies and mismatches start being prominent... The system reaches the limit of complexity, complexity turns into frightening confusion. A request for simplification arises, causing even more destructive rhetorical storms and inflow of demagogy... Various social groups deprived of common language stand apart in order to create their “*truthful*” dialect. The mixing up of languages arrives, and the turbulence – lasting until society, in disputes and clashes, reaches despair and resigns to any new half-truth, with reformed and “*improved*” hypocrisy. It is precisely such a phase as intolerance to falseness, mixing up of languages, and disappointment in the norm that now some western nations pass through. (Surkov 2017)

This rhetoric is actually commonplace among ultraconservative politicians who, to quote Sasse and Zapetti again, are quick to blame “postmodern narratives” for whatever ails the world today. Against this abomination, populists and nationalists deploy their aggressive essentialism.

To avoid the trap of essentialism and to combat reactionary cynicism, I believe we need to ground ourselves in postmodernism proper. Two basic routes are available here.

The first one requires intensifying those “fundamental,” critical and antiauthoritarian elements in postmodernist esthetics that militate against cynicism and essentialism. These are the features that were neutralized by the reactionary pseudomorphosis. An excellent example of what postmodernist esthetics could accomplish in this regard is *The Day of Oprichnik* by Vladimir Sorokin (2006). A similar route was taken by the groups “War” and “Pussy Riot,” as well as by Petr Pavlensky. A more reflexive version of this approach can be found in the poets Stanislav Lvovsky, Elena Fanailova, Maria Stepanova (*In Memory of Memory*), Galina Rymbu, as well as in theater and cinema productions Kirill Serebryanikov (*Performing a Victim, Terrorism, Who Thrives in Russia*), Konstantin Bogomolov (*Ideal Husband, The Karamazovs, The Dragon*), Aleksei Fedorchenko (*Angels of the Revolution*), and Mikhail Segal (*Short Stories*). This is the pathway of *critical postmodernism*, which gravitates to the experimental (even the elitist) end of the cultural spectrum. Its impact may seem limited to highbrow intellectuals, well versed in such complex esthetics, although I feel that it can shape the taste of the new generation of intelligentsia, just as texts of Prigov and conceptualists that seemed elitist and experimental at the time had informed the countercultural attitudes of the younger generation.

The second pathway winds through mass culture. That might seem odd given how much this culture is permeated with cynicism. Yet, consider the experience of Sergei Shnurov, the singer and songwriter beloved by millions, especially popular among the liberal intelligentsia, and you can see that mass culture is not immune to the task of transforming postmodern cynicism in the mass culture sphere into kynicism. Critics have already spotted the link between Shnurov and the trickster tradition (Gerasimov 2014, Engstrom 2018). In the last few years he produced several videos, starting with the legendary “In Peter – We Drink!”, and depicting as the favorite subject of his songs a hapless trickster who learns the self-defeating nature of his cynicism equally skeptical about pragmatic and ideological benefits of cynicism, this character in front of our eyes transitions to kynicism. Another example of the strategy consistent with postmodern kynicism is the unfortunately overlooked “New Year comedy” by Vasily Sigarev *The Country of Oz* (2013).

Other strategies of fighting postmodern cynicism in politics and culture are possible as well. The intelligentsia’s search for such strategies will determine how effective this fight will be.

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History of Russian Literature coauthored by Lipovetsky with three other writers. Among the volumes edited and co-edited by Lipovetsky are *Cheerful Kids: Cultural Heroes of Soviet Childhood*, *Uncanonized Classic: Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov, 1950-2007*, *Russian Literature Since 1991*, *Transgressive Women in Modern Russian and East European Cultures: From the Bad to the Blasphemous*, and most recently a volume of articles on Vladimir Sorokin. In collaboration with N. L. Leiderman, Lipovetsky published a two-volume study of postwar Russian literature that went through five editions. A four-volume history of Russian literature from the 1920s through the 1950s appeared in Academia Publishing in 2012-2014. Lipovetsky's is currently working on a monograph about D. A. Prigov and an edition of his collected works to be published by NLO. Mark Lipovetsky is recipient of the 2014 prize awarded by the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages for his outstanding contribution to scholarship.

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