SLAVIC REVIEW

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Laughter under Socialism:
Exposing the Ocular in Soviet Jocularity

Serguei Alex. Oushakine

> What do we need, comrades? We need the broad masses laughing as much as possible. We need laughter so badly, it is enough to make you weep. . . . We need laughter. Thoughtful, serious laughter without the slightest grin.
>
> —Nikolai Erdman and Vladimir Mass, *A Meeting about Laughter,* 1933

> Laughter can be different. Yet, such terms as "ours" [*nash*] and "theirs" [*ne nash*]—trite as they are—have no difficulty in finding their proper counterparts. . . . "Our laughter" and "their laughter" are not mere abstractions. The two are separated by a gulf of different social reasoning [*propast' raznogo sotsial'nogo osmysleniia*].
>
> —Sergei Eisenstein, *The Bolsheviks Are Laughing,* 1930s

In early 1953, the Leningrad Theatre of the Estrada and the Miniature—a restrained Soviet cousin of *The Second City*—presented its new show. The title of the show, borrowed from a poem by Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826), sheepishly conveyed the theater's main concern: "Smeiat'sia, pravo, ne greshno" (Laughing Is Not a Sin, Really). The dilemma that underlay this apologetic framing was dramatized in the show's opening routine: an angry viewer stormed from the audience onto the stage and viciously interrogated a surprised actor:

> —What do you think you are doing? A comedy show? We've made such huge progress, we've achieved such colossal success, and you are laughing!?
> —Yes, but we are not focusing on the success, we are focusing on the shortcomings . . .
> —This is even worse! We have all these shortcomings to deal with, and you are having fun![1]

The mounting tension was followed by comic relief: the angry viewer, quickly removing his wig and mask, revealed himself to be none other

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1. Elizaveta Uvarova, *Arkadii Raikin* (Moscow, 1986), 128.

than the theater's leading star, the immensely successful actor and stand-up comedian Arkadii Raikin (1911–1987).

Famous for his understated sarcasm and his instantaneous transformations on stage, Raikin had created an impressive gallery of negative—yet unmistakably Soviet—characters, including, as a 1960 article in *Pravda* noted, "bureaucrats, excessive risk avoiders [*perestrakhovshchiki*], idlers [*tuneiadtsy*], loafers [*bezdel'niki*], philistines [*obyvateli*], and individuals indifferent to the nation's concerns."[2] For more than half a century, Raikin's sketches, plays, and films defined the standards for Soviet humor and satire.[3] His success seemed universal; he became a mandatory item on the program of the official concerts in the Kremlin and performed his routines for every secretary general of the Communist Party, including Iosif Stalin. At the same time, his jokes became a part of contemporary folklore. Although he was no dissident, for many years he kept in his repertoire a sketch written for him by the denounced Mikhail Zoshchenko. He also helped to develop and to popularize the literary talent of Mikhail Zhvanetskii, who would become a key satiric writer of the 1970s–1980s.[4]

In a sense, Raikin provides an ideal point of entry to this cluster on comic genres under socialism. As both a symbol and a symptom of Soviet laughter, Raikin personifies the central themes discussed by the contributors to this volume and parallels each of their key figures. Like Grigorii Aleksandrov, Raikin enjoyed incredible official success. Like Nikolai Lebedev, he suffered from political censorship and cultural pressure and learned how to get his message across without saying much. Like Sergei Kurekhin, he turned himself into a one-man-show, blurring the boundaries between different media and contradictory contexts.

There is another—structural—similarity, too. Perhaps in the most concentrated form, Raikin's art embodied the key social problem of Soviet jocularity. Despite his popular and official success, until his very death, Raikin retained an apologetic tone in his defense of the comic art, explaining again and again the importance of laughter for building socialism.[5] Similar apologetic complaints about the shaky status of humor and satire in Soviet culture run through the entire socialist period.[6] Psychological rationalizations of sorts, these laments revealed the unspoken truth about Soviet laughter: laughing might not have been a sin, *really,* but neither was it perceived as an obvious virtue.

It is easy to dismiss these laments as the half-hearted attempt of privileged (but constrained) artists to retain a mask of dignity in a situation

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2. "Boevoe iskusstvo estrady," *Pravda,* 15 December 1960.

3. Raikin's routines and plays are available on several DVDs: *My s vami gde-to vstrechalis'* (1954), *Liudi i manekeny* (1974), *Volshebnaia sila iskusstva* (1970).

4. Arkadii Raikin, *Vospominaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1993).

5. For details, see his memoirs, ibid., 410–16.

6. For instance, in 1974, Sergei Mikhalkov, another heavyweight of the officially sanctioned satire, lamented in *Pravda* about the striking underdevelopment of Soviet comic genres, appealing: "We need films, books, plays, and pamphlets that will ruthlessly ridicule [*besposhchadno osmeivaiushchie*] everything that is absurd [*nelepoe*], alien [*chuzhdoe*], incompatible with our ideals and the norms of our social morality." Sergei Mikhalkov, "Dozhivem do ponedel'nika," *Pravda,* 23 March 1974.

where cultural production in general and cultural critique in particular were subjected to strict state control. And for many scholars of Soviet culture, the social importance of humor and satire under socialism would be limited to just that. Taken as a whole, Soviet comic genres are often used to exemplify the regime's failure to produce its own forms of cultural critique—neither sympathetic and forgiving (as in humor), nor corrective and biting (as in satire). Some critics find the very idea of searching for "cheer in a cheerless land" to be an impossible project to begin with.[7] Other researchers, refusing to draw any distinction between the political and the aesthetic, prefer to ignore artistic forms publically available in the Soviet Union altogether. Equating the artistic legacy of "socialist realism" with several decades of "cultural wasteland," they focus almost exclusively on uncensored literature and underground art.[8]

This cluster takes a different approach. The contributors are not interested in viewing artistic discourses that openly circulated in the USSR as mere aesthetic variations of the regime's propagandistic clichés; but neither are their articles particularly motivated by some archeological desire to unearth subversive meanings that might (or might not) have been smuggled under the cover of ideologically sound cultural forms. Instead, these articles approach the laments about the problematic state of Soviet laughter seriously by exploring the complicated artistic practices that animated the ossified frameworks of socialist culture from within. The importance of censorship is not denied here. But the discussion about the role of cultural pressure is transposed—from the field of ideological critique to the field of aesthetic analysis. In their essays, the contributors replace a traditional fascination with the stifling impact of ideological values with a close scrutiny of the lexicon of expressive means that these values (and constraints) generated.[9]

This perception of censorship as productive and enabling is, at least to some extent, determined by the genre in question. The comic form, as Iurii Tynianov reminds us, is by its very nature derivative, being profoundly determined by the structure that it ridicules.[10] The articles also share an important theoretical approach that determines their understanding of cultural production. As the contributions demonstrate, artists' structural dependency on socially available symbolic forms did not necessarily lead to the automatic reproduction of contexts and messages that were *originally* associated with these forms. Mocking or serious, distorted or not, citationality, as Jacques Derrida famously noted, is always duplication, if not duplicity. The iterability of the sign, its very reproducibility, creates

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7. David MacFadyen, *The Sad Comedy of El'dar Riazanov: An Introduction to Russia's Most Popular Filmmaker* (Montreal, 2003), 6.

8. See, e.g., Janet G. Tucker, "Introduction," in Janet G. Tucker, ed., *Against the Grain: Parody, Satire, and Intertextuality in Russian Literature* (Bloomington, 2002), 15.

9. Lev Losev, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature,* trans. Jane Bobko (Munich, 1984). For a detailed discussion, see my essay "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2002): 191–214.

10. See, e.g., Iurii N. Tynianov, "Dostoevskii i Gogol' (k teorii parodii)," *Literaturnaia evoliutsia: Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow, 2002), 300–339.

"the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting."[11] By focusing on the changing contexts of recognizable signs and structures, these articles present Soviet laughter as a site of contesting interpretative and formal strategies, "unfinalizable," in the language of Mikhail Bakhtin, and often unpredictable.[12] What may seem like a "cultural wasteland" in one conceptual framework can become a rather rich cultural soil in another.

Anthropologically speaking, such a shift in evaluation of cultural forms is not unusual. More than forty years ago, Mary Douglas observed that the status of cultural waste is determined not by its intrinsic quality but by the grids of social classifications and spatial typologies that shape the vision of the group that passes judgment.[13] Apart from the change in the grids of cultural perception, the shift in evaluation is also motivated by a different historical sensibility. The adoption of an aesthetic perspective on the comic genres of socialism allows the authors of this cluster to illuminate the profound confusion among Soviet cultural producers regarding the content and status of laughter under socialism—a confusion that previous, ideologically driven, studies have failed to notice and address.

This introduction is not the place for a detailed history of various Soviet attempts to solve the riddle of the comic, therefore I will mention only a few key cases to establish the general historical background. In his notes for the first congress of Soviet writers, Zoshchenko summarized the extensive debates on Soviet satire that had taken place in the 1920s and 1930s. As he put it, some critics in these discussions "talked themselves into complete nonsense, claiming that we should have no satire whatsoever. Others thought that satire ought to be very concrete—with proper names and addresses. However, the ultimate winner was the idea that satire was necessary but that it should be favorable. This mushy [*rykhlaia*] formula has remained not entirely clarified ever since."[14] This lack of definite clarification is symptomatic. Studies of the comic, from the 1917 revolution until perestroika, are marked by a similar inability to provide conclusive answers about the aims, motives, and intended effects of socialist laughter.

The perennial laments about the absence of the proper Soviet humor and satire were closely linked with a fundamental uncertainty about the social function and importance of the comic under socialism. Thus, Aleksandrov, the film director largely responsible for shaping the canon of Soviet musical cine-comedy, recalled that the task of inventing the new

11. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Margins of Philosophy,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982), 320.

12. On Bakhtin and unfinalizability (*nezavershennost'*), see my essay "Vne nakhodimosti: Bakhtin kak chuzhoe svoe," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie,* no. 3 (2006): 73–86.

13. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, 2002).

14. Mikhail Zoshchenko, "Osnovnye voprosy nashei professii," *Rasskazy, povesti, fel'etony, teatr, kritika: 1935–1937* (Leningrad, 1937), 379–80. Recollecting a public debate about Soviet satire in 1930, Lilia Brik noted in her diary how critics such as Vladimir Blium insisted that people should write complaints directly to the law enforcement institutions instead of writing satirical stories. Lilia Brik, *Pristrastnye rasskazy* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2003), 197. See also the coverage of the debate in E. G., "Nuzhna li nam satira? Na dispute v politekhnicheskom muzee," *Literaturnaia gazeta,* 13 January 1930.

genre in the early 1930s had left him totally perplexed. The fundamental questions—"Nad chem smeiat′sia? Vo imia chego smiat′sia?" (What should we laugh at? What should we laugh for?)—lacked any precedents or answer keys to follow.[15] In his writings from the 1930s, Sergei Eisenstein expressed a similar feeling: "Do we have our own laughter? We will have it. But what kind of laughter will it be?"[16] Georgii Malenkov might have popularized the phrase "We need Soviet Gogol′s and Shchedrins," only in 1952 in his report to the nineteenth congress of the Communist Party. However, this affirmative desire for (more) humor and satire in Soviet life was a common feature of artistic discussions during all of Soviet history.[17] Every decade witnessed a major attempt to tackle Soviet laughter—be it a search for the essence of the socialist fable (*basnia*), or for the specifics of the socialist feuilleton, or for the structure of the Soviet comedy, or for the key parameters of the art of Soviet political caricature.[18]

The dominant Marxist trend of perceiving social relations in terms of conflict and struggle largely determined the trajectory of these searches for the comic. Diverse thinkers—from Bakhtin to Eisenstein, from Mikhail Kol′tsov to Anatolii Lunacharskii—emphasized the functional aspect of laughter, viewing it first and foremost as a form of power. However, when Lunacharskii optimistically promised in 1920 that "We will laugh," describing laughter as a great force (*sila*) that should be "channeled in a right direction," he could have hardly expected that it would take at least ten years to begin the specification of that direction.[19] The effort to do so was led by the special Commission on Researching Satirical Genres (KSAZh), created by the Academy of Sciences in 1930 on Lunacharskii's suggestion. Not surprisingly, the Commission proved to be largely ineffective: it conducted only eight meetings and published only a few books before its status was downgraded from a research unit to a mere book depository office (*kabinet po sboru literatury*) in 1932.[20]

Lunacharskii's own book-length project, *The Social Role of Laughter,* also failed to materialize. Yet we can get a sense of his general direction by looking at his last speeches and publications. As if blending the theories of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Lunacharskii associated laugh-

15. Grigorii Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino* (Moscow, 1976), 165.

16. Eizenshtein, "Bol′sheviki smeiutsia," 80.

17. See Georgii Malenkov's "Otchetnyi doklad XIX s″ezda VKP," *Pravda,* 6 October 1952, 6. As early as 1925, S. Gusev complained in his article in *Izvestiia* that "we've yet to find our own Soviet Gogol′s and Saltykovs [-Shchedrins]." S. Gusev, "Predely kritiki," *Izvestiia,* 6 May 1927, quoted in Evgenii Ozmitel′, *Sovetskaia satira* (Moscow, 1964), 11. See also Ia. El′sberg, *Nasledie Gogolia i Shchedrina i sovetskaia satira* (Moscow, 1954).

18. For a good concise review and extensive bibliography, see Ozmitel′, *Sovetskaia satira.* See also N. Gorchakov, "Komediia v sovetskom teatre," *Pravda,* 19 April 1938, 4; V. Frolov, *O sovetskoi komedii* (Moscow, 1954); D. Zaslavskii, "O satiricheskikh zhurnalakh," *Pravda,* 5 September 1956, 4; D. Nikolaev, "V zashitu spetsifiki satiry," *Voprosy literatury,* no. 2 (1961): 47–56; I. Eventov, "Ostroumie skhvatyvaet protivorechie," *Voprosy literatury,* no. 6 (1973): 116–34; I. Eventov, *Sila sarkazma: Satira i iumor v tvorchestve Gor′kogo* (Leningrad, 1973).

19. Anatolii Lunacharskii, "Budem smeiat′sia," *Sobranie sochinenii v vos′mi tomakh* (Moscow, 1964), 3:76.

20. For details, see commentaries in ibid., 8:622.

ter with two major social effects—obedience and cohesion, on the one hand, and distinction, on the other. Emphasizing the mocking, ridiculing, and scoffing forms of the comic—Eisenstein would later call this "a militant humor [*voinstvuiushchii iumor*]"—Lunacharskii concluded in 1931: "Laughter is a weapon—and a very serious weapon at that—of a social self-discipline of a particular social class. . . . Molière, in a sense, created a wonderful school of self-discipline; one can say that three-quarters of his comedies were aimed at teaching the bourgeoisie how to understand and respect itself [*uchit' samosoznaniiu i samouvazheniiu*]."[21] A collective laugh, Lunacharskii suggested, has both a bonding and a distancing effect. Laughter-for-oneself, the bonding "laughter of fellowship," in other words, goes hand in hand with the laughter-at-others used as "a way of establishing distance."[22] Mockery becomes a tool for articulating "a mutual contradistinction" among classes.[23]

This interplay between unity and distinction, unleashed by laughter, is another common theme in all three articles in this cluster. However, unlike for Lunacharskii, for the contributors to this volume the assumed stability of social distinctions—us versus them, our laughter versus their laughter—is far from obvious. Anna Wexler Katsnelson, for instance, convincingly documents the fluidity of the content of Soviet laughter, while Yuri Leving and Alexei Yurchak explore in detail how the dominant conventions of the comic became the object of open ridicule.

The obscure object of Soviet laughter even stupefied the usually eloquent Bakhtin. His 1940 essay on "Satire"—written as an entry for a volume of the *Soviet Literary Encyclopedia* but never published—is a good case in point. Bakhtin's discussion of the culture of laughter lost its conceptual clarity as soon as he reached the Soviet present. His lucid analysis disintegrated—perhaps intentionally—into a mushy mumble:

> For a satirist, the present is totally decomposed into the past and the future, with no place for any neutral and autonomous present. Today's reality is a process where the past is dying and the future is emerging. . . . Ambassadors [*polpredy*] of the future are always present in satire in this or that form; therefore this future often has utopian features. Only Marxism-Leninism revealed the future scientifically, as a necessity. For us, the future has become a reality-in-the-making [*rastushchaia deistvitelnost'*]. It was born and it matures in *our* reality of today. Therefore in no way can the depiction of our contemporary reality be conceived of in negative images. The dying past in our reality is impotent, occupying a negligible space. Still, because of its presence, Soviet satire must exist.[24]

21. Anatolii Lunacharskii, "O smekhe," *Sobranie sochinenii,* 8:533, 534. See also his "O satire," ibid., 8:185–87. Eizenshtein, "Bol'sheviki smeiutsia," 84.
22. Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, 1962), 235.
23. Lunacharskii, "O smekhe," 8:535.
24. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Satira," *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh* (Moscow, 1996), 5:34. Emphasis in the original. Grigorii Aleksandrov, whose aesthetics would be in complete opposition to Bakhtin's, expressed a similar understanding of satire: "Our comedy should not only laugh [at vestiges of the past]. It should provide some fun [*byt' veseloi*], too. Satire, biting humor, and caricature are weapons against the obsolete [*otzhivaiushchii*] that prevents us from moving ahead. But merriment and cheerfulness [*vesel'e, zhizneradostnost'*] are

This recognized need for a carefully maintained balance between what Bakhtin called *osmeivaiushchaia satira* (laughing at) and *smeiushaiasia satira* (laughing with), eventually took the shape of a particular genre.[25] A distinctively "different social reasoning" of Soviet laughter, emphasized by Eisenstein in the 1930s, evolved into a peculiar form of positive critique—the "favorable feuilleton" [*polozhitel'nyi fel'eton*], in which the corrective edge of traditional satiric forms was replaced with the pathos of (socialist) affirmation.[26]

Taken as a form of comic narration, this favorable feuilleton was a complete failure—strikingly humorless and excessively didactic. Retrospectively, however, it had important negative value. As the epitome of Soviet comic genres, the favorable feuilleton—and the positive critique in general—indicates the analytic limitations of viewing Soviet cultural phenomena exclusively as discursive formations. In a similar vein, the authors of this cluster suggest that the work of Soviet laughter would remain misunderstood or simply ignored as long as the text-driven approach continues to enjoy its analytic monopoly. As an alternative, all three articles call attention to the role of the visual in tracing the peculiarities of the comic under socialism.[27] While the text often provided a streamlined narrative backbone to the comical performance, it was nonverbalized imagery that effectively undermined the ideological predictability of narrative canons, producing a situation of laughable incongruence. To put it differently: by focusing on the visual aspects of Soviet laughter, the cluster shows that the source of the Soviet comic was not so much *intra*-textual, as in traditional comedy, but *inter*-medial. It was the counterpoint of different performative media—textual versus visual, vocal versus gestural—that unleashed an important affective discharge, which might or might not have been intended in the original text.

To emphasize this point, I want to return—for the last time—to Raikin. A skillful practitioner of Soviet laughter, he clearly recognized the strategic role that visualization played in producing a comic effect. During his routines, the enforced (ideological) harmony of the text would quickly implode under the pressure of tacit but persistent bodily gestures and facial expressions. Stimulated by this parallel somatic narrative, the overall semantic discrepancy of the performance would result in an experience of *nesoobraznost'* (literally—*iconic dissonance, optical incompatibility*) (see figure 1). Raikin's recollections of his work with Zoshchenko are

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a remarkable means [*sredstvo*] to affirm the new, a means that that can provoke inspiration in people." Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino,* 205.

25. See, e.g., Mikhail Bakhtin, "L. E. Pinskii, 'Dramaturgiia Shekspira. Osnovnye nachala,'" in Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 6:441. For a discussion of the binary "laughing with" versus "laughing at," see James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York, 2005), 6–7; see also Highet's *Anatomy of Satire* for a detailed elaboration of this typology.

26. On "positive" humor, feuilleton, and comedy, see, e.g., I. Eventov, "Smekh—priznak sily," *Voprosy literatury,* no. 7 (1962): 33–34; Evgeniia Zhurbina, *Iskusstvo fel'etona* (Moscow, 1965), 62–65; V. Frolov, "Zametki o komedii," *Pravda,* 26 January 1952, 2.

27. For a similar approach, see also Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, eds., *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (New Haven, 2008).

Figure 1. "Practicing a Visual Discord: Arkadii Raikin and His Mask." From Adol'f Beilin, *Arkadii Raikin* **(Moscow, 1965).**

quite useful in this respect. In his memoirs, the actor singled out a particular aspect of Zoshchenko's narrative technique. The comic situation was created not by the usual unfolding of the story but by supplementing it with the gestures and stage setups that eroded the message of the text. As Raikin wrote: "The main task was to present the totally absurd rush of [Zoshchenko's] character . . . as something natural and ordinary." The actual narrative, in this sense, was simultaneously offset and occluded by the actor's extensive facial miming, modulations of voice, and body movements.[28]

Raikin was not entirely unique in achieving his comic effect by developing contrapuntal relations between message and speech, between narrative and behavior. Early Soviet culture contains plenty of similar ideas, methods, and practices. For example, in his texts on "conditional theater" Vsevolod Meyerhold insisted that the rhythmic structures of words and the plastic movements of bodies do not and should not coincide onstage. "Words are for the ear," he wrote, "plasticity is for the eye."[29] Viktor Shklov-

28. See Raikin, *Vospominianiia,* 325–26; see also Uvarova, *Arkadii Raikin,* 152.
29. Vsevolod Meierkhol′d, *O teatre* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 45. See also his Agitspektakl′ (1923), in V. Meierkhol′d, *Stat′i, pis′ma, rechi, besedy. 1917–1939* (Moscow, 1968), 2:50–52.

skii also identified the discrepancy between an actor's words and gestures as a major source of the comic. In his writings on early Soviet theater, Shklovskii observed that "the laughable is . . . [caused by the] incongruity of mundane words and eccentric actions."[30] Finally, Iurii Tynianov pointed out a similar trend in literature, arguing that purposeful stylistic discordance in a text—achieved through the misaligning (*neviazka*) of images or the deliberate contrast of semantic levels—was the key mechanism in parody.[31]

It is impossible to say to what extent Raikin's method was directly influenced by this artistic and intellectual tradition.[32] Crucially, however, his art reveals the fundamental significance of the optic supplementation for the production and performance of laughter under socialism.[33] Merging the visual with the verbal into a conflicting symbiosis, Raikin demonstrated that in the universe of censored culture, the main source of the comic may need to be located *outside* the text. Through emphatically visual performances, he exposed the ocular nature of his art of jocularity.

Following his lead, the authors of this cluster examine Soviet laugher first and foremost as an ocular phenomenon. Each article focuses on the way a particular visual strategy grafts itself onto a verbal narrative in order to significantly transform this narrative from within, without, however, altering its structure or consistency. The cinematic excess of Aleksandrov's *Radiant Path,* which Katsnelson analyzes in her article, affirmed the official message of socialist realism while simultaneously refuting it by laying bare the fantasmatic and illusory quality of its main assumptions. Leving, in his genealogical study of Nikolai Lebedev's artistic contribution to Samuil Marshak's poem *Mister Twister,* demonstrates how intervisuality— the thinly veiled reference to the biography of a particular image—can transform illustration into an independent mini-plot with a playful story that could not have been articulated otherwise. Finally, Yurchak reveals a perestroika-era inversion of these strategies, in which Kurekhin built an improbable story using as his foundation the static and familiar imagery of Vladimir Lenin. Despite obvious differences, Kurekhin's prank produced an effect familiar from Aleksandrov's film and Lebedev's illustrations: the incommensurability of imagery and narrative resulted not in comic relief but in a state of confusion. All these cases celebrated visual and semantic discord, creating a situation of *nesoobraznost'.* In short, they all provoked a peculiar Soviet laughter that responded to incongruence with a muted expression of controlled bewilderment, "Laughing is not a sin. Or is it?"

30. Viktor Shklovskii, "Komicheskoe i tragicheskoe," *Gamburgskii schet (1914–1933)* (Moscow, 1990), 113.

31. Tynianov, "Dostoevskii i Gogol'," 304, 306. For a detailed elaboration of the same approach, see also Sergei Eizenshtein, "Komicheskoe," *Metod. Grundproblem* (Moscow, 2002), 420–31.

32. Raikin was keenly interested in Meyerhold's work; in 1925 the director even invited the young artist to work in his theater. Raikin, *Vospominianiia,* 114–25.

33. For a useful discussion on visual supplementation, see Rosalind C. Morris, "Photography and the Power of Images in the History of Power: Notes from Thailand," in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and South East* (Durham, 2009), 134–35.

The Tramp in a Skirt: Laboring the *Radiant Path*

Anna Wexler Katsnelson

"Have we, cinematographers, done everything we can so that living will be better, more cultured, and merrier?"[1] For the duration of the 1930s, this was the question. The Soviet film industry was charged with the social order (*sotsial'nyi zakaz*) of developing popular entertainment genres, capable of luring the kind of audiences hitherto commanded only by foreign productions. Frequent linguistic sword-rattling repositioned lighthearted entertainment to the "frontline," and, by 1940, the preoccupation with comedy, as the surge of press clippings devoted to the topic suggests, had reached a crescendo.[2] That year, just before World War II redirected cinematographic focus, saw a public competition for the best comedy screenplay, a conference on the matters of cine-comedy, and the much awaited release of Grigorii Aleksandrov's latest musical comedy, *Svetlyi put'* (The Radiant Path).

Svetlyi put', entitled *Zolushka* (Cinderella) prior to Iosif Stalin's personal edit, screened a uniquely Soviet fairy tale of becoming: the transformation of Tania Morozova (played, inevitably, by Liubov' Orlova) from a simple, illiterate, peasant girl working as a domestic servant to a master weaver, an award-winning Stakhanovite shockworker, and finally an engineer. She is aided and mothered by a local party representative, hindered by a villain, and loved by an engineer from Moscow, that attainable ideal. By the end of the film the transformation of the Soviet Cinderella is complete as Tania the peasant is reborn as an activist, a party delegate, and an educated professional woman, with an educated professional betrothed.

Yet although this new sparkler in Aleksandrov's string of hits was based on an eponymous play by the professional humorist Viktor Ardov, and was celebrated by the press as a comedic feat, the film, aside from its opening sequence, is decidedly unfunny. Ardov's son later described his father's reaction to the cinematic adaptation as *bredovyi* (raving, delirious).[3] Indeed, Aleksandrov's version departed significantly from the original text,

1. Boris Shumiatskii, *Sovetskaia kinematografiia segodnia i zavtra: Doklad i zakliuchitel'noe slovo na 7-m Vsesoiuznom proizvodstvenno-tematicheskom soveshchanii, 13 i 15 dekabria 1935 goda* (Moscow, 1936), 5. Translations from Russian here and throughout are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2. *Komsomolka* for 26 March 1933, quoted in G. V. Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino* (Moscow, 1983), 205.

3. Mikhail Ardov, "Kakim ia ego pomniu (O moem ottse)," in Viktor Ardov, *Velikie i smeshnye* (Moscow, 2005), 425. For the original play, see Viktor Ardov, *Zolushka* (Moscow, 1940).

particularly through the injection of extensive dream/fantasy/utopia sequences. Protracted, cinematographically extravagant, and technologically difficult, these scenes stand in relief against the linear master plot that drives the film, making a grab at the viewer's attention while laughter, though advertised, is notably absent. The question that needs to be asked, then, is why does laughter disappear from the nominally comedic, purposefully merry *Svetlyi put'*? And where was its affective energy redirected?

In an attempt to comment on the modes of screening laughter in the 1930s USSR and on the probability of the nexus of utopia and comedy, I will read the narrative of a manifestly model socialist realist film through a form-conscious prism. *Svetlyi put',* like Aleksandrov's two previous films—*Tsirk* (Circus, 1936) and *Volga, Volga* (1938)—can be seen as a diligently au courant glossary of high Stalinist mythologemes, which in this case included the Stakhanov movement and the merriment of upwardly mobile Soviet life. In that sense *Svetlyi put'* emerges as the culmination of Aleksandrov's efforts to configure cinema as a simultaneous mythmaker and repository of Stalinist culture. Beyond content, however, the sensory overload of the film's nonrepresentational signs causes any teleological meaning to double in on itself. It is the ensuing ambiguity of the interaction between content and form that I am interested in pursuing, hoping to locate there the laughter that has fled comedy under high Stalinism.

Laughter

> We live in a hungry and cold country . . . but I often hear laughter. . . . Laughter is . . . strength. And since we have it, we ought to direct it onto the right course.
>
> —Anatolii Lunacharskii

Upon the release of *Svetlyi put',* Soviet critics duly acknowledged its celebratory mood and manifest ideological correctness, but nevertheless noted its uneasy relationship to traditional genre divisions: "And it is not a big deal that the wardens of genre rectitude will find in this film an abundance of various genres."[4] The consolation intended by the sarcastic tone of this review points, in actuality, to a grave issue at the heart of the Soviet cinematogrphic enterprise: the inability to produce comedy. As early as 1927 a substantial position paper was composed, in preparation for the first party conference on cinematography, outlining the new requirements and parameters of filmmaking.[5] The main points of this report concerned themselves with the effective methodology tooled to shape the

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4. Z. Grigor'ev, *Kino gazeta,* 4 October 1940.

5. The Russian film historian Ekaterina Khokhlova discusses this little-known and unpublished report: Khokhlova, "Kino totalitarnoi epokhi," *Iskusstvo kino,* 1990, no. 1:118. History films, and in particular features involving revolutionary history, were obviously the easiest in terms of the successful marriage of form and content.

content of Soviet cinematographic output and the optimal means of conveying desirable ideology on film—the cinematic apparatus as political persuasion. By all accounts, inspired by a third coming of classicism and a legible brand of realism as vehicles for ideologically driven narratives, Soviet cinematographic authorities devised a sliding value scale, similar to the *grande manière*. By conceiving of the cinematographic playing field as demarcated into the a priori classifications of genre, policymakers effectively offered filmmakers empty boxes in which to fit their productions, assigning certain codes and relationships to each one.[6] Here, as in Rick Altman's analysis, genre emerges as a determinant of the production of meaning and hence functions as an agent of an overarching strategy to "control the audience's reaction . . . by providing the context in which that film must be interpreted."[7] This division of cinematographic output into neat, almost scientifically articulated genre compartments was designed, I would like to suggest, to facilitate and pattern the fusion of art and politics. It is not surprising, then, that genre categorization was often invoked in discussions of comedy, for the commingling of ideology and light entertainment proved particularly difficult.

The opening sequence of *Svetlyi put'* sets up a fairly routine comedic atmosphere, albeit steeped in a fairy-tale lexis. The camera, in the first of many long shots, zooms in on a typical provincial Russian city, first closes in on the Small Grand Hotel and its window, then finally enters it. Inside, a peasant servant girl, Tania, wakes up and starts her day, while loudspeakers outside her window broadcast the morning radio show of audio *fizkul'tura*. Tania follows along while this disembodied, transmitted voice gives cheerful aerobic instructions, accompanied by a tune culled from Aleksandrov's first feature, *Veselye rebiata* (Jolly Fellows, 1934). Tania obeys the commands, timing her actions to the beat of the song. Then, having connected her legs to pulleys, she uses both her hands and her feet to perform a number of tasks simultaneously, continuing to follow the brisk tempo of the music (figure 1). Inasmuch as the soundtrack of any musical is designed with catchiness in mind, the potentialities for retransmission are even more pronounced in a totalitarian culture intent on broadcasting ideological doxa through cultural products. The uncanny ability of popular song to create a powerful synaptic experience was ideally coupled with cinema's wide outreach to provide an ideally easy platform for melodic insemination, and the song self-referentially replayed—"March of the Jolly Fellows"—was (and remains) very popular.[8] Prefiguring the "March of the Enthusiasts" that is to sound later in the film, the syncopated metrorhythm of the melody demonstrates why the military march

6. Highest ranked were heroically themed features that drew upon revolutionary history; second came films dedicated to the issues of life at the moment of transition from capitalism to communism; lowest ranked (but most produced) were the entertainment films.

7. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, 1987), 4.

8. The self-referential quotation is deliberately comical, if aggrandizing, since in the year in which the scene takes place—1930—"March of the Jolly Fellows" was four years away from being written.

Figure 1. Tania's mechanized routine.

constituted a deliberate choice for Soviet composers.[9] Its signature regular, driving beat, when combined with uplifting lyrics, creates a powerful audio-emotive effect that could be used to organize and spur human masses, to "carry them along," in Theodor Adorno's conceptualization of this musical genre, a function of a group conditioned response.[10] Indeed, following the tune of marching orders, Tania the peasant girl becomes a quasi-mechanized, and supposedly more efficient, human. Yet, although this scene raises the theme of well-organized labor, it is one that is thoroughly steeped in slapstick and its own cinematic tradition.

The comedic atmosphere created by Tania's robotic motions, the liberal application of slapstick, as well as the underlying performative structure of a central comic actor operating essentially alone, slightly grotesque, somewhat downtrodden—all clearly reference a formula that is easily recognizable, if gender-reversed. Starting in the 1920s, the dominant genre of comedy began to be defined by an intensely physical individual performer "whose comic adventures stem primarily from his inability to get along in society."[11] Such comedies frequently centered on the myths and fears of the mechanical and established a love-hate relationship toward the automata of industrialized production. Historically speaking, these films were based on what Tom Gunning has termed the "machine gag," a humorous topos already established in the early days of cinema that perfectly illustrates Bergsonian identification of comedy with the mechanical.[12] The work of Buster Keaton (who regularly pre-

9. In the early 1930s elaborate taxonomies documented and analyzed the music of various demonstrations only to find the repertoire of the masses lacking in truly revolutionary marches. See quotes from *Proletarskii muzykant* cited in Robert A. Rothstein, "The Quiet Rehabilitation of the Brick Factory: Early Soviet Popular Music and Its Critics," *Slavic Review* 39, no. 3 (September 1980): 373–88.

10. Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia on Mahler," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music,* ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, 2002), 617.

11. Stuart M. Kaminsky, *American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film* (Dayton, Ohio, 1974), 141.

12. Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," in Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, eds., *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (New York, 1995), 97–99. Henri Bergson, *Laughter:*

sented a dichotomy between robots and humans) and Charlie Chaplin (who, in *Modern Times* [1936], internalizes mechanical rhythm and becomes its "robotized victim") gave the machine age a lasting cinematic portrait.[13] Chaplin's films in particular were immensely popular in the Soviet Union (granted, they were also nearly the only foreign features available). Their enthusiastic reception spanned both the high and low ends of the cultural divide, as well as everything in between. Chaplin's act constituted a comedic subgenre that attracted imitators (in the USSR as well as pretty much everywhere).[14] Chaplin served as a paragon of comedic craft for the Soviet film industry. His *Modern Times,* which began its run on Moscow screens on 10 July 1936, had been heralded by the party from its very inception, and the "tramp" himself was officially endorsed as a source for emulation.[15] Aleksandrov not only was personally acquainted with Chaplin (a friendship he often flaunted) and considered familiarity with Chaplin's work to be a "comedic education" but also had cunningly built on the Tramp's recognizability factor in his films, even employing a Chaplin imitator in *Tsirk.*[16] In *Svetlyi put',* he went one step further in this epigonism.

Advancing a thoroughly physical conception of the comic, Aleksandrov mined the comedic potential of the play's *bytovoi* context—the humble beginnings of its protagonist and her Cinderella-like labors at the hearth.[17] Her face drawn into a comically serious mien, Liubov′ Orlova's Tania enters the film as a woman alone, an exploited clown. Much like the Chaplinesque tramp, she is "the butt of humor which often turned to sympathy."[18] Banking on the comedic effect those allusions to Chaplin easily elicited, Aleksandrov, in Tania, had no longer simply reproduced the Tramp, but rather reconfigured him as a *her* and as the perfect protagonist for a socialist realist master plot.[19]

An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, at www.gutenberg.org/files/4352/4352-h/4352-h.htm (last accessed 15 March 2011).

13. Garrett Stewart, "Modern Hard Times: Chaplin and the Cinema of Self-Reflection," *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 297–98.

14. On Chaplin's popularity and imitators in early Soviet Russia, see Iurii Tsiv′ian, "O Chapline v russkom avangarde i o zakonakh sluchainogo v iskusstve," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 81, no. 5 (2006): 99–142.

15. Boris Shumiatskii, then head of Soviet film industry, visited the United States in 1935 and was shown a rough cut of the film that he later praised: B. Z. Shumiatskii, "Za sovershenstvo masterstva," *Iskusstvo kino,* 1936, no. 7. Chaplin's popularity with the head of state supposedly led Stalin to watch—repeatedly—*City Lights* (1931), identifying himself in the melodrama of the Tramp's adventures. Iurii Arabov, "Telets i Molokh," in Larisa Maliukova, ed., *90-e: Kino, kotoroe my poteriali* (Moscow, 2007), 191. The newspaper *Kino* of 28 July 1936 announced the screening of *Modern Times* in Moscow.

16. In his autobiography Aleksandrov writes: "Friendship with Charlie Chaplin and knowledge of musical revues . . . augmented . . . my comedic education." Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino,* 191–92.

17. *Bytovaia komediia* is the Russian cognate of the comedy of manners.

18. Kaminsky, *American Film Genres,* 148.

19. While already present in the original play, the shifting of emphasis from mere comedy to heightened social content is made evident in the changes in the script. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI), f. 2450, op. 2, d. 1295.

Labor

> We are working people. . . . We will study—knowledge will free us; we will work—labor will enrich us.
>
> —Nikolai Chernyshevskii

Tania's Chaplinesque, mechanized performance of her domestic chores is funny precisely because her labors fall outside the teleological aim of a socialist realist master plot; they are aimless insofar as the building of communism is not served by them. Tania—as a human machine rigged with pulleys and gears—is only funny because her labor is not geared toward any consciously ideological purpose. With this well-calibrated comedy, Aleksandrov taps into the Soviet mythology of labor, setting a clear binary between pointless menial grind and meaningful industrial work. According to Katerina Clark's analysis, socialist realist writers, in their attempt to offer true proletarian culture,"were enjoined *explicitly* to show how, in the new society, the division of labor would be abolished and all conflict between the individual and collective good eradicated."[20] Maksim Gor'kii, in his famous speech at the First Soviet Writers Congress of 1934, lent this aesthetic diktat its most succinct articulation: "We must choose labor as the main protagonist of our books, that is, [it must be] a man, organized by the processes of labor, which we arm with all the might of modern technology, a man who in his turn organizes labor to be easier, more productive, elevating it to art. We must learn to comprehend labor as art."[21] Still, Tania's journey from domestic servant to industrial laborer and finally to a member of the newly educated proletariat cadre is emblematic, not only of the ideological elevation of the theme of labor, but also of the political investment in gender and gendered labor in particular. Central female characters had become increasingly popular in postrevolutionary imagery, often embodying the contrast between the old and the new. By reassigning the Chaplinesque comedic formula to a female actor, Aleksandrov draws, then, on an affective mechanism of representation that Susan E. Reid ultimately read as the use of "conventional gender codes and hierarchy to naturalize the subordination of society to the Stalinist state."[22] Women, in other words, were commandeered as metaphors for an obeisant populace, an appropriation indicative of the extreme vacillation in the alignment of gender roles in Soviet Russia. From the utopian hopes of liberation, the erasure of biological difference, and the liberated sexuality of the radically modernizing postrevolutionary years, the pendulum had swung back to patriarchal values by the 1930s.[23] With its central female protagonist, *Svetlyi put'* both displays and whitewashes this class/gender stratification that strapped peasant women

20. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, 1981), 108.
21. Maksim Gor'kii, *Sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1953), 27:320.
22. Susan E. Reid, "All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 133.
23. Thomas G. Schrand, "The Five-Year Plan for Women's Labour: Constructing Socialism and the 'Double Burden,' 1930–1932," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 8 (December 1999): 1456.

Figure 2. Tania in her factory gear.

with the double burden of both traditional duties and new industrial labor.[24] Textile workers in particular constituted a favorite trope, occupying a space that was both traditionally feminine yet modernized by technology, and their representation—habitually adorned by a peasant kerchief updated by a tie at the nape (rather than under the chin in the village manner)—was a staple of Soviet visual propaganda (figure 2).

Signaling the binate codification of gender in high Stalinism, Liubov′ Orlova's Tania embodies both gender specificity and gender equality. Tania cross-dresses to the extent that she chooses workman's overalls that obscure her feminine form at the factory. Her femininity and beauty are otherwise not only not eradicated but conversely and routinely emphasized, punctuated by frilly dresses, gauzy fabrics, parasols, and bonnets—the proper accoutrements of conventionally constructed and construed womanliness. The peasant girl's progress is articulated materially, through her clothing and coiffure (hair as a synecdoche, evoking a spectrum of culturally specific associations), as traditional Russian costume and braids are supplanted by a modern dress and a cropped bob.[25] One of the many cultural tropes thematized in *Svetlyi put′,* then, is the state-sanctioned re-

24. Middle-class women, usually educated, were seen as having already "arrived" at emancipation and were therefore expected to concentrate on family life. Working women, though, particularly peasants, were still in need of emancipation and education and were expected to join the workforce as well as perform the traditional duties of a housewife. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "'Middle-Class Values' and Soviet Life in the 1930s," in Terry L. Thompson and Richard Sheldon, eds., *Soviet Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham* (Boulder, Colo., 1988), 20−39.
     In 1934 the Commissariat of Heavy Industry (Narkomtiazhprom) and its chief, Grigorii (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze (who figures as a point of reference in Aleksandrov's film), began promoting the ideal of *kulturnost′* (culturedness) and correct social values. A movement of "Wife-Activists" (*obsshchestvennitsy*) was born, mobilizing housewives for socially minded volunteer work and the improvement of domestic standards of living. Rebecca Balmas Neary, "Mothering Socialist Society: The Wife-Activists' Movement and the Soviet Culture of Daily Life, 1934−1941, *Russian Review* 58, no. 3 (July 1999): 396−412.
     25. Oksana Bulgakova reads Orlova's image as an allegory of a pan-Soviet transformation. Oksana Bulgakova, "Sovetskie krasavitsy v stalinskom kino," in Hans Günther, Marina Balina, E. A. Dobrenko, and Jurij Murasov, eds., *Sovetskoe bogatstvo: Stat′i o kul′ture, literature i kino* (St. Petersburg, 2002), 391−411.

emergence of previously bourgeois notions of fashion, a seemingly incongruous component of a carefully calibrated attempt to produce the "correct form" of a gendered body.[26]

Altruistic and competitive, individual and collective, feminine and masculinized—the performance of communist labor in *Svetlyi put'* reflects the range of contradictions encoded in the Marxist-Leninist conception of proletarian labor and in the gender/class stratifications of Soviet society, but it also seems to sexualize them. Indeed, labor takes on a distinctly erotic, even orgiastic quality in Aleksandrov's film. The emotive energy conserved by the absence of laughter, as if following the laws of physics, seems to be transported and transformed into a sexual charge that surrounds proletarian labor and the Stakhanov movement. What emerges is almost a Hollywood fantasy of romantic love, albeit with an altogether less conventional object of desire. Granted, the theme of sexuality is introduced early in the film—Tania is unresponsive to the amorous advances of her would-be suitor, Taldykin—but, because it is structured through slapstick physicality, this sexuality becomes less and less erotically explicit with time. Conversely (and yet consequently), Tania's relationship with her "fairy godmother" (Sovietized as Comrade Pronina, the secretary of the local factory's party organization) becomes thoroughly corporeal and borderline erotic, with constant touching and a number of kisses, exchanged, of course, in the name of Soviet labor.

The novelist and essayist Dmitrii Bykov, always good for a pithy one-liner, has claimed that *Svetlyi put'* represents the pinnacle of a uniquely Soviet cinematographic *ideologeme*—the representation of labor as ecstatic, or *blud truda* (the wantonness of labor).[27] Take for example the scene when Tania experiences her distinctly secular revelation and figures out how to single-handedly service eighteen weaving machines. Reclining on her bed, she suddenly bolts upright holding a large, phallic shuttle near her open mouth with a dreamy yet intense look in her eyes, while the musical soundtrack throbs to an increasingly rapid beat. Suggestive not only visually but also discursively, this scene enacts a rather lewd wordplay between *chelnok* (the shuttle of a loom) and *chlen* (penis), spooling a time-honored folktale tradition that linked the implements and the act of weaving to all matters sexual.[28] As Tania rises, her nightgown rumpled,

26. Nadezhda Azhgikhina and Helena Goschilo, "Getting under Their Skin: The Beauty Salon in Russian Women's Lives," in Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren, eds., *Russia, Women, Culture* (Bloomington, 1996), 94–121. On the recalibration of bourgeois values, see Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, "Directed Desires: *Kul'turnost'* and Consumption in Post-Revolutionary Russia," in Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, eds., *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881–1940* (Oxford, 1998).

It is important to note that *Svetlyi put'* sought to capitalize on the rehabilitation of the fashion industry by releasing the film along with a merchandizing campaign (perfume and matches printed with the film's title). The campaign stumbled when Stalin changed the film's title at the last minute. Fedor Razzakov, *Seks-simvoly Rossii, 30–60e gody* (Moscow, 2000), 13.

27. Dmitrii Bykov, "Blud truda," *Iskusstvo kino,* 1996, no. 4: 124. Bykov's title is borrowed from an ingenious line in Osip Mandel'shtam's poem, "Polnoch v Moskve. Roskoshno buddiiskoe leto," dating from June 1931.

28. While in *Svetlyi put'* the shuttle acquires a sexual connotation, in traditional fairy

Figures 3 and 4. Tania's ecstasy.

her hand pressed to her heaving bosom, and her hair fanned by a sudden burst of wind, she climactically recites, "The heart beats, beats, and will achieve what it desires," which, in this case, is to become Stalin's champion of labor (figures 3 and 4).[29] Tania's successes do indeed culminate in a prize from this highest of authorities (whose person could only be implied, never shown on screen, in a comedy), a climax likewise accompanied by visible markers of bodily arousal. And then, at last, Tania's triumphant speech at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (and the much less dramatic reunification with her love interest, an engineer who assisted in her professional feat), is followed, in a timely manner, by the copious discharge of many a fountain. None of this is funny; on the contrary, it is treated with utmost seriousness. Labor has finally become (high)art, and the laboring body, that site of convergence of private and public, emerges as sublime under totalitarianism, transported onto a higher plane.

Utopia

> There are circumstances that destroy the psyche: dreams, mirror reflections.
> Mirror reflections should be forbidden.
>
> —Iurii Olesha

Tania's first encounter with factories, heavy machinery, and industrial labor occurs under altogether fantastic circumstances, in which the sense of magical awe pushes all joking firmly aside. Dismissed from her position

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tales it was the spindle that signified penetration (for example, Charles Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty"). For a classical exploration of the weaving/sexuality axis in fairy tales, see Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths* (New York, 1957).

29. This again is a wordplay (albeit not at all intriguing), since the Russian for "beating" and "achieving" are cognates. Anne Eakin Moss offers a fascinating account of the peculiar erotic gaze of Stalinist cinema, diverted as it was to Stalin himself and the party-state, basing her analysis on *Svetlyi put'* as well as other films of the era. Anne Eakin Moss, "Stalin's Harem: The Spectator's Dilemma in Late 1930s Soviet Film," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 3, no. 2 (August 2009): 157–72.

Figure 5. Factory/Castle.

Figure 6. Factory gate.

as a domestic servant, Tania seeks help from the secretary of the factory party organization, who takes her in. Asleep on her new bunk, Tania has a dream: she is led by the hand to a castle on a hill with tall towers and spires and many windows lit brightly from within. She arrives at its ornate wrought-iron gate, and it opens to let her in (figures 5 and 6).[30] The dream then dissolves into reality, and we see Tania being thrust into a machine hall, where multiple electronic looms spin at high speed with a deafening and pulsating roar.

The union of the factory and the fantastic through dream syntax, has, of course, a notable precedent in Russian literature—Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream from Nikolai Chernyshevskii's novel *Chto delat'?* (What Is to Be Done? 1863). The last in a series of social commentaries thinly veiled as dreams, Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream is prophetic, offering a glimpse into the communal and joyous society of the future. Chernyshevskii's positivist social utopia, influenced by the preceding generation of thinkers including Charles Fourier and Louis Blanc, codifies three key tropes: the pleasure principles of rationally organized labor, the emancipation of women, and the transformation of a human into the ideal of the New Man—or, in this case, New Woman. Tania's dream in *Svetlyi put',* I would like to suggest, builds on this staple of Russian utopian thought, "this cycle of love and labor," to quote Irina Paperno, and gives the already ekphrastic text a visual form.[31] Echoing the doubling in Chernyshevskii's novel (Vera Pavlovna and her futuristic guide, the tsaritsa, are revealed in the last dream to be one and the same), the dream sequence in *Svetlyi put'* constitutes the first instance of doubling in the film, where the viewer sees both Tania's supine self and her walking spectral image in the same shot (figure 7). Doubling is seen again in a sequence toward the end of the film: Tania, after an

30. This scene draws on some well-known and ideologically driven predecessors: the factory/castle echoes a similar image in Dziga Vertov's paean to socialist labor, *Entuziazm* (Enthusiasm, 1931); while the dramatic wrought-iron gate references an analogous opening in Sergei Eisenstein's *Oktiabr'* (October, 1928—on which Aleksandrov worked as an assistant).

31. Irina Paperno, "Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream: The Kingdom of Heaven," *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism* (Stanford, 1988), 210–13.

**Figure 7. Tania's doubling and super-
imposition.**

award ceremony in the Kremlin, stops by an ornate gilded mirror and
sees a reflection of her earlier selves. While the mirror image retraces the
three key stages in her development—from a peasant girl, to a humble
factory worker, and finally to a record-beating master weaver—Tania, in
her present form, still stands outside the frame. This seemingly indepen-
dent mirror image reaffirms *Svetlyi put'* as a visualization of a precise mo-
ment in *What Is to Be Done?* where Chernyshevskii articulates the doubling
through a looking glass: "'Look at me . . . Have you seen my face? . . . Yes,
Vera Pavlovna has seen: it is herself, it is herself, but she is a goddess. . . .'
'You see yourself in the mirror as you are, by yourself, without me.'"[32]

The key difference between the use of utopian tropes in the novel
and in the film lies in their alternate vectors of chronology: the mirror
in Chernyshevskii's novel looks toward the future, while the reflection
in Aleksandrov's film is entirely retrospective. The future Chernyshevskii
longed for, Aleksandrov seems to be saying, has already been achieved. To
wit the heavy-handed references to historical dates dot *Svetlyi put'*, locating
it within extra-cinematic reality and its chronology: the film begins with a
conspicuous identification of the year as 1930, similarly prominent close-
ups of turning newspaper pages halfway through the film announce the
year 1935, and the ending, featuring the All-Union Agricultural Exhibi-
tion positions the story firmly in 1939. Inasmuch as Aleksandrov's film ac-
tualizes Chernyshevskii's utopian metaphor cinematically it also presents
Vera Pavlovna's dream as realized, its prophecy fulfilled in the coming into
life of the socialist utopia, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics.[33] In
this respect, *Svetlyi put'* thematizes, then, a defining socialist realist trope,
the transformation of utopia as "no-place" into a particular chronotope:[34]

    32. N. G. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'? Iz rasskazov o novykh liudiakh* (Leningrad, 1975),
281–82.
    33. Richard Dyer's seminal analysis of musicals as embodiments of a utopian sensibil-
ity is operative here as well, as are the categories he outlines. Richard Dyer, "Entertain-
ment and Utopia," in Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical* (London, 1981), 175–89.
    34. On socialist realism and utopia, see, for example, Hans Günter, "Sotsrealizm i
utopicheskoe myshlenie," in Hans Günther and Evgenii Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii
kanon* (St. Petersburg, 2000), 41–49.

"But after all this is not . . . a utopia, it is a radiant path that has long since become familiar to us. . . . — Take a look . . . how radiant and wonderful is that which we perceive as commonplace!"[35]

Visually striking and technologically complex, Aleksandrov's cinematic treatment of these imaginary sequences greatly influenced the film's reception. Praise often appeared to be tinted by an implied rebuke: "G. V. Aleksandrov—a master of infinite inventiveness . . . [who] cannot bear an empty spot, he has more ideas than can fit in one picture."[36] These ideas, in *Svetlyi put'*, largely involved Aleksandrov's decision to transform Ardov's decidedly quotidian play into a fairy tale, largely by means of extensive special effects.[37] The use of special effects, the development of new cinematographic techniques, and the importation of innovative American technologies had marked Aleksandrov's directorial oeuvre since his first independent, post-Eisensteinian work. If montage will be forever associated with Eisenstein, then Aleksandrov's signature became its obverse: the seamless dissolution of one shot into another, often through extreme close-ups. This anti-montage, patented already in Aleksandrov's first feature, the 1934 *Veselye rebiata* (arguably the most comedic of his oeuvre), with an opening sequence that appears to be a single tracking shot, to match the soundtrack, this anti-Eisensteinian, anti-montage dissolution punctuates the length of *Svetlyi put'*. This dissolution enhances the film's striving for the magical qualities that eluded the original script, and, by virtue of comedic origins, forms the socialist realist linkage of magical merriment. From the first sequence on, Aleksandrov's camera engages in tracking shots that often switch their inside/outside positioning and transcend physical obstacles to demonstrate the technological capabilities of the mechanical eye.[38] *Svetlyi put'*, in this sense, enacts not only the personal apotheosis of a Soviet individual but the magical metamorphosis of Soviet reality as a whole. Daily life, rendered spectacular by the camera, does indeed become merrier. Thus we see lint transforming into snow transforming into water and many instances of painted surfaces transmogrifying into a range of moving images, all by means of Aleksandrov's trademark dissolve.

Svetlyi put' also introduces another technological innovation—the Soviet version of a composite shot. Superimpositions of film as a means of achieving fantastic imagery have existed almost from the very inception of cinema (as in Georges Méliès, *L'homme à la tête de caoutchouc,* 1901), and by the late 1930s, Hollywood had tapped into this technique, often using highly evolved projection work.[39] In the USSR, however, the dearth

35. From a review of *Svetlyi put'* in A. Iakovlev, *Komsomol'skaia pravda,* 11 October 1940.

36. I. Bachelis, *Izvestiia,* 5 October 1940.

37. Ardov's play was criticized for being bourgeois in its all-too-naked transformation, its lack of emplotments, and its general mediocrity. Quoted in Igor Frolov, *Grigorii Aleksandrov* (Moscow, 1976), 112.

38. There are visual parallels that connect this shot of Aleksandrov's film to Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) produced a decade earlier.

39. Projection work—and in the 1930s only rear projection was in use—entails placing actors against a screen onto which a setting would be projected, then refilming the whole ensemble from the front.

Figure 8. The wandering mask sequence.

and low quality of film stock made this costly process even costlier, neces-
sitating developments that would enable filmmakers to attain the same
composite effect within the original negative. One such technique, called
Bluzhdaiushchaia maska (literally "the wandering mask," known in English
as a traveling matte), was developed in the Mosfilm studios by the camera-
man Boris Gorbachev, based on research by French scientists and using
the infrared spectrum of light to produce composites.[40] In *Svetlyi put'* this
enhanced technique was used to double Orlova's image in the mirror and
was to achieve the fantastic "flying car" sequence that follows.[41] Having en-
tered the mirror after the award ceremony, Tania is invited by her doppel-
gänger to enter a shiny automobile, which immediately takes off into the
air (figure 8). The car, modern and sleek, is a new iteration of the "flying
carpet" of many traditional fairy tales, underscoring the attempt to up the
magical ante. The technology of the "wandering mask" enabled Aleksan-
drov to inscribe his film into the fantastic and folkloric syntax promised
but not delivered in the title of the original play: *Cinderella*.

Fairy tales were officially co-opted as vessels for socialist realism dur-
ing the First Soviet Writers' Congress, when Gor'kii and the leading
children's book author Samuil Marshak explicitly anointed the genre as
ideologically desirable. No longer judged bourgeois and reactionary, the
fairy tale was redeemed—to narrate the fabulous, one needed to harness
it.[42] Rehabilitated, fairy tales were strategically positioned by Soviet pro-

40. B. Gorbachev, *Tekhnika kombinirovannykh s'emok* (Moscow, 1961).

41. The sequence that has Tania flying over Moscow in her shiny black automobile
might remind a contemporary viewer of a similarly fantastic flight in Mikhail Bulgakov's
Master and Margarita (1966–67).There is a possibility that this connection is not an en-
tirely accidental one. Around 1936 Aleksandrov and particularly Orlova, became friendly
with the writer and his wife, visiting their home (Elena Bulgakova notes their presence a
couple of times in her diary, although it is unclear from its text whether they were present
during Bulgakov's reading of drafts of his novel).

42. Immediately following the revolution, fairy tales and their narrative devices were
"condemned as 'idealism'" by newly minted experts in child development, chief among
them Vladimir Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaia. Marina Balina, Helena Goscilo, and
Mark Lipovetsky, eds., *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales* (Evan-
ston, 2005), 105–7. On the resurgence of the fairy-tale genre under Stalin, Katerina Clark

paganda as the only precedents for the wonders of the country. Specifi-
cally, the fairy tale *Zolushka,* or *Cinderella,* originally imported into Russia
from France in the eighteenth century, contained the kind of cognitive
transformation that Soviet politics dictated and Soviet art was enlisted to
figure.[43] For this reason, it frequently reappeared in various guises; it was
not Charles Perrault's original version of the tale that was screened, but
its many Sovietized adaptations.[44] Although a favorite of many artists in
various media, *Zolushka*'s master plot was especially significant for Alek-
sandrov. His signature—the unifying thread that runs through his entire
cinematic oeuvre—is the reworking of a Hollywood musical into a Soviet
rendition of a fairy tale that features, at its center, the *Zolushka* typology
of female metamorphosis. Aleksandrov, structuring his string of hit musi-
cals exclusively on this foundation, became something of a Soviet Horatio
Alger.[45]

Aleksandrov not only acknowledged his film's explicit interweaving
of life and the fairy tale, so central for socialist realist discourse, but even
turned it into a retort to his critics:

> There were many arguments about Tania's fantasy (dream, flight)—that
> [these] are not realistic devices. . . . But these fantasies, I countered my
> opponents, build on realistic material. The pathos of the film was crys-
> tallized in the famed lyrics of the song: "we are born to make fairy tales
> real" . . . In the "fantastic" sequences I wanted to overcome decisively the
> quotidian thrust of the original script, to give a grand theme an elevated,
> poetic solution, to show that contemporary reality can be more magical
> than an old fairy tale.[46]

The blurring of fantasy and reality is also made explicit in the lyrics that
open the film: "A fairy tale we are creating, / And the make believe of
old folk epics / Can only pale in comparison / To the reality of today."
Predictably, the Soviet critical apparatus picked up on this deliberate con-

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writes: "In order to describe *homo extraordinarious* one needed more fabulous forms, such
as fairy tales." Clark, *Soviet Novel,* 147.

43. The fairy tale of *Cinderella,* one of the oldest and most globally common mo-
tifs in folkloric literature, was first written down by Charles Perrault in *Contes de ma Mere
L'Oye* in 1697. His collection was translated into Russian in 1768 as *Skazki o volshebnitsakh
s nravoucheniiami.*

44. The theme of a domestic servant who aspires to a better life was already featured
in Aleksandrov's first film *Veselye rebiata* as well as, for example, Boris Barnet's 1928 film *Dom
na Trubnoi* (A House on Trubnaia Street). The fairy tale of *Cinderella* was finally made into
a film in 1947, but even then it was not based on the rather innocuous Perrault original,
but on a Soviet adaptation by the playwright and children's book author Evgenii Shvarts.

45. Elena Stishova writes in an essayistic piece that "the archetype of *Zolushka,* as a
sign for an oppressed woman liberated by the Soviet regime for a new, happy life," origi-
nated in Lenin's famous quote that had a common cook governing a state. Elena Stishova,
"Prikliucheniia Zolushki v strane bol'shevikov," in Christine Engel and Renate Reck, eds.,
Frauen in der Kultur: Tendenzen in Mittel- und Osteuropa nach der Wende (Innsbruck, 2000),
233. In the 1930s *Zolushka* was also treated by writers such as Shvarts and the once-futurist
poet Semen Kirsanov.

46. Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino,* 255. The song in question is the popular "March of
the Aviators."

flation: "*Svetlyi put'*—is a film about a fairy tale that became real."[47] As Tania soars over the highest mountain, flying across the most recognizable locales of the Soviet Union (radiating from the heart of the empire—the Kremlin in Moscow—outwards over its vast geographic expanse) while "March of the Enthusiasts" blasts on the soundtrack, the ideological message of *Svetlyi put'* becomes crystal clear. The fantastical techniques of the "wandering mask" have reconfigured the movie camera into a wandering advertiser, reiterating its subservience to dominant ideology and its role as propagator. As the pathos of a fairy tale come to life takes over the film, the laughter that was front and center when Tania was a peasant and a servant fades from the screen.

Laughter II: The Absence

Life has become better, comrades. Life has become merrier.

—Iosif Stalin

In the beginning Tania was funny. Her Chaplinesque pluck and mechanized motions, perfectly coordinated yet ideologically aimless (and therefore wasteful), drew easy laughter. After her ecstatic rebirth as a shockworker, however, a single recurring gag, always much too brief for true comic relief, is all that is left to laugh about. Henri Bergson articulates the necessary linkage between laughing potential of a mechanical action and consciousness that is at play here: "A comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious."[48] If Tania the peasant is funny because of the unthinking mechanicity of her actions, her actual encounter with heavy machinery in the Soviet textile industry never leads to laughter, she never follows Chaplin's lead to extract the comedic potential of the machine. Consequently the film's only remaining gag no longer has Orlova as its comic star. Instead, this gag is performed by Vladimir Volodin, another staple of Aleksandrov's troupe, who plays Tania's indefatigable but unlucky would-be suitor Taldykin. His act is pure slapstick, but within the restricted economy of a highly motivated narrative, it too proves to be malleable and becomes subjugated to storytelling, driven by a desire for meaning, and no longer anarchic.[49] Likewise, the sexual corporeality that defines Volodin's act in early scenes diminishes as the film progresses, removing the laughter elicited by sexualized slapstick. This absence of comedy did not go unnoticed. Most reviews, although avowedly adjectival, never ran with the adjective "funny" or any of its permutations, substituting instead such approximations as "happy," "joyous," or "life-affirming"—but never sidesplittingly funny.

47. Z. Grigor'ev, *Vecherniaia Moskva,* 7 October 1940.
48. Bergson, *Laughter.* Bergson's theories had a wide circulation in Russia at the time.
49. On comedic films as restricted economies, see Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany, 2007).

Theories of the comic—as plentiful as they are serious—range in their understandings of the experience. The comic has alternately been seen as incongruence, as a moral dimension involving emotive states of envy, superiority, or affirmation, as a separate liminal space that operates with different (often subversive) rules, and even as redemptive. More often than not, laughter is seen as either subversive, conversely acquiescent, or—ambiguously and paradoxically—both, most notably in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.[50] Either/or laughter is encountered through the tinted lense of politics.[51] Aleksandrov's autobiography is a case in point, for, in the course of recounting a formative experience in his making as a comedic director, he hails the potency of laughter as socially subversive ferment: "I was amazed that the most powerful person I knew at that time was so destroyed by laughter that he became frightened, pitiful, powerless."[52]

Laughter is a prominent subject throughout Aleksandrov's autobiography. Buttressed by ample citations of hallowed literary and moral authorities (that is, Nikolai Gogol′ and Aleksandr Herzen), Aleksandrov's discussion of laughter ultimately provides a discursive framework to retrospectively position his interest in comedy as a persistent and foundational life motif.

Why, then, was laughter drained from the film? Satire would have been an obvious vehicle for socially oriented laughter, but it was also dangerous. Aleksandrov had risked the demanding balancing act in his previous feature film *Volga, Volga* (1938), and portrayed the bureaucrat Byvalov with satirical bite, but perhaps he deemed the tactic too untenable for a film on Stakhanovism.[53] Evgeny Dobrenko, for example, analyzed this kind of satire as appropriation, the staging of comedy by a threateningly merry state to enforce the degradation of laughter.[54]

Lexicographically speaking, merriment replaced laughter in Soviet official discourse during the 1930s. Tied in an originary hermeneutic knot

50. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul′tura srednevekov′ia i Renessansa* (Moscow, 1965).

51. Locally and historically, medieval Russia had developed two interconnected traditions of laughter: holy fools (*iurodivye*), inherited from Eastern Orthodoxy, whose performance of folly was seen as prophetic and wise, and the satirical folly of *kromeshnye prazdnestva* (dark celebrations), a type of ritualistically staged courtly laughter that was popular with Ivan the Terrible. For the Russian tradition of laughter and its political aspects, see Iu. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii, "Novye aspekty izucheniia kul′tury Drevnei Rusi," *Voprosy literatury,* no. 3 (1977): 148–67; D. S. Likhachev, A. M. Panchenko, and N. V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi* (Leningrad, 1984).

52. Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino,* 189.

53. Two points need to be made here. The first is that changes in the script of *Svetlyi put′* seem to bear out this supposition—evidently the subject matter demanded a more socially aware treatment. RGALI, f. 2450, op. 2, d. 1295. Second, Stalin, who adored *Volga, Volga* and its bureaucratic fall guy (even making jokes about their resemblance), allegedly found *Svetlyi put′* to be lacking in bite, commenting to its director that "we value your courage, but in this picture you aimed to please us. You wanted to please the boss." Mark Kushnirov, *Sveltyi put′ ili Charli i Spenser* (Moscow, 1998), 195.

54. Evgeny Dobrenko, "Soviet Comedy Film: or, the Carnival of Authority," *Discourse* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 48–57; and Dobrenko, "Gossmekh, ili Mezhdu rekoi i noch′iu," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski,* no. 19 (1992): 39–45.

with labor, merriment as a popular Soviet concept was launched in Stalin's 1935 speech in praise of Stakhanovism, which was instantaneously printed on *Pravda*'s masthead and disseminated broadly.[55] Merriment was recast as a politically mandated necessity, hence its pro forma presence in every newspaper review of *Svetlyi put'*, whereas laughter is nowhere to be seen and, even as a physiological phenomenon, failed to merit its own entry in the first edition of *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, published throughout the 1930s.

This nexus of politics, utopia, and laughter—so central for *Svetlyi put'*—leads to equivocality. Some philosophical traditions claim that laughter is not altogether useless in utopia; Thomas More, Fourier, and Karl Marx all produced visions that did not exclude it.[56] An opposing camp, however, has long hypothesized that utopia would render laughter redundant, aimless, and jobless. William Hazlitt, for example, posited that a humanity that has outgrown all injustice and inequality will have consequently outgrown the need for laughter: "[Comedy] . . . by constantly and successfully exposing the follies or weaknesses of mankind to ridicule, in the end leaves nothing worth laughing at."[57]

Perhaps the best way to think through the gradual expulsion of laughter in *Svetlyi put'*, however, is as an effective conceptual counterpoint to the evolution of its protagonist. The narrative of the film, which tracks the personal and professional growth of a positive hero, perfectly exemplifies the socialist realist master plot. In her analysis of the structure of this master plot, Clark identified the dialectic of "Spontaneity" and "Consciousness" as the fundamental force behind the Leninist version of historic progress: "'Consciousness' is taken to mean actions that are controlled, disciplined, and guided by politically aware bodies. 'Spontaneity,' on the other hand, means actions that are . . . sporadic, uncoordinated, even anarchic. . . . The ultimate stage . . . communism, is reached in a final synthesis . . . or ultimate revolution [that] will result in the triumph of 'consciousness.'"[58] Tania's early domestic duties of potato peeling and milk heating are funny because their mechanization is spontaneous and unmotivated. As the film continues, her labor follows the totalizing progression of the master plot. As soon as it is channeled into the building of communism, her labor has to be reborn as creative and sublime. Laughter, which is, according

55. Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin: Soviet Public Culture from the Revolution to the Cold War* (Princeton, 2000), 89.

56. Thomas More, *Utopia,* at oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/more/utopia-contents.html (last accessed 15 March 2011). Marx famously connected laughter and revolution: "The people, so often as it joined them, saw on their hindquarters the old feudal coats of arms, and deserted with loud and irreverent laughter." Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York, 1978), 491. Fourier, meanwhile, thought that comic writers would provide yet more pleasure in his already pleasurable vision of a future society. Charles Fourier, *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts on Work, Love, and Passionate Attraction,* trans. and ed. Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu (Columbia, 1983).

57. William Hazlitt quoted in Jure Gantar, *The Pleasure of Fools: Essays in the Ethics of Laughter* (Montreal, 2005), 94.

58. Clark, *Soviet Novel,* 15–16.

to both Bergson and Clark, the provenance of "spontaneity," dwindles as Tania achieves full political "consciousness" as a disciplined member of communist society. If labor transforms the *animal laborans* into a human through the attainment of political agency, as Hannah Arendt has suggested, then Tania's rapturous and heroic Stakhanovite labors could certainly have propelled her onto an enlightened path.[59] As Tania sings "Look mama, it's Tan′ka, it's me / Not downtrodden, [but] industrious, famous" we see her moving out of her dormitory (styled to look like a cross between an Orthodox monastery and a fairy tale *teremok*) into a modern apartment. Perched atop a heap of new possessions, next to a strategically placed mirror reflecting the old Russian landscape behind (onion domes and wooden *izby*), Tania bids farewell to her—and, by extension, the all-Soviet—past. Her dejected comical suitor follows at a trot, stumbles, and falls into an open manhole cover—the last bit of slapstick in a film that from thereon might be radiant but hardly funny.

Sensory Overload

> The most complex and frustrating material for study turns out to be superficially the easiest and the simplest: the area of motivated art.
>
> —Iurii Tynianov

Still, if there was a dearth of laughter in *Svetlyi put′,* it is ultimately compensated for by an excess of other aspects. Material things, for example, clutter, multiply, and literally tumble over each other in a transparent advertisement for (the supposedly oxymoronic) Soviet conspicuous consumption. The advent of prosperity and abundance under prewar Stalinism is another theme that Aleksandrov cunningly inventories, not only through the profusion of material objects on screen, but also through a corresponding surplus of nonrepresentational cinematographic signs. In the phantasmagoric sequence when Tania follows her double into the mirror, the mirror is filmed lingeringly, its ornate frame glittering and its glassy surface shining. As the action takes place, and throughout the sequence, Aleksandrov retains these gilded carvings as a frame surrounding the shot. Additionally, he keeps Tania's double in the frame long after her narrative function has been made clear, emphasizing the alienation inherent in Tania's travels through *zazerkal′e* (the looking glass). In a later sequence at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, Aleksandrov again punctures the film's hard-earned realism by staging Tania's apotheosis as an engineer and a delegate to the All-Union Congress in an overtly theatrical setting: a model of the never-built Palace of the Soviets towers in the background, the backdrop recasts Roman architectural laurels in a visual hodgepodge of imperial attributes. Tania, positioned at the center of this phantasmagoric exhibition space, appears to be yet another of its curiosities (figure 9). Second, as she and her love interest walk past the

59. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958).

**Figure 9. Tania at the podium at the
All-Union Agricultural Exhibition.**

many fountains that adorn the exhibition's iteration of the spectacular
excesses of Peterhof (itself, of course, an iteration of Versailles) they ap-
pear outlined in black, silhouettes against the bright watery background,
mere projections against an elaborate illusion. Finally there is a curious
transition between shots. Aleksandrov uses neither a dissolve, nor a mon-
tage cut, but rather demarcates the screen, as if a sliding door were be-
ing opened. This incomplete taxonomy of an overwhelming visual density
calls relentless attention to its own artifice, seemingly at odds with the
markings of reality that Aleksandrov references throughout the film.

    This sensory overload, driven by a desire to re-present, or cinemato-
graphically render objects, spaces, and people, is similar to the operation
defined by Kristin Thompson as "cinematic excess." "Excess," here, indi-
cates "material [that] provides a perceptual play by inviting the spectator
to linger over devices longer than their structured function would seem
to warrant," implying "a gap or lag in motivation."[60] "Excess," I would ar-
gue, matters, because it disrupts the teleological socialist realist narrative
progression of *Svetlyi put',* undoing its implacable ideological motivation
with the richness of its cinematic perceptual field. Above all, excess draws
attention to the underlying codes that structure the film, to the physicality
of the film itself.

    Frames in particular are telling, and they proliferate in *Svetlyi put':*
Tania's image becomes a framed photograph, and her portrait is placed in
proximity to the omnipresent bust of Vladimir Lenin. Conspicuously pres-
ent even though the flight sequence is long and the viewer surely has un-
derstood that it happens in an alternate, fantastic space, the frame remains
on the screen, echoing its rectangular shape (figures 10, 11, and 12). A
frame decontextualizes what is placed within it, reiterating, in almost De-
leuzian terms, the cleavage between actuality and *virtuality* enacted by the
process of filmmaking.[61] The fixed frame, "screen door" effect, darkness

    60. Kristin Thompson, *Eisenstein's "Ivan the Terrible": A Neo-Formalist Analysis* (Prince-
ton, 1981), 292–93.
    61. For a discussion of the operation of cinematic framing, its procedures of selec-
tion and delimitation, see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis,
1986).

Figures 10, 11, and 12. The frame sequence.

of silhouette—not only do these elements of excess draw the attention of the viewer to themselves, but also to the fact that the events on the screen are not in some way true or natural but rather filmed. These elements demonstrate that they are a part of a film, mimicking (and making visible) the framing enacted by a camera, the splicing of stock, the adjustment of zooming and throwing out of focus. Similarly, Tania's podium for her All-Union speech is a loom that progressively spools out fabric, simulating the reel of film stock (figure 9). Elsewhere, a close-up of a swatch of fabric against a wooden female frame is accompanied by a conversation about insufficient smoke, referencing the process of filmmaking.[62] Tania and her love interest are prominently framed against the crowning sculpture of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, Vera Mukhina's monumental *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (1937), reminding the viewer of the Mosfil′m logo. The viewer, presented with shots where closed compositions dominate and framing devices (ranging from icicles to window lattices) are naturalized yet conspicuous, is constantly reminded of the presence of

62. The choice of Tania's profession, no matter how much motivated by Soviet reality (her character was based on Dusia Vinogradova, a real-life prizewinning Stakhanovite master weaver) contained a suggestive set of built-in fairy-tale connotations, connecting it not only to the idea of sexual initiation mentioned earlier but also, self-reflexively, to the act of telling a story (made explicit, for example, in the English expression "spinning a tale")—and, in this case, the making of a film. This metaphor is actualized by the many visual homologies that couple cinematographic procedure with the process of weaving.

the aperture. These are, like the frequent use of mirrors, and the devices of self-referential audio quotation, deeply self-reflexive.

A similar self-reflexivity can be gleaned from the flying car sequence where the Soviet landscape is visible through the vehicle itself, framed by its implied motion. Paul Virilio reads cinematic and vehicular motion as epistemic cognates: "To see the landscape pass by a train or automobile window or to look at a film . . . the way you look out of a window, [makes] . . . even the train or the cockpit becomes in their turn projection rooms."[63]

And indeed, speed and filmmaking are made one in *Svetlyi put'*, reified and reiterated in the production of its overall illusion. It is not just material objects that double and multiply in *Svetlyi put'*, then, it is representation that doubles in on itself as well. Combine that with the representational elasticity of Aleksandrov's trademark dissolve, so prominently displayed throughout the film, alerting the viewer to the expressed artifice as well as any cut would, and you have a film profoundly steeped in cinematic illusion-making. Accentuating not only the underlying formal elements of his film but also the codes of their cinematic production, Aleksandrov subtly bares the device, and thereby the spectacle he was supposed to naturalize. Similarly, Tania's utopian transfiguration by labor from the Tramp in a skirt, comical and amusing, to an embodiment of the Soviet dream (in a skirt) no longer at liberty to court mere hilarity, similarly accentuates the fissure between nominal and actual realities. Life might have become merrier, but comedy was no longer funny.

"We, contemporaries of the Five-Year Plans, see how people alter, how peasants, for example, change," Viktor Shklovskii wrote in his diary, stiffly bracketing human potential within the omnipresent grip of political motivation.[64] Change was a popular catchword, reverberating with the prerequisite merriment of Stalinist slogans, mandating that everyday life would be fit for a sublime comedy. Similarly viewing visual culture through the prism of ideology, most of the contemporary scholarly approaches to *Svetlyi put'* picked up on the film's blithe conformism.[65] Many have seen its excesses as merely unconscious parody, while others, notably Maria Enzensberger, have read them as part of a propaganda with a heart, "sufficiently rich in human content to be able to arouse the spectator's interest and empathy."[66] The reading I propose here diverges from this path. Indubi-

63. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (New York, 1991), 61.
64. Viktor Shklovskii, *Dnevnik* (Moscow, 1939), 119.
65. See, for example, Richard Taylor, "But Eastward, Look, the Land Is Brighter: Towards a Topography of Utopia in the Stalinist Musical," in Diana Holmes and Alison Smith, eds., *100 Years of European Cinema: Entertainment or Ideology?* (Manchester, Eng., 2000); Trudy Anderson, "Why Stalinist Musicals?" *Discourse* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 38–48; and John Haynes, *New Soviet Man: Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema* (Manchester, Eng., 2003). Finally, Emma Widdis reads *Svetlyi put'* geographically, as domestication and subjugation of periphery to the center. Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven, 2003).
66. Peter Kenez makes the parody assessment: see Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (New York, 2001). Maria Enzensberger, "'We

tably, *Svetlyi put'* is cinema that operates as a simultaneous generator and repository of socialist realism, the visual incarnation of its ideologemes and mythologemes. In that sense the content level of Aleksandrov's films of the 1930s presents a cautiously attuned cultural seismograph. Yet their form figures otherwise. Using cinematic excess, protracted imaginary sequences that last longer than the unifying narrative would demand, and self-referential and self-reflexive devices of mirroring and framing, Aleksandrov disrupts his ideologically correct narrative and foregrounds the artificiality of the events on the screen.

This ontological fabulism is supported by the film's obvious structural affinities with the fairy tale. I have already noted the appropriation of fairy tales by socialist realism, a view powerfully articulated by Clark, whose analysis of the prescriptive methodology of the socialist realist master plot, revealed its affinity with the morphology of the fairy tale.[67] But, as Clark herself was the first to argue, the status of fairy tales in Stalinist culture involved much more than merely providing affirmation. When formalists like Vladimir Propp turned to the fairy tale as an object of scholarly study in the increasingly oppressive late 1920s, it was precisely because its traditionalism afforded them a relatively safe haven for the pursuit of an analysis of form: "In the fairy tale, myth as dissociated from ritual becomes a form of protest against its own premises."[68] As Mark Lipovetsky has pointed out, the enthusiastic endorsement and active deployment of the fairy tale by Soviet authorities only made it safer, rendering it the perfect vehicle for covert criticism.[69]

Just as the perceived impregnability of the resurrected fairy tale created a site of potential alterity, the presupposed rigidity of revived genre-categorizations afforded film "comedies," shaped under their auspices, a certain degree of freedom. A degree, because a true socialist realist comedy governed by the prescriptive master plot proved to be elusive, leading to the grouping of ultimately melodramatic narratives with brief comedic interludes under its nominal rubric. If initially *Svetlyi put'* suggested that the comic operated through normalization of the mechanical, then by the end of the film a radically recontextualized perception emerges, postulating that laughter is no longer a requirement. The principal function of the comic appears to have been rewired. It is shifted from mechanized movements to unconstrained fantasies, displacing and redirecting emotive and fantasmatic investments. The evacuation of laughter in *Svetlyi put'* combined with the film's cinematic excess, indicates, then, that a larger

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Were Born to Turn a Fairy Tale into Reality': Grigori Alexandrov's *The Radiant Path*," in Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, eds., *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (London, 1993), 106. Enzensberger's analysis builds on Maiia Turovskaia's groundbreaking study of fairy-tale conventions in Ivan Pyr'ev's films: Maiia Turovskaia, "I. A. Pyr'ev i ego muzykal'nye komedii: K probleme zhanra," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski,* no. 1 (1988): 111–46.

    67. Clark, *Soviet Novel.*

    68. Vladimir Propp, *Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki* (Moscow, 2000), 61.

    69. Mark Lipovetsky, "Introduction," in Balina, Goscilo, and Lipovetsky, eds., *Politicizing Magic,* 240. The twentieth-century tradition of the fairy tale as a vessel for antitotalitarian content includes such authors as Evgenii Zamiatin and Evgenii Shvarts.

issue is at stake. Laughterless comedy begs the question whether laughter on film is at all possible under the conditions of high Stalinism.

Svetlyi put' as a laughterless comedy, I would suggest, performs the comedic structure in the strictly traditional, even archetypal way of emplotment: it moves toward an overtly happy ending, complete with the exposure of malevolent forces and the rewarding of perseverance.[70] It is a comedy in the sense that it ends with an image of paradise on earth. But as *Svetlyi put'* guides its heroine on her radiant path, staging the ultimate spectacle of socialist realism, laughter disappears and a gilded frame de/marks the illusion and the absence.

70. R. D. V. Glasgow, *The Comedy of Mind: Philosophers Stoned, or the Pursuit of Wisdom* (Lanham, Md., 1999), 129.

Mr. Twister in the Land of the Bolsheviks: Sketching Laughter in Marshak's Poem

Yuri Leving

Visual Narratives and the Soviet Art of Book Illustration

Samuil Marshak's poem *Mister Twister* (1933) is a biting satire about an evil American capitalist. After traveling to the Soviet Union merely to amuse his bored and spoiled daughter, Mister Twister is horrified to discover that the grand hotel where they intended to stay accepts people of color as guests, too, and that segregation is not practiced. The story, extolling the equality of all people in the Soviet Union, follows Mister Twister's fruitless search for a Leningrad hotel that upholds his values. The poem enjoyed immense popularity among generations of Soviet children and has been hailed as a successful socialist spoof of the popular travelogue genre. Most Russians can even recite its famous refrain by heart:

> Mister
> Twister
> Quondam
> Minister,
> Mister
> Twister,
> Millionaire,
> Banker and broker
> And newspaper king.[1]

After introducing a theoretical framework on the nature of visual perception, I will then place Marshak's poem within a historical context, surveying the changes in its numerous republications across three ideologically changing decades of Soviet literature. From the poem's initial publication in the satirical children's magazine *Ezh* (Hedgehog) to its very last edition, visual narratives were produced by the artist Vladimir Lebedev as, at first, an illustrative accompaniment to the poem and, later, as a dynamic counterpoint to Marshak's satire. I will end by tracing this illustrative history, demonstrating the power of visual representations in the production (rather than the mere depiction) of totalitarian humor.

The poet Samuil Marshak (1887–1964) and the artist Vladimir Lebedev (1891–1967) are quite famous for their collaborative co-dependency. Asked once to shed more light on the practical aspects of his creative alliance with the artist, Marshak answered: "When working with Lebedev, the initiative might come either from me or from him. . . . In *Tsirk* [Circus] and *My—voennye* [We Are Soldiers], I wrote the poems as inscriptions to

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1. For quotes from *Mister Twister* in this article, I use the translation by Sam Raphael Friedman that appeared in *Soviet Literature,* no. 1 (1948): 7–19, corrected against S. Marshak, *Mister Tvister* (Moscow, 1933). The translation was reprinted in the anthology compiled by James von Geldern and Richard Stites, eds., *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917–1953* (Bloomington, 1995), 201–11. Whenever Friedman's rhythmic translation differs from the original significantly, I have taken the liberty of amending the text.

Lebedev's drawings. In *Bagazh* [Baggage], *Skazka o glupom myshonke* [Tale of a Stupid Little Mouse], *Mister Tvister, Kruglyi god* [The Whole Year Round], *Raznotsvetnaia kniga* [Multicolored Book], and *Tikhaia skazka* [Quiet Tale], the verses came before the drawings."[2] Given the nature of their creative collaboration, I will, therefore, need to trace the evolution of not one but two narratives and two artistic strategies—Marshak's and Lebedev's. The visual shifts and readjustments in Lebedev's drawings were, in some respect, a response to Marshak's endless rewriting and re-editing of the poem. Marshak's own creative flux may ultimately be seen as a peculiar form of dialogical imagination, in which he attempted to respond to the ever-changing demands and concerns of the state. This form should not be confused with Bakhtinian dialogism, for it is far grimer and more pragmatic. It does, however, share a similar quality—both Marshak and Lebedev created their art with "answerability" to the interpellations of the state.

Wherever an image is used for communication, particularly in book illustrations, we must assess how an audience would determine its communicative intention by studying the visual consistencies and tropes that aid interpretation and illusion.[3] Soviet illustrators engaged in a process of playful transformation by using stereotypes and recognizable symbols in different and unexpected contexts. Marcel Proust might have been the first European to fully understand the unspoken bond between images and ideas, but Soviet book illustrators were certainly able to employ it, communicating, in their drawings for young readers, subtle aspects of the ideology as sanctioned by the authorities and formulated by cultural emissaries.[4] In 1931, Anatolii Lunacharskii himself admitted that the art of children's book illustration in the Soviet Union was not only ahead of its European counterparts but also ahead of the works of the socialist writers they were illustrating.[5] Even Marina Tsvetaeva, residing then in Prague, praised the art of the Soviet illustration in an essay from the same year.[6]

Socialist realism was a faith that did not tolerate sacrilege, a kind of hyper-idealism with larger than life proportions. It was straightforward, leaving little space for second-guessing and absolutely none for irony.[7]

2. Letter to V. S. Matafonov, dated 7 May 1963 in Samuil Marshak, *Sobranie sochinenii v vosmi tomakh* (Moscow, 1972), 8:471–72.

3. Cf.: "We need think of nothing more solemn than the average comic strip, which presents quite a number of difficulties to those not familiar with its conventions. The public learns to know the recurrent characters and to recognize them at the merest hint. We are likewise trained by the poster artists to take in and assimilate the most baffling images." E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Washington, D.C., 1960), 234.

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has discussed the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible armature, which it manifests, and the interior armature, which it conceals. He claims that no one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, 1968), 149.

5. Anatolii Lunacharskii, *Detskaia literatura: Kriticheskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1931), 6.

6. Marina Tsvetaeva, "O novoi russkoi knige," *Volia Rossii,* nos. 5–6 (Prague, 1931). Quoted in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1994), 5:326.

7. S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy: Art That Offends* (London, 2006), 156.

During the Khrushchev thaw, nonconformist artists began to respond with irony to the stifling literalness of socialist realism, questioning the validity of official representations and distancing themselves from the system as a whole.

I contend, however, that the seeds of this subversive activity can be discerned among the seemingly loyal artists of an earlier period. This is a challenging claim, especially considering that in the state-controlled book market, children's books accompanied by proper illustrations were intended to shape and influence a mass audience according to the aesthetic and social standards set by Bolshevik propaganda.[8] For these early socialist artists, high art and low art were often no longer separate. The transformations of imagery during the Stalinist era were, therefore, akin to what western visual culture faced later, when it became susceptible to an all-pervading and undiscerning consumerism.[9] Satire, the obvious vehicle for laughing at society and culture, was dangerous. As Anna Wexler Katsnelson demonstrates in her analysis of Grigorii Aleksandrov's popular film comedies of the 1930s in this issue, products of mass circulation often demanded risky balancing acts. Commenting on the disappearance of laughter from 1930s Stalinist comedy, Katsnelson reexamines Alexandrov's prototypically socialist realist film in light of its somewhat ambiguous form.

In this article, I will use Marshak's *Mister Twister* as a similarly paradigmatic case, one that highlights Soviet tactics for shaping young readers' visual perception and exemplifies the business structure of Soviet children's publishing. In particular, I will expose Marshak's sensitive self-censoring mechanisms and Lebedev's inherently ambiguous illustrative conceptions. These aspects, not unlike those in Katsnelson's analysis, reveal the complex intervisual relationship between content and form, or—in this case—text and illustration.

Mister Twister as a Travelogue

In his article, "O bol′shoi literature dlia malen′kikh" (1933), Marshak heralded satire and humor as important educating tools in the emerging genre of Soviet literature for children (even citing François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as a possible model for emulation) and cautiously called for an expansion of the limits of what was considered acceptable at the time.[10] With Twister, Marshak was able to strike a care-

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8. See also a relevant discussion of the design of children's books in Evgenii Shteiner, *Avangard i postroenie novogo cheloveka: Iskusstvo detskoi knigi 1920-kh godov* (Moscow, 2002), 22–25.

9. Cf. "Visual culture is predicated on the assumption that contemporary culture has already mixed the elite and the popular, the fine and the vulgar, modernism and kitsch, to the point where it is no longer sensible to treat them separately. In this view, high and low art are names of different discourses, but they are sufficiently impure, mutually dependent, or susceptible to commodification that they can be treated using the same general methodologies." James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York, 2003), 50.

10. Samuil Marshak, "O bol′shoi literature dlia malen′kikh" (1933), *Sobranie sochinenii,* 7:300.

ful balance between the comic and the ideological: despite his obviously satirical portrayal, Marshak's protagonist often seems more sympathetic than malignant. The fact, however, that Marshak went through eight versions of the poem (manuscripts from different years have survived in the Marshak collection at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg) suggests that his continuing work on the manuscript was difficult, if not painful. Over the years, Marshak tried to adapt his poem several times to match the shifting official climates. This process resulted in a series of curious metamorphoses, all of which highlight the dangerous relationship between mechanisms of oppression, self-censorship, and laughter under state socialism.

Marshak's poem was first published in the fifth issue of *Ezh* in 1933, accompanied by Lebedev's illustrations. The same year saw the first separate book edition of *Mister Twister,* which would later be reprinted (during Marshak's lifetime) in 1935, 1937, 1948, 1951, and 1962. Throughout these various editions, Marshak changed the names of Leningrad streets and hotels, added new episodes, and "cleansed" his coarse phrases. Rewriting an already published text was not unusual in Marshak's creative process, and in a 1961 letter to D. Balashov, he explained the specific political and ideological reasons behind it:

> In the early 1930s, when this book came out, it was very difficult to publish it. Only thanks to Gor′kii's interference was I able to do it. Though the book was antiracist, its appearance was considered inappropriate. There were impediments as well every time it was reprinted. The editorial boards convinced me that foreign tourists would stop visiting us if a few porters could boycott Mister Twister. I remember that I was quite reluctant to undertake the process of making changes, but it was difficult to argue then, while the book seemed necessary and timely to me. Nevertheless, its main idea was retained.

Other changes were stylistic in nature and resulted from moralizing pressures, as Marshak describes in the same letter:

> You are right: "Breathing with gas to pedestrians' mugs" was better than "to pedestrians' faces." It was better suited both semantically and phonetically. However, I had to give in to the pseudo-pedagogical concerns of those who were afraid of "coarse language" in books for children. . . .
> On the whole I do not yield easily. But children's books were so strictly controlled that one couldn't always have it one's own way—especially with respect to details.[11]

Mister Twister is a typical travelogue in that it presents a satire on contemporary life through stories involving travel and adventure. Many travelogues take the form of satiric tales about visits to strange lands and other worlds. The most famous of these written in English is *Gulliver's Travels.* A satirical picture of *our* world, however, which describes only human beings, must, according to Gilbert Highet's formula, "pretend to be a photograph, and in fact be a caricature. It must display their more ridiculous and repellent qualities in full flower, minimize their ability for healthy

11. Letter to D. Balashov from 1961 in Marshak, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 8:461.

normal living, mock their virtues and exaggerate their vices."[12] Some of these satires could be called "inverted travelogues." In these, the writer presents himself as a visiting foreigner from far away who observes and describes the local customs with a humorous amazement, tempered by disgust.[13] This is almost the form of travelogue that Marshak employs in his poem about the American tourist who comes from a world that is absolutely unknown to the Soviet reader.[14]

The late Stalin regime nourished ignorance about foreign countries in order to advance its own xenophobic interpretation of history that cast the bourgeois west as the enemy. Soviet caricaturists were often given the task of providing bold visual representations to fit this exaggerated enemy. Boris Efimov's cartoons, for example, consistently ridicule westernizing enemies from both the outside (Nazis, Americans, Zionists) and the inside (Trotskyites and saboteurs).[15] Anne Gorsuch has noted that the creation of enemies was only one part of the proposed solution to the foreign policy and domestic challenges of the postwar period.[16] The regime also demanded a corresponding heightening of "Sovietness" among its loyals. Domestic tourism, one logical response to this demand, was intended to produce physically and ideologically healthy Soviet citizens. Leningrad, in particular, was praised in Soviet patriotic education and showcased for foreign tourists. During the Soviet period, tourism was generally regulated by a centralized office. Intourist, established in the 1920s, was the organization in charge of foreign tourism. The rates of foreign tourism remained relatively low in comparison to extensive domestic travel, but, as Auvo Kostiainen has pointed out, its role was immensely important. Kostiainen attributes its importance to two main factors: first, that foreign tourists brought western currency into the country, and second, that tourists and travelers were seen as vessels to convey positive images and experiences of the Soviet Union back to their respective foreign nations.[17] It was,

12. Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, 1962), 190.

13. Ibid., 205. As a reviewer of an earlier version of this article noted, "the travel narrative undergoes a double inversion: the foreigner comes to see us, to tour, so that we learn about the foreigner. It is sadly appropriate that this brilliant Soviet travelogue is one in which the Soviets all stay home: a journey by stationary bike," thus evoking the classic distinction between second-world foreign language textbooks and American ones, "the standard American textbook scenario has Americans arriving in a new land to learn a new language. In Soviet textbooks, the native speakers come to us."

14. See Anne E. Gorsuch, "'There's No Place Like Home': Soviet Tourism in Late Stalinism," *Slavic Review* 62, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 760–61.

15. As Stephen Norris claims, Efimov's prodigious output proves that "laughter is a sharp weapon and a powerful medicine," moreover these sharp weapons "created a visual basis for belonging to the socialist experiment. . . . Soviet cartoons gave citizens a chance to reflect on the meanings of the socialist experiment and individual complicity in building the Soviet state." See Stephen Norris, "'Laughter Is a Very Sharp Weapon': Boris Efimov and Soviet Visual Humor" (paper presented at the "Interdisciplinary Conference on Totalitarian Laughter: Cultures of the Comic under Socialism," Princeton University, 15–17 May 2009).

16. Gorsuch, "'There's No Place Like Home,'" 761.

17. Auvo Kostiainen, "The Lure of Travel Guidebooks: The Case of Leningrad and St. Petersburg," in Matti Luukkainen and Riitta Pyykkö, eds., *Zur Rolle der Sprache im Wandel der Gesellschaft* (Helsiniki, 2002), 141.

therefore, important to present the "right picture" of the Soviet Union to these tourists, to properly imbue them with propaganda. To this end, Intourist took control of the movement of foreigners and, as the abundant evidence suggests, designed specialized itineraries and orders to cater to their expectations and tastes. In Marshak's poem, Mister Twister's daughter, Suzie, represents precisely this kind of client, who imagines that the USSR will look the way it does in propagandizing comic strips. Asked by her father why she would like to travel to Russia, Susie Twister exclaims:

> "I want something different:
> Fresh caviar
> And shchi,
> And loll
> In the shade
> Of a cranberry tree."

This exaggerated strophe was not added until the 1951 edition, where it was accompanied by an equivalent increase in Mister Twister's expansionism and expectations of luxury. In the 1948 edition, Twister had still merely "rung" the telephone at Cook's travel agency (instead of causing it to bang deafeningly, as he would in the ensuing versions) and requested only one cabin:

> Anon
> Rings the phone
> At Cook's:
> "M'lad!
> Reserve
> A double stateroom:
> New York—
> Leningrad.
> With a bath
> And a pool,
> And a garden,
> Begad!"

In later editions, the number of cabins was doubled, then grew to three and, finally, to four in the final redaction of the text.

Twister's arrival in Leningrad follows the standardized itinerary designed for foreign tourists in the USSR, which wove historical and architectural landmarks into an ideologically sensible and politically loyal narrative. An Intourist brochure from that period describes an entrance into the socialist world as follows: "From all parts of the world, via the Baltic Sea and the Finnish Bay, ships are heading towards the Neva river mouth. Here is Leningrad, the largest port of the USSR and its city second in size."[18] Twister is also greeted with the noise of the Leningrad port as he sees the factory smokestacks:

> The hustle,
> The bustle

18. L. A. Block, ed., *A Pocket Guide to the Soviet Union* (Moscow, [1932]), 1.

> Of Leningrad nears.
> Off to the starboard
> The skyline appears.
> On steely gray water
> Ride boats
> By the score,
> And workshops unending
> Extend from the shore.

The British author of a 1933 guide to Russia also recommended entering the Soviet Union by boat.[19] Once in town, the same author advised, "Your usual means of transport to the hotel will be an Intourist motor-car, probably a Lincoln. This must be paid for in foreign currency, but if your trip is an inclusive one this item is already covered. . . . The horse-carriages are extremely expensive; taxis are cheap but rarely to be found."[20]

Marshak's poetic account adheres to every documentary detail, even in respect to the model of Twister's transport car. Describing the car's hood ornament, a miniature silver Greyhound—the signature trademark of the Lincoln—Marshak writes:

> Then,
> With a glance
> At a golden-tipped spire
> They turn
> To their auto
> And test every tire.
> The ladies
> Are seated,
> The luggage
> is stowed,
> The car with a rush
> Roars off down the road—
> The driver
> In front,
> Where a driver should be,
> Old Twister
> In back,
> With a bag on his knee;
> His spouse
> At his left,
> Her umbrella clutched tight,
> The monkey

19. "You will be chiefly interested, probably, in the line which takes you from the heart of London to the heart of Leningrad in four and a half days . . . there is no pleasanter and more desirable approach to the Soviet Union than this water route. In an environment half Russian, half European, you receive a gradual transition rather than an abrupt shock in your transfer from one civilization to another. Furthermore, you are sure to encounter a certain number of fellow-travelers who have been before—contacts from which you will begin to form notions which will enable you to see and judge Russia intelligently. . . . In Leningrad the boat comes past Cronstadt and up the Neva, not far from the centre of Leningrad." Lars Moën, *Are You Going to Russia?* (London, [1934]), 64.
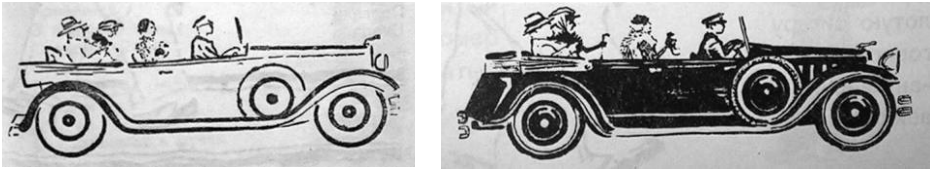
20. Ibid., 74.

Figure 1. Illustrations from the 1933 and 1937 editions.

Figure 2. Lincoln Grey-hound, 1931. National Automobile Museum, Reno, Nevada. Photograph by Jim Galli (2009).

Figure 3. Illustration from the 1962 edition.

> And Suzie
> Squeezed in at his right.
> They listen
> to wheels
> wrapped tightly in rubber
> And watch
> the silver hound
> upon the hood's cover.

Lebedev demonstrates the same attention to documentary detail and carefully reproduces a contemporary Lincoln in his 1933–1937 illustrations (figure 1). Compare this with a close-up of the 1931 Lincoln Greyhound hood ornament (figure 2). Later, Lebedev upgraded the vehicle—giving it the more stylish, sleek design of the late 1950s—and made sure to keep the ornament in the front (figure 3).

Evolution of Mister Twister's Image

The protagonist's name underwent a number of changes before Marshak finally settled on "Twister." According to the surviving manuscripts, Marshak considered the names Blister, Prister, and even Mr. York and Mr. Pork.[21] His ultimate choice, Twister, has been read as an incomplete anagram of the word *western* (= Twes<t>er) denoting some sort of arche-

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21. Otdel rukopisei, Rossiiskaia natsional'naia biblioteka, St. Petersburg, S. Marshak's Collection, f. 469, op. 1, ed. khr. 2 (1933), 48 pp.
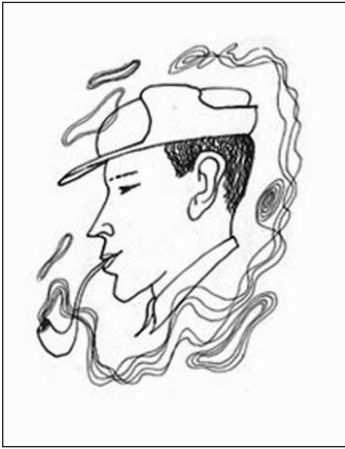
Figure 4. Daniil Kharms, *Self-portrait with pipe* **(1930s).**

Figure 5. Maiakovskii in New York, 1925. Photograph by A. Alland (fragment).

typal bourgeois. Another potential source, however, comes from Valerii Shubinskii's recent biography of Daniil Kharms. Kharms loved to dress as an Englishman and was known under the nickname "Mister Twister" in one of the billiard clubs that he frequented in Leningrad during the early 1930s (figure 4).[22] Another possible prototype for Marshak's Twister may have been Vladimir Maiakovskii and his poetry, which included the anti-racist "Black and White," "The Brooklyn Bridge," and "Broadway," each inspired by his journey to the United States in 1925 (figure 5).

In the revisions over the years, the characterization of Mister Twister became less and less attractive and was particularly repulsive at the dawn of the Cold War (figures 6–10). This, perhaps, is an example of the phenomenon articulated by Sigmund Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious:* "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter."[23]

In the 1948 theatrical adaptation of *Mister Twister,* Marshak inserted a scene in which the protagonist chases after his runaway monkey:

> In my childhood I could climb up deftly,
> But now I need practice.
> Since I got into Congress,
> I have put on twice as much weight! . . .
> (*He is trying to climb the fence but is falling off*)
> No, I can't! . . . I'm no boy.
> I am short of breath![24]

22. Valerii Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms: Zhizn′ cheloveka na vetru* (St. Petersburg, 2008), 345.

23. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 8, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (London, 1905), 102–3.

24. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva, f. 656, op. 5, ed. khr. 5181, manuscript, p. 9.
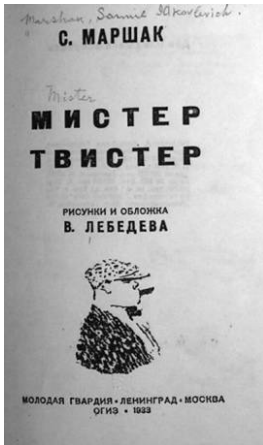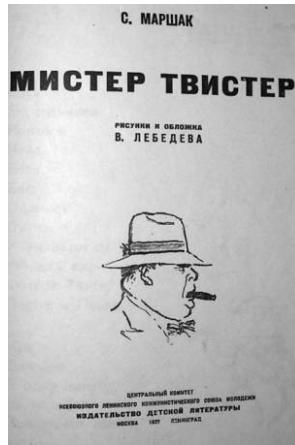
Figure 6. *Mister Twister* (1933).

Figure 7. *Mister Twister* (1937).

Figure 8. *Mister Twister* (1948).

Figure 9. *Mister Twister* (1951).

Figure 10. *Mister Twister* (1962).

These antics clearly incite the kind of laughter defined by Henri Bergson: "We laugh if our attention is diverted to the physical in a person when it is the moral that is in question."[25] But in this passage, Marshak also adds a critical detail to the character of Twister: the fact that he is an American congressman, a detail that hints at the corrupt bond between the wealthy and the legislature in the United States. Comic laughter can indeed be used as a social weapon in irony and satire, but only when it follows the comic intuition of the dominant social order that gives human life its

25. Henry Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London, 1911), 115.

context and meaning.[26] There must, in other words, be a commonality in social context between the satirist and his or her audience. A satirical attack on, say, the intricacies of American politics would be incomprehensible to an audience of foreigners who did not understand the system. An equivalent commonality in belief, however, is not necessary; the audience can laugh without agreeing with the satirist from the onset. Satire, in this regard, can be educational: it may be only as a result of the satirist's humor that the audience comes to understand why the object of satire was so objectionable.[27] Some critics have taken this claim even further, asserting that "humour is aggressive and it is always aggressive. There is no such thing as an innocent and non-aggressive joke."[28] Totalitarian humor, at least, proves this to be the case.

Bergson claimed that comedy is based on something he called a *mechanical inelasticity*.[29] Mister Twister and his family constantly produce samples of such awkward behavior:

> Past mirrors,
> Round corners,
> With slow measured pace,
> They marched on
> And onward—
> Like snails in a race.
> In front
> Strode the porter
> In gold-braided gear,
> Behind him
> Came Twister,
> "A flea in his ear,"
> Behind him
> His spouse
> Looking quite comme il faut,
> Behind her
> The maiden,
> The monkey in tow
> Then grabbing
> His Suzie
> And monkey
> And all,
> And followed by Mrs.,
> He danced down the hall.

26. Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York, 1997), 33.

27. Ibid., 158.

28. George Mikes, *Humour in Memoriam* (London, 1970), 20.

29. One of his examples is a man running along the street who stumbles and falls; the people who see him fall burst out laughing. Bergson explains that they laugh because the man's action is involuntary. The man could have altered his movements to avoid the fall, but "through lack of elasticity . . . *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum,* the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else." Bergson contends that this "inelasticity" is the reason for both the fall and the laughter which follows. Bergson, *Laughter,* 66. Emphasis in the original.

With a skip
And a hop,
Like a prancing bear,
Upsetting
The calm
Of Hotel
Angleterre.

More broadly, however, comedy can arise when characters "stumble" into unexpected circumstances that assault the norm of their existence and to which they respond with humorous "inelasticity."[30] The inelasticity of Mister Twister's perception becomes increasingly apparent (and absurd) as the gap between his "capitalist" notions and the socialist "reality" widens:

"Again,"
Whispered Suzie,
"Go automobiling?
I won't!"
She wailed.
"It's a wild-goose chase.
If we can't
Get a suite here,
Then buy out the place!"
"With pleasure,"
Said Twister,
And dolefully sighed,
"Or a house on the Neva!
With pleasure!"
He cried.
"But, darling,
Remember,
You're not in Chicago
Or even,"
He added,
"In old Santiago.
In Leningrad
People
Just simply don't sell—
You can't buy a house,
Let alone
A hotel!"

A verbal joke is a complicated construction. Some psychologists suggest that children, when learning jokes, may only respond to one compo-

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30. This kind of comedy is often associated with magical realism. Mary Hartje, however, finds another example of this situation in Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*. The protagonist, K., literally stumbles into the absurd reality of his "arrest" by a group of strangers. For the duration of the novel, he is unable to alter his own involvement in the meaningless situation leading to his trial. In addition, his "inelasticity," his inability to recognize the absurdity of his plight, makes him a laughable figure to the reader. See Mary Ellen Hartje, "Magic Realism: Humor across Cultures," in Graeme Harper, ed., *Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism* (New York, 2002), 114.

nent and not to the others. Jokes, it turns out, often contain both blatantly comic features (such as the description of outlandish behavior), which children readily enjoy, and more subtle ones (word play, logical errors, cultural allusions), which they might miss.[31] In Marshak's poem, for instance, attentive readers will find a number of intertextual linkages that would have transcended the cultural frame of reference for Soviet children. Among these, Ivan Bunin's short story "Gospodin iz San-Frantsisko" (The Gentleman from San Francisco, 1915) is particularly noteworthy. Mikhail Gasparov once called Bunin "[Marshak's] Master of the Word"; Marshak himself admitted that he was significantly influenced by Bunin and Aleksandr Blok.[32] The racist gentleman from San Francisco also travels to Europe on a boat accompanied by his wife and daughter. Two particular motifs—of a smoking Negro and the mirror reflections—have been amalgamated in the image of a black man in the Soviet hotel in Marshak's poem. Similarly, both millionaires are ultimately denied rooms in the luxury hotels once they prove to be dysfunctional in the rigid reality they involuntarily confront.

Another literary influence is Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov's 1931 novel, *Zolotoi telenok* (The Golden Calf), which also recounts an incident with a rich traveler in a hotel. When Ostap Bender arrives at the "Grand Hotel" in Leningrad, the porter turns him away. Even though Bender has a million rubles in cash and is ready to pay any amount requested, the Grand Hotel (like the real "Astoria" in July 1930) has been reserved for the convention of soil scientists. Whereas Il'f and Petrov's satire exposes the absurdity of totalitarian logic, Marshak packages his satire (which features a similar case of ideological dismissal from a hotel) as a capitalist critique. Under oppressive regimes, jokes replace the press, public debate, and even private discussion. These jokes, according to George Mikes, are actually more effective "because a serious debate admits two sides, two views; a serious debate puts arguments, which might be considered, turned round, rejected. The joke is a flash of lightning, a thrust with a rapier."[33]

Imagery for Children: How to Balance Concise and Precise

Catriona Kelly has documented that, even in the 1920s, the politically active child—more interested in the world of work than the world of fantasy—although dominant, was not the only endorsed model for youth. During the period of the New Economic Policy (1921–1928), a number of private presses, notably Raduga (Rainbow) of Leningrad, fostered something of a countertradition in children's literature. The works published by these private presses usually had higher production values than those from the state houses and were often more consistent with prerevolutionary writing practices. Additionally, these books often featured alternative

31. Martha Wolfenstein, *Children's Humor: A Psychological Analysis* (Glencoe, Ill., 1954), 196.

32. Mikhail Gasparov, *O russkoi poezii: Analizy, interpretatsii, kharakteristiki* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 414.

33. Mikes, *Humour in Memoriam,* 98.

young protagonists who expressed views at odds with the rationalistic teleology of socialization.[34]

The Children's Literature Section of the State Publishing House (Gosizdat), set up in 1924 and directed by Samuil Marshak, was "an especially important haven for imaginative work, both verbal and visual."[35] The writers who worked there included two members of the absurdist OBERIU group—the poets Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedenskii—as well as the renowned Nikolai Oleinikov, Nikolai Zabolotskii, Osip Mandel′shtam, and the dramatist Evgenii Shvarts. The artists included P. Sokolov, a pupil of Kuz′ma Petrov-Vodkin, Sergei Makletsov, and, of course, Lebedev. Journals produced by the house—particularly *Ezh* and *Chizh* (Siskin), founded in 1928 and 1930, respectively—adhered to high standards, both aesthetic and technical, despite political pressure (although this did not last long: most of the OBERIU contributors to *Ezh* were later arrested). Even the explicitly political texts produced by the house were thoroughly concerned with the need to appeal to the imaginations of children.[36]

Soviet iconography used to depict the western capitalist was largely defined by the political caricatures of Efimov and the Kukryniksy. In 1932, Mezhrabpomfilm released a short animated cartoon entitled *Blek end Uait* (Black and White), based on Maiakovskii's poem of the same name and directed by Leonid Amal′rik and Ivan Ivanov-Vano. The film dealt provocatively with contemporary issues of race and contained a number of loaded stereotypical images (a grotesque white plantation owner with an exaggeratedly large cigar, a black shoeshine boy, a car on a road lined with palm trees, among others; see figures 11–14).

Marshak's poem, produced in this context, was hugely popular, and continued, even after his death, to inspire adaptations—from puppet shows and animated films to a television movie. These adaptations, as well as the drawings made for the poem after Lebedev's death, which tended to imitate the original artist's canonical illustrations, are beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the original collaboration between writer and artist.

Miron Petrovskii wrote of Marshak and Vladimir Konashevich, another of Marshak's illustrators, that their art "does not separate like water and sunflower oil, but instead forms an organic whole that becomes a *book,* the collective creation of two masters. Marshak was really extraordinarily lucky in this regard—the artists working on his books were not simply 'maintenance staff,' but coauthors."[37] Marshak himself emphasized this point in regard to Lebedev: "V. V. Lebedev was never an illustrator or a decorator of books. Along with the writer—of verse or of prose—he can rightfully and justifiably be considered an author: he puts that much uniqueness, subtle observation, and confident craftsmanship into each

34. Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia, 1890–1991* (New Haven, 2007), 81, 82.

35. Ibid., 88.

36. Ibid.

37. Miron Petrovskii, "Samuil Marshak: Vot kakoi rasseiannyi. Strannyi geroi s Basseinoi ulitsy," *Knigi nashego detstva* (St. Petersburg, 2006), 210. Emphasis in the original.

Figures 11–14. Screenshots from *Black and White* (1932).

book."[38] Lebedev was quite popular among writers; his drawings never diverged from their texts in detail or overall essence, and, more important, had an internal rhythm that fit both verse and prose.[39]

In the meeting of children's book illustrators at the 1936 assembly of the Komsomol Central Committee, Lebedev publicly expressed his belief that "drawings must be concise."[40] In journals of the 1920s, such as *Smekhach* (Laughter), *Buzoter* (Brawler), *Bich* (Scourge), and *Begemot* (Hippopotamus), Lebedev's drawings were typically printed on full pages. In this way, his concise images took on an almost monumental expressiveness, akin to the art of a poster. In these works, storytelling occurred only in the form of a brief caption; editorial staff members specialized in coming up with these satirical captions, which usually consisted of an imagined conversation between the characters depicted. As Iurii Gerchuk

38. As quoted in V. Glotser, *Khudozhniki detskoi knigi o sebe i svoem iskusstve: Stat'i, rasskazy, zametki, vystupleniia* (Moscow, 1987), 131.

39. Marshak's technique for working with his illustrators may be seen in the memoirs of M. Miturich (dated to some time after the 1950s): "He made almost no specific comments. . . . If he really just did not like a drawing, he would start reading the verse to which the illustration was meant to relate, emphasizing the meter, the intonation, and sometimes he would also make me read the poem aloud." M. Miturich, "Ritm stikha i risunka," in Z. S. Papernyi, A. Fadeev, B. Galanov, and I. S. Marshak, eds., *Ia dumal, chuvstvoval, ia zhil: Vosopominaniia o S. Ia. Marshake* (Moscow, 1971), 289.

40. See Glotser, *Khudozhniki detskoi knigi,* 134.

has pointed out, Lebedev did not illustrate texts but rather sculpted satirical images, populated with the new characters that were emerging in his field of vision: the flirtatious "Soviet ladies" from the establishment, the self-confident businessmen, the swaggering bosses and their deputies, the career party men, the hoodlums on the street, the ostentatiously genteel "nepmen" in the "NEP" series (1925–1927).[41] These characters, imagined first by Lebedev, essentially prepared the comic medium for the Twister family.

The tastes in Soviet children's literature were changing with the times, but Marshak insisted that the character of "Mister Twister" should remain timeless. As he continued to revise his text to ensure its timelessness, Lebedev reworked his illustrations to match.[42] His originally black-and-white drawings gradually turned into watercolors, but they were nevertheless based on the drawings already familiar to readers.[43]

The revisions were meant to ensure that the poem could be properly understood by new generations of readers. The changing times were visible not only in the characters but also in the surroundings. The steamship on which the millionaire travels from America to Leningrad, for example, was updated several times. Throughout these changes, Lebedev was invariably precise in seeking out the correct model for the ship; his illustrations seem to depict actual trans-Atlantic ocean liners, and indeed the grandest in the west.

A giant for its time, the passenger liner RMS *Queen Mary* was launched at Glasgow from the slipway at the John Brown Wharf in the fall of 1934. The luxurious ship completed its first trans-Atlantic voyage two years later, arriving in New York on 1 June 1936 after crossing the Atlantic in 3 days, 23 hours, and 57 minutes at an average speed of 30.63 knots (59.6 km/h). This event was reported in the Soviet press and printed with a corresponding photograph (figure 15), a photo which Lebedev seems to have faithfully reproduced for the 1937 edition (figure 16).

Less than a year after this edition, however, the English broke their own record (which had stood for 56 years) with the RMS *Queen Elizabeth,* which improved upon the *Queen Mary* in both capacity and design (figure 17). In 1948, Lebedev adjusted his illustration to reflect the newer model (figure 18). Finally, for the 1951 illustration, the passenger liner

41. Iurii Ia. Gerchuk, "Udivitel′nye prikliucheniia 'Bagazha,'" in S. Marshak and V. V. Lebedev, *Khudozhnik V. Lebedev delaet knigu* (Moscow, 1982).

42. A less than successful attempt to analyze Lebedev's illustrations to the poem *Mister Twister* was made by Nina Shantyko, whose analysis resulted in ideological commentary rather than a discussion of Lebedev's artistic technique. Nina Shantyko, *Kogda stikhi druzhat s kartinkami* (Moscow, 1983), 16–17.

43. The changes made to the illustrations of *Mister Twister* conformed to the overall pattern in which Lebedev's artistic style was evolving at the time, as Gerchuk describes it: "Though Lebedev's characters remain as grotesque as ever, schematic depictions are replaced by individual personalities and psychology. The drawing style itself also changes: it becomes more diverse and more flexible; a style is chosen each time to suit the latest thing to be depicted . . . Lebedev came into his own as a satirist in the 1920s and in that capacity he remained there." Iu. Ia. Gerchuk, *Vladimir Lebedev. Al′bom,* ed. I. S. Viskova (Moscow, 1990), 37.

Figure 15. RMS *Queen Mary* **(Photograph by Matthew Field, 2008).**

Figure 16. Illustration from the 1937 edition.

Figure 17. RMS *Queen Elizabeth*. **Post card (circa 1940s).**
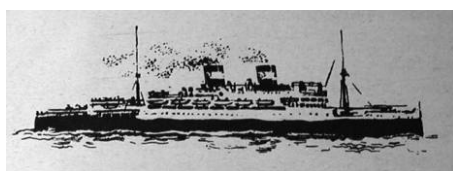

Figure 18. Illustration from the 1948 edition.
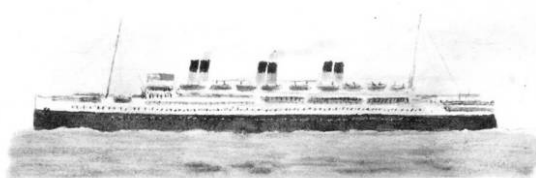

Figure 19. Illustration from the 1951 edition.

was updated once again, acquiring a third smokestack and gaining a luxurious third deck (figure 19).

Lebedev was known as quite an eccentric. According to Irina Kichanova-Lifshits, he "loved objects, and would eagerly visit consignment shops and antique stores" where he would buy strange things. Once, he even tore up her crocodile-skin handbag simply because he was so enamored with it.[44] Lebedev dressed in the garb of a Canadian lumberjack, with high-laced boots, a wool coat of bright crimson plaid, and a peaked hat. No one else in Leningrad during the 1930s would have dressed like this. Such active interest in western items could arouse dangerous suspicions, but Lebedev's taste for things outside the ordinary was too strong to resist.

Both Marshak and Lebedev were sensitive to western tastes and style. As one of Lebedev's few friends confided years later, "At that point, in the

44. Irina Kichanova-Lifshits, *Prosti menia za to, chto ia zhivu* (New York, 1982), 44.
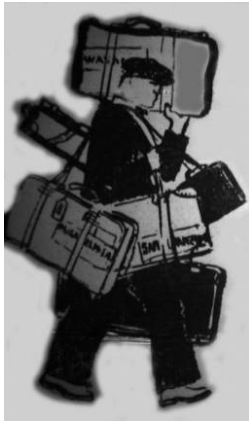
**Figure 20. Carrier
(*Ezh* edition, 1933).**

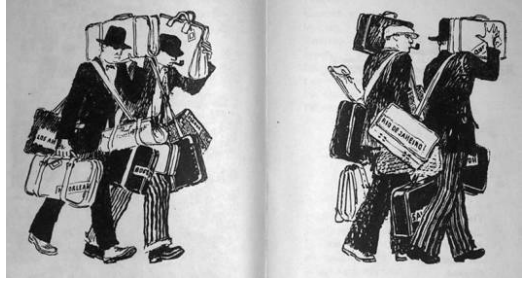**Figure 21. Carriers (Book edi-
tion, 1933).**

Figure 22. Carriers (Book edition, 1937).

1920s, we watched all the classics from around the world—all the Ameri-
can classics as well as the French avant-garde and French impressionism.
We watched each film many times."[45] Additionally, they seem to have been
influenced by Lev Kuleshov's film *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West
in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924) in producing both *Mister Twister* and the
long poem *Bagazh.*

A particularly famous scene from Kuleshov's silent film is the one en-
titled "The Suitcases of Mister West," depicting the process of unloading
the tourist's many bags. There is no dog among Mister West's bags as they
are loaded into the car, but his traveling bag is stolen by a proletarian
vagabond who is accompanied by a "rootless mutt" (borrowing a famous
image from Blok's *Twelve*). A similar scene appears in *Mister Twister,* when
the millionaire is depicted with twenty-four suitcases. In each edition of
the book Lebedev playfully updated the stickers on the suitcases to in-
dicate the cities Twister had "managed" to visit in the intervals between
new editions. Philadelphia, Washington, and San Francisco appear in the

45. V. A. Vlasov, "Iz vystupleniia na vechere pamiati V. V. Lebedeva," in *V. V. Lebedev. Iz
vospominanii. Zhivopis', grafika 1920–1930-kh gg.* (St. Petersburg, 1994), 23.

Figure 23. *Mister Twister* **(Book edition 1962).**

magazine edition of 1933; Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Ottawa were printed in the book version later the same year; and Rio de Janeiro and London were added to the imaginary route for the 1937 edition. This journey, one could argue, broadened to reflect the expanding political geography of young Soviet readers (figures 20–22).

In the postwar reality of the Iron Curtain, however, these journeys, although imaginary, could not continue. Lebedev got rid of the porters, and by the 1962 edition, Mister Twister's suitcases had lost all of their markings (figure 23).

An Artist-Dauber

Writing about the psychological significance of accuracy in pictorial representation, Ernst Hans Gombrich has asserted that "the historian knows that the information pictures were expected to provide differed widely in different periods. Not only were images scarce in the past, but so were the public's opportunities to check their captions. How many people ever saw their ruler in the flesh at sufficiently close quarters to recognize his likeness? How many traveled widely enough to tell one city from another?"[46] The increasing ability to verify the accuracy in documentation, Gombrich infers, makes discussions of illustration more about information than about aesthetics. This inference is especially useful in our discussion of Soviet `graphics for children. In the earliest period, illustrations were allowed to be abstract and misleading. These images documented the as-yet nonexistent utopian world of the new Soviet culture—a world that was itself still a work-in-progress.

According to Nikolai Punin, who wrote the first monograph on Lebedev, the artist's early work on posters and book covers was closely tied

46. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion,* 68

to his aesthetic experiments with cubism. The genre of the poster, which was both limited in its means of expression and intended for the broadest possible audience, required the artist to be highly flexible and competent with his technique. Working at the Russian Telegraph Agency, Lebedev displayed a "happy sharpness of mind, inventiveness, and an affinity for precise characterizations," combined with "a particular rhythm and that lively happiness, which made his posters unmatchable."[47] According to Punin, Lebedev's illustrations for books were just as masterful. Punin writes: "After his brilliant experiments with *Tsirk* [Circus] and *Morozhenoe* [Ice Cream] and a number of other children's books executed by him, bookstores burst into color with numerous imitations of his examples, and book illustrations in the receding cultural tradition—all the 'World of Art' illustrations—paled in comparison and, in terms of form, began to seem impotent, overly concerned with aesthetics, and unexpressive."[48]

This quality of Lebedev's art, however, which Punin had identified as entirely positive in 1928, was precisely what caused the artist's downfall in the subsequent era of socialist realism. A mere eight years after Punin's monograph, Lebedev faced accusations of excessive formalism for his illustrations to Marshak's *Skazki, pesni, zagadki* (Tales, Songs, Riddles, 1935). Lebedev's drawings for the book, which was released by the publisher Akademiia for a primarily adult readership, were picturesque and impressionistic, composed of spots rather than lines. The quick liveliness of these sketches can be gleaned from his surrealist illustration for the tale, *Bagazh* (figure 24).

On 1 March 1936, *Pravda* published an article entitled "On Artist-Daubers," which was later revealed to have been written by D. Zaslavskii, a columnist for the newspaper. In style and content, his article was strongly reminiscent of the notorious lampoon of Dmitrii Shostakovich (with whom, incidentally, Lebedev had carried on a long friendship), entitled "Chaos Instead of Music," which had been published a month before. Zaslavskii's editorial began suggestively: "This is a book whose pages you flip with disgust, like an atlas of pathological anatomy. It is a collection of all kinds of childhood monstrosities as could only be conceived in the mind of a comprachico: rickets-stricken horrors on matchstick legs with bloated stomachs, children without eyes and noses, monkey-children, weak-minded boys, and wild, unkempt girls. And the adults—monsters and animals—all cripples. We see a horrible cat, for instance, nauseating and repulsive. And something still worse—a ragged carcass: all that is left of a horse."[49]

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47. N. N. Punin, *Vladimir Vladimirovich Lebedev* (Leningrad, 1928), 12.
48. Ibid.
49. [D. Zaslavskii], "O khudozhnikakh-pachkunakh," *Pravda,* 1 March 1936. As quoted in *Protiv formalizma i naturalizma v iskusstve: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1937), 11. As if foreseeing the wall of misunderstanding that was being erected, Lebedev tried to explain himself before the official culture, declaring in an interview in 1933: "In his works, an author can break formal grammar rules without compromising the artistic value of his work. The artist can commit a number of errors in anatomy and form, and this likewise does not always ruin his work." First printed in the journal *Literaturnyi sovremennik,* no. 12
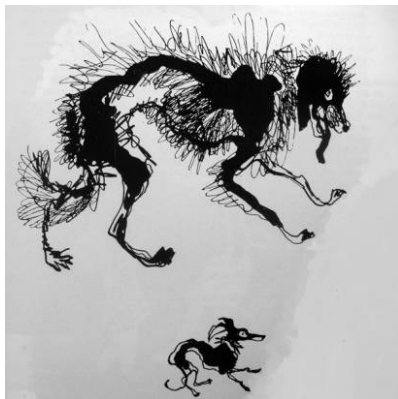
**Figure 24. V. Lebedev, Illustration
to *Bagazh*, in S. Marshak, *Skazki,
pesni, zagadki* (Leningrad, 1935).**

This offensive evolved into a merciless presentation of Lebedev as an enemy of children: "Only a person who feels no love for Soviet children could create such an image of a Pioneer campfire as that on pg. 107 of Marshak's book."[50] It continued:

It is as if a dark and savage comprachico with a deathly hatred of everything natural, simple, joyous, happy, smart, and necessary has gone through the book and soiled everything, mucked it up, and left its dirty imprint on it all. And having committed this nefarious deed, he gladly signed it: Illustrated by V. Lebedev.

And instead of a Latin taxonomic inscription to all of these nightmarish depictions of monstrosities, we have the simple, sweet, happy stories of S. Marshak. Instead of the mark of a medical publishing house, we have that of Akademiia. There is nothing more striking than the contrast between the joyful tone of Marshak's verse tales and the grim debauchery in the monstrous imagination of Lebedev, who, if he cared to, could produce drawings that are talented and comprehensible. All of the words in the stories are simple, funny, and clear, which is why little kids love them. But in the drawings everything is distorted, perverted, incomprehensible, not at all funny, and not connected to the text in any way.

"Here, if you please, is how filth is drawn," said a young wife in the Gogol′ story, holding her crying child up to the picture where Vakula the smith depicted a horrible devil. Such was pedagogy in the old village. But the artist Lebedev and the other comprachicos do not daub their "filth" in order to scare children. On the contrary, they want to please children. They even believe that they are training children to have a sense of aesthetics. . . .

It is strange that Marshak himself does not notice this. . . . There is no place where formalism reveals itself to the extent that it does in illus-

(1933): 204–6 with the title "Beseda s V. V. Lebedevym." As quoted in Glotser, *Khudozhniki detskoi knigi,* 133.
50. Ibid., 14.

trations for children. This is precisely where its innate emptiness, decay, and rot are on display at full strength.[51]

The condemnation left no room for contemplation: "If someone does not know how or does not want to work simply, happily, and lovingly for Soviet children, if someone despises the joyful and sunny world of the Soviet child, if someone is only capable of daubing 'filth' for his own satisfaction, then that person should be as far away as possible from the kids."[52] Kichanova-Lifshits, who became Lebedev's assistant, friend, model, student, and wife at the end of the 1930s, recalled what a blow these attacks on his work had been for the artist: "I read that awful article; it was rude and base, and in those days could have had the most severe consequences. It did not happen immediately, but everything did quiet down; however, that fear never left Lebedev. He would leave and go out into the city from that fear. The walls of the house were suffocating—they did not save him from the fear. He knew the city like no one else, and he loved it like no one else. And then, with the zeal of one who had discovered it first, he began to reveal it to me. . . . He taught me to see the city, and he fell in love with it."[53]

These attacks presaged the dismantling of Lebedev's accustomed structures; the humorous magazines, with which he had frequently collaborated, were ultimately shut down by the end of the 1930s. The artist began to close himself off; he refused to produce official portraits, and, according to Kichanova-Lifshits, "would describe himself as a wolf who believed no one."[54] Lebedev also began to grow lukewarm toward book illustration; after the 1940s, he viewed it mostly as a way of earning a living, perhaps the only area left where creativity, largely unwelcome in that era, could still be applied.

Illustration as a Riddle

The most creative, and certainly most surprising, aspect of Lebedev's illustrations for *Mister Twister* is his delightful use of formalism to smuggle a voice of resistance into Marshak's anticapitalist poem. This gesture may be seen as a small but calculated act of revenge against the system that had once bullied him for being a formalist dauber and had nearly forgotten him since.

In the 1951 edition, three significant illustrations appear on consecutive pages (figures 25–27). At first, the combination of "camel" and "palm tree" seems to be a parody of the advertising brochures designed for the idle rich. On closer examination, however, these drawings reveal Lebedev's formalist device, a joke with which he had been both daring (for it was published in a book for children) and ingenious (for it contains a deeply complex chain of associations).

51. Ibid., 13.
52. Ibid., 14.
53. Kichanova-Lifshits, *Prosti menia,* 37.
54. Ibid., 39.
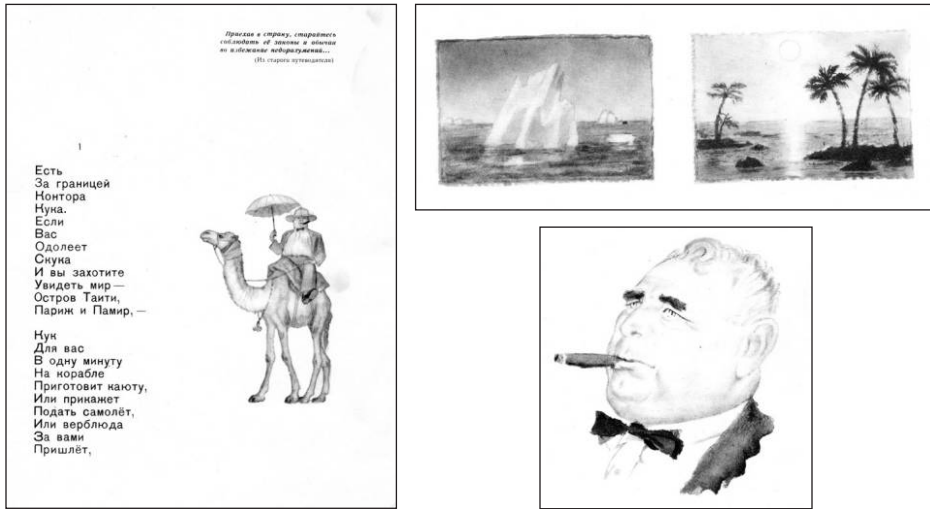
Figures 25–27. Three consecutive pages from *Mister Twister* **(Book edition 1951).**

When taken together, the three drawings—the camel, the palm trees, and the smoking Mr. Twister—evoke a very specific image: the exotic and efficient branding that appears on packs of American Camel cigarettes (figure 28). Marshak himself would have known the brand; he was an inveterate smoker, and had been living in England in 1913—the year Camel cigarettes first appeared on the global market.[55] By 1923, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco's Camel brand had a 45 percent share of the American tobacco market.

Osip Mandel'shtam was one of the first to link America with imagery of the Middle East in his poem "Amerikanka" (American Girl, 1913): "An American girl of twenty years / Must make it to Egypt."[56] The Camel brand's logo—with its camel against a golden background of palm trees and pyramids—picks up on the same connection, successfully uniting the mysteriousness of distant voyages with the dangers of western luxury. In symbolist poetics at the beginning of the 1900s, the cigarette and cigar were not yet fixed images (in Innokentii Annenskii: unknowable, scrolling red fabrics in a dark window aperture), and by the 1930s they are already clichés.[57] Metaphorically, the cigar stood for individualism and the cigarette stood for the masses, but each was also seen to have its own rhythm

55. In 1933, Marshak traveled in Italy and occasionally asked his wife how Lebedev's work on the illustrations for *Mister Twister* was progressing. "Is Vladimir Vasil'evich finishing up the drawings to *Mister Twister*" (beginning of June 1933); "Where is Vladimir Vasil'evich now? Thank him, my dear Sofia, for his drawings, and tell him that I will write him soon" (7 June 1933), both from Marshak, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 8:134–35 and 8:136–38.

56. Osip Mandel'shtam, "Amerikanka," *Stikhotvoreniia* (Ekaterinburg, 1998), 88.

57. Innokentii Annenskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i tragedii* (Leningrad, 1990), 58. In the poem "V otkrytye okna" (In the Open Windows), titled "Letnim vecherom" (On a Summer Evening) in the autograph, under the crossed out working title "Ogonyok papirosy" (The Cigarette Light).

Figure 28. Advertisement for Camel cigarettes (1929–1930).

of flaring up and dying out, a kind of aesthetics or even metaphysics.[58] As K. Bogdanov wrote in his social history of smoking in the twentieth century, the most crucial determinant of the unique folklore surrounding smoking in Russia was the fact that, unlike western Europe, Russia got its tobacco secondhand, from Asia through Europe. This influenced the official attitude toward tobacco and made it more of a political and religious consideration than something economic or medical.[59]

How exactly does Lebedev achieve the desired effect? Like Marshak, he uses the technique of shading and fragmenting certain attributes. Psychologists like Rudolf Arnheim have suggested that perception is primarily gleaned from the general structural features of an object or image and that intellectual abstraction, therefore, is more direct and elementary than individual detail. A young child, for example, understands "doggishness" before he is able to distinguish one dog from another.[60] In Lebedev's illustrations, then, the essential structural images from the cigarette pack picture are broken apart and spread out over several consecutive illustrations, while other noteworthy details are disposed of altogether.[61] In one

58. At the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States, with the appearance of the tobacco brands known to everyone, cigarettes become part of the soldier's regimen: they are sent for free to the front, thus forming habits and creating future customers. Unlike the sophisticated, old-fashioned, aristocratic pipe, the cigarette is simple, contemporary (an element of modernity), and democratic.

59. K. A. Bogdanov, "'Pravo kurit': K sotsial'noi istorii kureniia v XX veke," *Povsednevnost' i mifologiia: Issledovaniia po semiotike fol'klornoi deistvitel'nosti* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 320.

60. Rudolf Afnheim, *Art and Visual Perception,* exp. and rev. ed. (Berkeley, 1974), 45.

61. Kichanova-Lifshits describes Lebedev's technique for selecting material as follows: what "he needed as an artist, he took and assimilated. And what he did not need, he rejected." Kichanova-Lifshits, *Prosti menia,* 50.

illustration, three palm trees are depicted on an idyllic island, matching Marshak's "Cook will show you / Palm trees and cedars"; in another, the famous Camel pyramids are transformed into two cone-shaped icebergs, retaining the proportions of the pyramids but in reverse order; and pyramids themselves, although never explicitly named in the text, are perhaps brought to mind by the words of Marshak's final version, where the allusion to "Baghdad" conjures up Middle Eastern stereotypes. The main uniting element for these dispersed details, however, is the drawing of Mister Twister himself, who appears, in every version of the illustration, sitting on a dromedary camel with a cigar in his mouth.[62] The position of the camel's legs is of some interest. In Lebedev's first series of illustrations, the camel is poised in mid-gallop; in later versions, it stands still, bearing an even greater resemblance to Fred Otto Kleesattel's original drawing of the Camel logo.

Lebedev's approach to his work, we may surmise, was deeply formalist; each drawing tries to show the readers *how* it was made: he laid bare the device, to use Viktor Shklovskii's terminology. In the 1933 illustrations, the resemblance to the Camel logo is passing, perhaps even unintentional (according to Kichanova-Lifshits, Lebedev had a phenomenally tenacious memory).[63] By 1951, however, after countless revisions by Marshak, and three new versions by Lebedev, the unmistakable resemblance is entirely intentional, a playful reference to western popular culture (figures 29 and 30).

Lebedev believed that "art should be the same nut for a child to crack as for an adult."[64] As a result, his illustrations were often constructed as collages or riddles to which one had to find the key. In this case, however, the key had been hidden so deeply that it was probably not intended for young readers. Marshak and the other authors in his circle also thought constantly about the ways children read and understand differently from (or similarly to) adults. In the year that *Mister Twister* was published, Boris Zhitkov wrote an article entitled "What Adults Need from a Children's Book," observing: "If we assume that a child is an abridged version of an adult in terms of his tastes, his behavior, and temperament, then we must also say the same about his way of thinking. All children have this in common—a schematic way of thinking."[65] Lebedev's impulses also led him to create images that had a "behind-the-scenes" engine, or common plot, that could be discerned. In this case, his miniplot was a piece of con-

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62. The specifics of this picture are of some interest. It is noteworthy that Mr. Twister is depicted smoking a cigar, even though the underlying reference is to a cigarette pack. This is not as contradictory as it seems, because the cigar was understood as the universal symbol of status. An American millionaire would naturally have been associated with this glamorous detail, which in the Soviet Union in the 1920s (and for a long time thereafter) was identified with the style of Hollywood movie stars. Also noteworthy is that the camel has a single hump. In *Lolita,* Vladimir Nabokov actually plays with the fact that the Camel cigarette pack depicts a dromedary (one-humped) camel rather than a Bactrian (two-humped) camel. See Marina Abasheva, "Roman s reklamoi: Nabokov i drugie," *Neprikos-novennyi zapas,* no. 6 (62) (2008).

63. Kichanova-Lifshits, *Prosti menia,* 39, 51.

64. Glotser, *Khudozhniki detskoi knigi,* 133.

65. Boris Zhitkov, "Chto nuzhno vzroslym ot detskoi knigi," *Zvezda,* 1933, no. 7: 135.
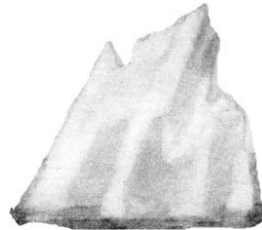
Camel cigarettes packaging

Illustration by V. Lebedev

Three palms

Pyramid

Iceberg

Camels

Figure 29. Design used on Camel cigarettes packaging (left) and Lebedev's illustrations (right)

**Figure 30. The montage of elements
used by Lebedev.**

temporary, everyday mythology, made up of three palm trees, two pyra-
mids, and a camel in the desert: the package of an American cigarette
brand. Incidentally, the Camel brand gained a cult status among Soviet
youth a few years later. As Joseph Brodsky later wrote, "Of cigarette brands
[we preferred] Camels . . . Our choice, of course, was conditioned by
form, not by content."[66]

The case of Lebedev, the "formalist dauber," is representative of the
survival strategy used by many nonconformists in the Soviet world, par-
ticularly in the field of totalitarian art. While some, like Marshak, chose to
rationally and thoughtfully readjust themselves to the changing rules of
the game, others, like Lebedev, resisted through quiet but caustic parody.
By illustrating *Mister Twister* with a reconfigured Camel advertisement,
Lebedev provided a retort to the objections of those in power. It was al-
most as if to say: you don't like how I draw? Well, then print the work of
your official enemy without knowing it, for American advertising shares
your aesthetic tastes! Lebedev, in this sense, prefigures the 1991 antics of
Sergei Kurekhin, which Alexei Yurchak analyzes in this cluster of articles.
His goal is indeed strikingly similar: not to fool the public, but to produce
a peculiar "kind of confusion and, later, laughter." Lebedev was able to
take advantage of, and mock, the Soviet state's obsession with unques-
tionable facts, an obsession that many presumed extended to children's
literature.

For the dissident movement in the Soviet Union, oppositional dis-
course took the form of mimetic resistance, where "the oppositional dis-
course in a sense shared the symbolic field with the dominant discourse: it
echoed and amplified the rhetoric of the regime, rather than positioning
itself outside of or underneath it."[67] In the case of Marshak and Lebedev, a
parallel kind of opposition can be found. Here, there is also mimetic resis-
tance, but what is mimicked is not the discourse of the Soviet state, but the
imagery of the capitalist west. This imagery was employed as a backdrop

66. Iosif Brodskii, "Trofeinoe," trans. A. Sumerkin, in *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*
(St. Petersburg, 1995), 4:200.

67. Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture*
13, no. 2 (2001): 192.

in an attempt to mock familiar, noncontroversial discursive structures by shifting the site of their enunciation.

When Lebedev was thrashed in *Pravda,* it had lasting effects. Some of his friends turned away from him, others protested openly, and he himself was forced to stop working for the publisher. When Marshak faced criticism, he had already survived several "purges" and had witnessed the sad fate of his OBERIU comrades at the Leningrad children's publishing house. The criticism of his work took place at the beginning of the 1930s, when heated debates on children's literature erupted in Soviet periodicals. This was the time when "laughter seemed suspicious, because it is by its very nature antitotalitarian. The joy found in children's books qualified as a bourgeois disrespect for proletarian life."[68] Marshak was ultimately defended by Maksim Gor'kii, who, in his article "The Man with Cotton Stuffed in His Ears," repudiated the pseudo-pedagogical arguments for "seriousness" that were being employed by Marshak's adversaries.[69] After Gor'kii's death in 1936 and the sharp increase in cultural and ideological pressure, Marshak became wary of a second round of attack and its likely consequences. Rather than trying, as he had before, to keep out of sight, he actually changed course. The cosmetic facelifts and textual overhauls of *Mister Twister* indicate, in many ways, the increasing taxes on concealed laughter that were levied by a system that refused to laugh alongside its perceptive artists.

68. Petrovskii, "Samuil Marshak," 213–14.
69. M. Gor'kii, "Chelovek, ushi kotorogo zatknuty vatoi," *Pravda,* 19 January 1930; response to D. Kal'm, "Protiv khaltury v detskoi literature!" *Literaturnaia gazeta,* 16 December 1929.

A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom

Alexei Yurchak

> the parasite is . . . a joker, . . . grimace . . . greasepaint. . . . He goes on stage, sets up the scenery, invents theater, and imposes theater. He is all the faces on the screen . . . he is at the origin of comedy, tragedy, the circus and the farce, and of public meetings, where he gathers the noises of legitimacy.
>
> —Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

The Event

On 17 May 1991, the Fifth Channel of Leningrad television broadcast its popular program *Piatoe koleso* (The Fifth Wheel)—an episode that has since become one of the most notorious media events of the past two decades. The Fifth Channel acquired prestige during the period of perestroika reform, when it was broadcast nationally. Its programs concerned historical and cultural events in the Soviet past and present and were watched by an audience of several million viewers. Sergei Sholokhov, one of the hosts of *The Fifth Wheel,* had the reputation of being a young, dynamic, and pathbreaking journalist.

On that day, he began the program with the following words: "Today we are opening the *Wheel* with a new rubric. It is called 'Sensations and hypotheses.' I will host it together with Sergei Kurekhin, a famous political figure and movie actor."[1] Kurekhin sat next to Sholokhov, behind a large desk in a scholarly looking office lined with bookshelves. A few years later, he would become a national celebrity, but at the time of the program he was unknown to most viewers. Kurekhin began to speak: "The goal of this rubric will be to introduce absolutely new approaches to well-known historical events in our country and the whole world, to well-known facts." The first program, he announced, would concern "the central mystery of the October [Bolshevik] revolution," a mystery that had "always remained," despite all our apparent knowledge of the event.

During the next hour, speaking in a serious scholarly tone and displaying historical photographs, documentary footage, film clips, and interviews with scientists, Kurekhin put forward a remarkable thesis on the origins of the Bolshevik revolution. He began by admitting that it was hardly surprising that the revolution had "inspired whole generations of

1. For this analysis I used a video-recording of the original program that aired on 17 May 1991. This original differs substantially from the video-recorded version that Sholokhov made available for purchase in 1996 under the title *Lenin-grib* (Lenin mushroom). The latter version is shorter than the original (32 minutes instead of 70), substantially re-edited, and augmented with additional materials and interviews, including a part of the program that was not originally aired, in which Kurekhin and Sholokhov break their serious tone and start laughing. It is video clips from this later re-edited version that are available today on YouTube.

cinematographers and . . . that so many books [had] been written about it." Every revolution, he argued, is indeed an impressive visual spectacle. Although we usually assume that visual representations of a revolution happen later, after the events have already taken place, Kurekhin argued that revolutions are simply too spectacular to happen on their own. Someone "first [has] to visualize certain images and later attempt to reproduce them in reality." During a recent visit to Mexico, he continued, he had seen frescos that depicted the Mexican revolution of the early twentieth century in a style identical to the one used for the Russian Bolshevik revolution: "the same exhausted people, armed with primitive tools of labor, overthrowing some rulers."

In order for revolutionary leaders in both places to have imagined these events in a similar manner, their minds must surely have been subjected to similar influences. In Mexico, the source of influence is clear. During ritualistic ceremonies, Kurekhin explained, the native peoples routinely used drinks prepared from Lophophora Williamsii or peyote—a Mexican cactus with strong psychotropic properties.[2] Although Mexican cacti do not grow in Russia, Kurekhin noted, Russian forests do have an abundance of similar hallucinogens: mushrooms, most prominently the fly agaric mushroom (*mukhomor*).[3] These mushrooms, he claimed, induce the same effects as the Mexican cacti: "people see absolutely incredible pictures very vividly and colorfully" and "enormous scenes of great events and revolutions fly before your eyes."

Building on this premise, Kurekhin began to formulate his famous thesis: "Reading the correspondence between [Vladimir] Lenin and [Iosif] Stalin I came across one phrase: 'Yesterday I ate too many mushrooms, but I felt great.'" Bolshevik leaders ate a lot of mushrooms, Kurekhin mused, and some of them surely had hallucinogenic properties. If consumed for many years, these mushrooms can permanently change an individual's personality. Indeed, Kurekhin continued in an unwavering scholarly tone, "I have absolutely irrefutable proof that the October revolution was carried out by people who had been consuming certain mushrooms for many years. And these mushrooms, in the process of being consumed by these people, had displaced their personalities. These people were turning into mushrooms. In other words, I simply want to say that Lenin was a mushroom."

Because the subject of this audacious claim was the leader of the com-

2. Kurekhin referred to the writings of Peruvian American anthropologist and writer Carlos Castaneda, whom Kurekhin first read in a Russian samizdat translation in the mid-1980s when it became popular among informal artistic milieus. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995. Castaneda studied the rituals of Yaqui and Navajo Indians and described their consumption of peyote as a way to gain insight into one's life. Castaneda's writings have been discredited in academia as largely fictional. See Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1968).

3. Fly agaric mushroom (*amanita muscaria*) contains psychoactive alkaloids that are deadly to flies and have a hallucinogenic effect on humans. In Russian traditional peasant culture, these mushrooms were used for their hallucinogenic and medicinal effects (as painkillers, as cures for neuroses and inflammations, and so on). See Andy Letcher, *Shroom: A Cultural History of the Magic Mushroom* (New York, 2007).

munist revolution, about whom public criticism and irony had always been taboo, the claim itself became even more believable. Had Kurekhin been speaking of anyone else, his words would easily have been dismissed as a joke. But Lenin! How could one joke about Lenin? Especially on Soviet television. Audiences could not help but attribute some credibility to the revelation.

During the broadcast, which lasted over an hour, the audience received no explanation of whether this was an ironic prank or a serious program. Millions of television viewers found themselves at a loss: some were completely confused about the program; others recognized the extreme irony of *stiob* but were stunned that such a genre could be performed on television and, moreover, that it could be directed at Lenin; and still others took the program at face value and were shaken by its iconoclastic revelations.[4] When the program ended, the studio was overwhelmed with phone calls from viewers—some wanting an explanation, some protesting, and some laughing.[5] Even educated and well-informed members of the intelligentsia were confused. The actor Konstantin Raikin, a member of Moscow's theatrical circles and an accomplished comedian himself, later described his reaction to the broadcast: "I took it as any normal Soviet person who was accustomed to trusting serious conversations [in the media would have] I was absolutely sold." Although he may not necessarily have "bought" the claim that Lenin was a mushroom, he certainly did not instantly recognize it as a hoax. In retrospect, he finds this astonishing: "Every one of us thinks that he is not a fool and is able to recognize a sham, so to speak, when he is being taken for a ride." Those who are comedians should presumably recognize such hoaxes with an even greater ease. And yet, Raikin, who had never heard of Kurekhin before that moment, failed to recognize his provocation. Another famous viewer, the singer Alla Pugacheva, also claimed to have taken the program seriously: "I was asking everyone: did you hear that? Did you watch that program?!"[6]

Perhaps the words of these celebrities should be taken with a grain of salt. These quotes, after all, come from a special 1996 program that Sholokhov broadcast in memory of Kurekhin, who had tragically died that summer. So although the comedian and singer did admit that they were fooled by the hoax, we must remember that Sholokhov had a particular interest in presenting evidence of such. If his program had indeed fooled many people, it would demonstrate that he, its host, was, in 1991, already more enlightened and ironic than the majority of viewers. Sholokhov has,

4. On stiob, see Alexei Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in the Post-Soviet Nightlife," in Adele Marie Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev* (Durham, 1999); see also Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), chap. 7.

5. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995.

6. Sergei Sholokhov, interviews with Konstantin Raikin and with Alla Pugacheva on the program *Tikhii dom: Pamiati Kurekhina,* broadcast on RTR television channel, July 1996.

in fact, been making this claim for many years. In a 2008 interview he recalled:

> The next day after the broadcast Galina Barinova, the chief for ideology at the [Leningrad] Regional Party Committee, was visited by a delegation of Bolshevik veterans, who demanded that she explain to them whether it was true that Lenin was a mushroom. "No!" Galina Barinova emphatically replied. "But how can this be," protested the veterans, "if yesterday they said so on the television?" To which she replied: "This is untrue," adding a phrase that put me and Kurekhin in a state of shock: "Because a mammal cannot be a plant."[7]

Sholokhov's claim to have fooled the gullible public, especially the Bolshevik veterans, seems suspiciously self-serving. It remains true, however, that at the time of the program's original broadcast, most people did not recognize it as a hoax, even if they did not necessarily take its central claim at face value. Moreover, the program turned out to be such a remarkable event that today, almost twenty years later, it is still widely remembered in Russia as one of the first illustrations that the Soviet system was crumbling.

Several important questions come to mind. Why did this provocation happen when it did? Why did it focus on Lenin? How exactly was it performed? What was funny about it to some people, not funny to others, and confusing to yet others? What were the social, cultural, and political effects of this provocation at the time of the broadcast and in the subsequent years? And finally, can the answers to these questions provide us with a new perspective on the dissolution of the Soviet Union and, more broadly, on the relationship between politics and irony?

The Open

Kurekhin was involved in many activities. A brilliant and versatile pianist, improviser, and composer, he started playing with informal bands in Leningrad in the mid-1970s, exploring a diversity of styles, from avant-garde jazz to punk rock (figure 1).[8] In the 1980s, he famously created and led Pop-Mekhanika—a multifarious musical orchestra and performance group, which brought together diverse styles and genres and united characters from a variety of official, informal, and amateur cultural scenes. Rock guitarists performed with classical opera singers, ballet dancers, boys' choirs, avant-garde fashion models, free jazz saxophonists, characters from strange local "scenes," and sometimes even animals (a scared flock of geese gaggling to pulsating music or a startled horse, which once, to everyone's joy, began pissing on stage). Kurekhin conducted this motley crew by running, jumping, waving his arms, and shouting commands.

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7. Dima Mishenin, "Tikhii Sholokhov" (interview with Sergei Sholokhov), in *Krest'ianka: Zhurnal o vkusnoi i zdorovoi zhizni,* December 2008, at www.krestyanka.ru/archive/year2008/dec/dec_349.html (last accessed 15 March 2011).

8. For a discussion of Kurekhin's musical history, see Aleksandr Kan, *Poka ne nachalsia dzhaz* (St. Petersburg, 2008).

Figure 1. Sergei Kurekhin playing piano (late 1980s).

The resulting sound and spectacle were extremely unusual but surprisingly well organized.[9]

Performances of Pop-Mekhanika acquired a cult status among connoisseurs, but Kurekhin remained unknown to wider audiences. By the early 1990s, his activities had broadened beyond music: he published articles, wrote scripts and music for films in which he also acted, directed theater plays, and hosted radio and television programs.[10] The televised Lenin hoax was the first of his projects to have an audience of several million viewers. How, one might ask, was it possible for Kurekhin to conduct such a daring hoax within the state-controlled national media?

In order for the hoax to work, an unusual combination of political, social, and cultural elements had to come together. This type of televised provocation can only succeed under certain circumstances—before the provocateur becomes widely known and recognized, before the audience comes to expect this unusual genre of irony on television, and before important political ideals become common objects of public irony. In the case of Russia, a program of this kind could only have been successful during the limited historical window of the early 1990s. Earlier, the media was too tightly controlled by the Soviet party-state; television programs had to be preapproved, and any irony at the expense of the political foundations

9. The history and analysis of this remarkable artistic project still awaits its author. For some footage of Pop-Mekhanika performances, see Vladimir Nepevnyi's documentary *Kurekhin: Dokumental'nyi film* (St. Petersburg, 2004). Many short clips are available on YouTube.

10. Many of his scripts and movie performances also acquired popular cult status. See, for example, Sergei Debizhev's 1992 films *Kompleks nevmeniaemosti* (Insanity Complex) and *Dva kapitana 2* (Two Captains 2). For a comprehensive analysis of Kurekhin's cinematographic career, see T. L. Karklit, "Fenomen Sergeia Kurekhina v otechestvennom kinematografe kontsa 80—nachala 90-kh godov" (thesis, Vserossiiskii gosudarstvennyi institut kinematografii im. S. I. Gerasimova, Moscow 2004), at kuryokhin.letov.ru/Karklit/diplom/ (last accessed 15 March 2011).

would have been impossible. Although this control had weakened by the final years of perestroika, it had not completely disappeared. Later, in the post-Soviet 1990s, although irony about the Soviet system had become common, the media ultimately fell under new forms of control: the new political system and its newly introduced market considerations.

The early to mid-1990s, it is now clear, marked the beginning of a short and peculiar period of suspense, when the old forms of control, regulation, and governance were being weakened or broken, and the new ones had not yet emerged or stabilized. During that short period of "the open," squeezed between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet future, popular mass media, including cultural programs on television, experienced unprecedented and unexpected freedoms.[11] Film director Sergei Debizhev, who worked with Kurekhin on several projects, described the atmosphere in Russian cinema and television during those years in almost utopian terms: "At that time it was possible to do whatever you wanted without asking anybody or saying anything to anyone."[12] Although Debizhev's words may be tinted with nostalgic exaggeration, the short period they describe was certainly unique in its relative lack of predetermined control.[13] Sholokhov claims that during that period he was able to choose the topics for *The Fifth Wheel* with relative freedom. He needed only to obtain the "air signature" (*efirnaia podpis'*) of Bella Kurkova, his boss at the Fifth Channel, to approve a topic for broadcast. By 1991, Kurkova usually approved any topic, as long as Sholokhov assured her that it did not deal with Boris El'tsin, who at the time was still an ousted member of the Politburo. When Sholokhov proposed Kurekhin as his guest for a program on history, Kurkova provided her air signature "without even looking."[14] She also let him choose the length of his different programs, saying: "Seriozhen'ka, if you want, take two hours of air time. There will be no one else after you." According to Sholokhov this free indeterminacy, which "cannot even be imagined on television today," ended in the mid-1990s, with the privatization of television and the emergence of strict "programming formats, such as 26 minutes, 52 minutes," and so on.[15] Kurekhin's televised provocation was one of the earliest manifestations of this unusual, and short-lived, period of suspended political and economic constraints.

11. Slavoj Žižek defines "the open" as the "intermediate phase" of a historical situation, "when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by the new one." Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, 1993), 1.

12. "Interv'iu s Sergeem Debizhevym (4 maia 2004 goda)," in Karklit, "Fenomen Sergeia Kurekhina." For a discussion of this unexpected freedom and its effects in the Soviet cinema, see George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry* (University Park, 2000).

13. This period can also be compared with what Hakim Bey calls "temporary autonomous zone." Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York, 1985). For a discussion of temporary autonomous zones during the early period of postsocialist transition, see Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids."

14. *Programma "Piatoe Koleso": "Lenin-grib"* (nineteen years since the broadcast), host Svetlana Sorokina, 18 April 2010, Fifth Channel of St. Petersburg television, at www.5-tv.ru/programs/broadcast/504896/ (last accessed 15 March 2011)

15. Mishenin, "Tikhii Sholokhov," 2008.

At the end of perestroika, despite the changes in the media and the growing critique of the Soviet political system, most viewers were still prepared to accept serious programs on television at face value. Contrary to the common assertion that Soviet people did not trust Soviet media and always read between the lines, the mass media, especially television (in particular its programs concerning science and culture) actually received phenomenal trust and respect. During perestroika, the public's trust in serious media only increased, with new journalistic programs achieving unprecedented popularity. Indeed, it was the popular new genre of investigatory journalism that Kurekhin chose to imitate, skillfully playing with his audience's expectations.

Visual Documentation

To make his outrageous claim appear plausible, Kurekhin had to present evidence that seemed credible. Sholokhov later recalled: "It was crucial that one loved assembling a body of evidence. Our viewers are extremely scrupulous. Every idea must be substantiated in practice, not only in theory . . . one needs to provide corroborating documents. And Kurekhin found lots of artifacts to support his thesis."[16] These artifacts included historical photographs; documentary footage; quotes from letters, books, and memoirs; and interviews with real scientists. When presenting these materials, Kurekhin tried to divert the viewers' attention away from the truth or falsity of his main claim (that Lenin was a mushroom), focusing instead on the smaller, unrelated question of whether each of the presented documents, photographs, or scientific facts was credible.

It was also important that the hoax be broadcast on television. In other forms of media—magazine articles, radio programs, or live lectures—it would have been next to impossible to pull it off. The televised format offered Kurekhin many visual techniques to convince viewers that his claims could be trusted. Among these, of course, was his skilled performance as an actor. Kurekhin's behavior in front of the camera never once betrayed his agenda; his apparent sincerity was buttressed by extremely articulate and learned speech, a genuine tone of voice, and candid stares directed at the camera. This effect was amplified by the physical setting of the program: the scholarly office, its large desk, shelves full of books, and stacks of folders and paper (figure 2).

If Kurekhin had presented his visual evidence in a published text, the hoax would have been more readily apparent. The temporalities of reading text and watching television are different: readers can reread passages and study photographs, while viewers of real-time broadcasts are far more constrained. Kurekhin used these constraints to his advantage. He displayed his historical photographs and documentary footage for only a fleeting moment, quickly replacing one example with the next, and providing assertive commentary about its supposed meaning. His barrage of fast-paced visual evidence and verbal narrative was designed to overload the viewers' perception, making it more difficult for them to contemplate

16. Ibid.

Figure 2. Beginning of the television program. Kurekhin (right) introduces his main thesis.

the literal content of each image or to question the claims made on its behalf.

In his essay, "The Photographic Message," Roland Barthes argues that documentary photographs are unique among other forms of visual representation, such as drawings, paintings, cinema, theater, and artistic photography. Whereas each of those forms provides only an interpretation of reality, the documentary photograph can function as reality's direct, uninterpreted, reflection or "analogon."[17] Documentary photography is, of course, not devoid of subjective interpretation (by the photographer, editor, or publisher) but, as Barthes stressed, its interpretations are always dependent upon, and ultimately hidden behind, the photograph's irreducible character as reality's reflection. Every documentary photograph, therefore, incorporates a "structural paradox," for it is simultaneously an objective reflection of reality and a subjective interpretation of it. The concomitant "ethical paradox," therefore, is that by manipulating a documentary photograph, one directly manipulates the truth.[18] In presenting his fake evidence, Kurekhin was skillfully drawing on these structural and ethical paradoxes inherent in documentary photography and footage.

Kurekhin first showed a photograph that supposedly linked Lenin with Mexico (figure 3). He provided the following commentary:

> Let us take this photograph. Look. This is Lenin with a group of his comrades. Look carefully. Some of them you know, others you do not. Notice that if we draw a certain structure, taking Il'ich [Lenin] as its top and then identifying five points—this is the first point, second point, third, fourth, and fifth, five points—and then connecting them into one whole, then what will we get? We will get a star. . . . A five-pointed star with one elongated section, the same kind of star that is found on almost all Mexican shrines.

He then quickly moved on to the next piece of evidence. What did this short display achieve? The photograph was genuine, and easily recogniz-

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17. Roland Barthes,"The Photographic Message," in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader* (New York, 1982), 196, 197.

18. As attested by numerous historical precedents of doctoring photographs.

Figure 3. Kurekhin traces a five-pointed star on a photo of Lenin and his comrades in a history book.

able as such by the viewers. Such photographs of Lenin and his comrades were ubiquitous in Soviet history books, documentary films, and museums. The interpretation that accompanied the photograph, however, was fake. There are no "five points" on the picture that could be identified and connected, but rather many faces, far more than five, and none of them stands out as a point. The star that Kurekhin traced was completely arbitrary, but because he showed the picture at such a sharp angle and narrated its description with such speed, this was impossible for the viewers to determine. The recognizable picture and its confident description produced a general sense of authenticity and importance, although what it all meant remained unclear or dubious. In truth, this documentary photograph had been "doctored"—not in its internal pictorial structure but through the manner of its perception and visibility. Kurekhin's procedure emphasized a general sense of authenticity, while deemphasizing the concrete "fact" that claimed to be authentic. *How* the evidence was presented was more important than *what* was literally depicted.

Kurekhin, leaving no time for contemplation, moved on to a second example: another well-known photograph of Lenin, sitting at the desk in his Kremlin office. Before showing this photograph, Kurekhin provided a commentary full of specialized terms—all of which, although real, would have been largely unfamiliar to most viewers. Continuing his previous discussion of hallucinogenic cacti in which he had mentioned Lophophora Williamsii, he now introduced several more scientific terms (such as Turbinicarpus, melocactus, cephalium) and "facts" that he left unexplained. Kurekhin seemed to be leading to an extremely important revelation, and with a genuine scholarly enthusiasm, finally declared: "But there is something strange about Lophophora and Turbinicarpus—they do not have cephalium.[19] Only melocactus has cephalium, certain types of

19. *Cephalium,* from Greek *kefali* (head)—a real term describing a flat, round, woolen or bristly "head" at the top of a cactus, from *Dictionary: Botanical and Technical Terminology* at www.cactus-art.biz/note-book/Dictionary/Dictionary_C/dictionary_C.htm (last accessed 15 March 2011).

Figure 4. Kurekhin discusses the picture of Lenin at his desk.

Figure 5. The picture of Lenin discussed by Kurekhin. The round "strange object" is at the bottom, right of center.

melocactus and certain types of discocactus. Therefore, this means that—well, let me explain it to make it clearer for you." After this introduction, he produced a photograph that most viewers would easily recognize (figures 4 and 5):

> Take a look. This is a photograph of Lenin in his office. Look here, you see? None of the researchers have paid attention to this strange object situated next to the inkstand. You see, it has a small top. . . . It is an astonishing fact that Lenin—the person on whom millions of monographs are focused, every day of whose life and work is researched—and yet all scholars and researchers failed to pay attention to this strange object. However, it is present on almost all photographs of Lenin at his office. Look, it is here, next to the inkstand.

Kurekhin showed the picture for only a short moment before quickly replacing it with several different photographs of Lenin's desk, each with the same white cylinder. Then he said: "I want to explain what this is. This is reminiscent of, or rather, at first it seemed to me that this object is reminiscent of a melocactus with cephalium at the top." Instead of explaining the meaning of this statement, Kurekhin started providing more complex terms and fictionalized facts to distract the viewers: "Why cephalium develops in the melacactus is still an enigma. Its function remains unclear.[20] Suddenly, for no apparent reason, a woolen hat starts growing on the top of a cactus slowly covering it up. Lophophora Williamsii, which we discussed earlier, does not have this woolen hat. But Turbinicarpus, which is an intermediary stage between Lophophora and melocactus, already possesses emerging elements of cephalium. You understand, right?" Building up the viewers' expectations, Kurekhin delivered his final point: "The object that is located on Lenin's desk is highly reminiscent of Turbinicarpus in the condition in which its hallucinogenic qualities are manifested." According to Kurekhin, in other words, this object established a direct

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20. Needless to say, Kurekhin exploited the ignorance of most viewers about such issues. In fact, the function of the cephalium is well known—this is where "flower buds and fruits are formed" in a cactus. From *Dictionary: Botanical and Technical Terminology*.

linkage between Lenin and the Mexican hallucinogens. Having already made his point in this protracted way, Kurekhin continued to distract the viewers' attention from how speculative it was by adding a further qualification: "This is a model of something that we do not yet know, which I will explain a bit later." Needless to say, he never returned to this explanation. Once again, a documentary photograph was "doctored" by making it only momentarily visible and by casting it in a complex rhetorical frame of serious sounding but unfamiliar terms. As before, this lent the program a general air of importance and authenticity that made it difficult for viewers to focus on concrete "facts."

Kurekhin introduced a third example: "I will now ask to show fragments of documentary footage from the film *Zhivoi Lenin* [Live Lenin, 1958, directed by Mikhail Romm], and you will understand, based on documentary materials, that certain things are directly linked." The fragments showed Lenin surrounded by different groups of people in different contexts. Kurekhin explained:

> Look for a moment here, you see? Lenin is constantly [shown] with different people. Look carefully. On the right there is a boy standing. We will return to him later. Here he is again. You see? Some boy is always near Lenin. Here he is again. You see? Now we have moved to another part of the film. Again the very same boy. You see? Here he is, he just passed by. Now he has a slightly different haircut, but it is the same boy. And in these next frames it is again him. Wait, some more episodes. You see? The very same boy. In other words. Thank you very much, stop the film please. You see, the fact is that same boy always stands next to Lenin. Pasha followed Lenin closely all the time, because he was the only person who knew every [forest] trail and every place rich with mushrooms [*gribnoe mesto*]. And he brought Lenin to these mushroom sites. As you could see for yourself in the footage, this is not a speculation.

Once again, Soviet viewers easily recognized the film clips as genuine documentary footage of Lenin. The speed with which the clips were shown, however, left no time to consider the validity of Kurekhin's interpretation. If we watch the footage more carefully this interpretation appears obviously false. Instead of featuring "the same boy" standing next to Lenin, each fragment depicts Lenin with completely different groups of people, some without boys altogether. The last clip—with which Kurekhin concluded: "You see? The very same boy"—actually showed Lenin standing next to a man and a woman (figure 6).

Figure 6. Stills from the excerpts of the film *Live Lenin*, which Kurekhin showed during the broadcast.

Figure 7. A prerecorded interview that Sholokhov conducted with a mycologist and later broadcast during the Lenin-mushroom program.

An Interview with a Mycologist

In addition to the documentary photographs and footage of Lenin, Kurekhin aired prerecorded interviews with real scientists, who, unaware of the claims that he would make in the program, had provided serious expert commentary. One interview was with a scientist from Komarov Botanical Institute in St. Petersburg, whom Sholokhov introduced as follows: "I decided to check Sergei Kurekhin's theory and to interview a specialist. This is Aleksandr Eliseevich Kovalenko, a scientist specializing in mushrooms." Dressed in a white robe, Kovalenko stood in the middle of a laboratory packed with equipment and glass jars, looking extremely self-conscious in front of the camera—all of which added scholarly authenticity to his words (figure 7).

> *SHOLOKHOV:* Tell us please whether macro-mushrooms, as well as micro-mushrooms, possess any narcotic qualities.
>
> *KOVALENKO:* Well, as a specialist in macro-mushrooms, I will speak only about them. So, yes, they possess such qualities. There are mushrooms that have been consumed since prehistoric times in different parts of the globe for this purpose. In places like ancient India and in other Asian countries. Also in our Siberia. And we know most about their consumption in Central and South America.
>
> *SHOLOKHOV:* And what about Mexico?
>
> *KOVALENKO:* The so-called Mexican mushrooms are a group of mushrooms belonging to one family that for many centuries have been used and are still used by American Indians in various rituals. These are very small and unremarkable looking mushrooms; I can show them if you want.
>
> *SHOLOKHOV:* Oh, of course, yes.

> KOVALENKO: All these mushrooms are so unattractive at first glance. For example, this mushroom [shows a mushroom in a jar].
> SHOLOKHOV: Well, I think it is quite cute. . . . Do they need to be boiled or fried or dried?
> KOVALENKO: Well, there is a whole science devoted to this. There are many recipes for cooking such mushrooms.

This interview, although conducted with a genuine scientist, had nothing to do with Lenin. Like the previous visual documents, it provided a general air of authenticity without explicitly addressing Kurekhin's extraordinary claims.

Ironic and Artistic Genres

The most remarkable feature of Kurekhin's performance, then, was his convincing defense of a clearly absurd thesis by creatively supporting it with genuinely authentic documents, facts, and opinions. While Kurekhin invented many elements of this creative tactic himself, he also drew on an existing informal artistic tradition that emerged during the late Soviet period. It was within this tradition that Kurekhin had come of age as an artist, musician, and provocateur in Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s. A central element of this tradition was ironic "overidentification" with the authoritative symbols and meanings of the state—the ironic style that was sometimes referred to as stiob.[21] Among other things, this meant making false claims with an air of utmost sincerity and without visible irony. In overidentification, unlike other genres of irony, it is hard to differentiate between the assertions made seriously and the assertions made ironically. This genre became particularly widespread during late socialism in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (and, in the past ten years, has emerged in U.S. political culture and media as well).[22] In every instance, the irony of overidentification is directed at the formal organization, rhetorical style, and conventions of presentation in the dominant authoritative discourse. Soviet authoritative discourse during perestroika was characterized by its obsession with disclosing the previously unknown facts of Soviet history, ostensibly for the purpose of ridding real socialism of its alleged distortions. Kurekhin's televised provocation may be described as an overidentification with this discourse of disclosure.[23]

21. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever.*
22. Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, "American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (May 2010): 179–221.
23. Kurekhin's wife, Anastasia, later remembered that although he thought about faking perestroika media for a while, there was an immediate model on which he based his television appearance. A few months earlier he had watched a serious television program according to which newly discovered facts about the death of the poet Sergei Esenin suggested that he was killed, rather than committed suicide as was commonly believed. In the program this claim was "based on completely absurd facts. Showing photographs of Esenin's funeral [the program's author] provided such comments: 'Notice where this person is looking; and see, another person is looking in the opposite direction. Which proves that Esenin was killed.'" Having watched this program Kurekhin said: "In this way anything

Kurekhin also drew from the related informal artistic genre that Boris Groys has called, "art documentation." Art documentation is not the creation of artworks per se, but the development of elaborate documents, descriptions, accounts, and other forms of evidence *about* real or imaginary events.[24] Groys associates this genre, which emerged among Soviet informal art groups in the 1970s and 1980s, with the "Collective Action Group" (Gruppa "Kollektivnye deistviia"), whose activities "took place outside Moscow with only the members of the group and a few invited guests present." These activities were "made accessible to a wider audience only through documentation, in the form of photographs and texts."[25] These documents, however, were never accompanied by an explanation of what the events meant or what the participants thought.[26]

Kurekhin would have been familiar with parallel developments of this genre that emerged in Leningrad during the same time. The "Necrorealists," for example, organized absurd actions in suburban forests. Their live events were only open to group members; documentary footage was later publicly exhibited in private apartments. Members of the group never explained why they carried out these events and why they meticulously documented them.[27] Another group, the "Mit′ki," focused on developing strange lifestyles and everyday rituals to problematize the boundary between life and art. Their activities were also known publicly only through the documentary writings and drawings about their lives that members of the group circulated.[28] These documented lifestyles—in texts, photographs, documentary footage, and other forms of evidence—interfered with the Soviet everyday, creating strange and often inexplicable distortions within it. Although the documents did not address the purpose of these actions, and although these actions did not fit into traditional understandings of political opposition, they nevertheless worked to displace the very definition of what constituted a political identity in the Soviet state. Kurekhin was not only familiar with these groups (and others like them) but had actually collaborated with them on several projects (particularly in Pop-Mekhanika). His televised hoax was informed by this established genre of *art documentation.*

At the same time, however, there was an important difference between Kurekhin's hoax and the practices of late Soviet art groups. Instead of doc-

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at all can be proven." Elena Pomazan, "Anastasiia Kurekhina: Sergei byl ochen′ svetlym chelovekom," *Komsomol′skaia pravda,* 18 August 2005 at kp.ru/daily/23563/118278 (last accessed 15 March 2011).

24. Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 54.

25. Ibid., 58.

26. Groys also traces the shift to art documentation in contemporary western art. Ibid, 59–60.

27. Alexei Yurchak, "Necro-Utopia: The Politics of Indistinction and the Aesthetics of the Non-Soviet," *Current Anthropology* 49, no. 2 (April 2008): 199–224.

28. Alexei Yurchak, "Suspending the Political: Late-Soviet Artistic Experiments on the Margins of the State," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 713–33. For the broader context in which such groups operated, see Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever.*

umenting his own inexplicable actions, Kurekhin documented the role of Lenin and other leaders in the Bolshevik revolution. Instead of presenting documents of his own artistic creation, Kurekhin presented real historical documents. Instead of simply presenting them without commentary, he readily described them with and used them as evidence for his new interpretations. Finally, instead of publicizing his documentation in small, semiprivate spaces, Kurekhin presented it on state-run national television for an audience of millions. Because of these unique features, Kurekhin's provocation was able to interfere with historical reality with the kind of force that the genre of art documentation could never achieve. This was not a mere art project but a full-scale public hoax that actually fooled or confused many people. To understand it, therefore, it is crucial to compare it, not only with experimental art practices, but also with public hoaxes and forgeries more broadly.

Provenance

A curious case of art forgery, which took place at about the same time in England, provides a particularly useful point of comparison. In the early 1990s, the international art world was shaken by the discovery of an art forgery masterminded by the English con man John Drewe. This forgery was unprecedented in both its immense scale—hundreds of fake works by Alberto Giacometti, Marc Chagall, Jean Dubuffet, Ben Nicholson, Georges Braque, and Nicolas de Staël were sold through respectable art auctions for a decade—and its method. While most art forgers produce perfect imitations of well-known masterpieces, Drewe produced original pictures of unremarkable quality, claiming that they were the previously unknown works of great masters. These mediocre pictures were then accompanied by perfect provenance—documentation of the pictures' origin and history. Instead of focusing on the internal quality of the paintings, Drewe focused on the external quality of their documentation. He forged not artwork, but paperwork.

To prepare a perfect provenance, Drewe composed elaborate decade-spanning correspondences between people who had never existed, receipts for sales of these nonexistent pictures between different countries and family estates, beautiful art catalogs for exhibitions that never took place, and records of counterfactual restoration work. These perfectly crafted documents were not only presented to art dealers, but also secretly planted into the records of prominent archives and museum collections— London's Tate Gallery, the Institute of Contemporary Art, the National Art Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The fake canvases themselves were actually quite mediocre. The artist who painted them for Drewe worked quickly, sloppily, and using cheap vinyl paints instead of genuine expensive oils. This alone could have been easily detected, if the art experts had only bothered to check. The perfect provenances rendered the intrinsic quality of the accompanying mediocre canvases relatively invisible and fooled an army of experts, critics, and

auctioneers into authenticating them.[29] After Drewe's con was discovered, the director of the Tate Gallery admitted to having personally authenticated two of the fake works (supposedly by Nicholson) "not because the pictures were good—in fact, the general consensus was that they were unimpressive at best—but because the provenancing was flawless."[30] Other reputable academics authenticated the pictures based on the falsified pieces of evidence that had been placed in the archives. Before Drewe's scam, an art expert commented, "the security in archives and libraries focused on preventing valuables being taken *out;* there wasn't corresponding diligence to prevent stuff coming *in.*"[31] By seeding perfectly faked documentation among genuine archival data, Drewe brought hundreds of previously nonexistent "masterpieces" to life. His, however, was more than a criminal scam, for it ultimately exposed a hidden principle at work in the contemporary western art world—that the value of a work of art is not necessarily rooted in its intrinsic quality. This reflects the provocative claim that Michel Foucault made in his essay, "What Is an Author?" For a work to be recognized as genuine art, Foucault argued, it must be positioned within a certain "index of reality"—the modern system of classification that defines the work in terms of external documentation and cultural conventions.[32] One element in this index is the author's "name," which in this case refers not only to the actual person who produced the work but also to the "cultural space" within which the work can be recognized as art, and outside of which cannot.[33] What Drewe skillfully forged was not art per se but an "index of reality" for the late capitalist art market, with which he could transform unknown mediocre drawings into outstanding artworks.

In this way, Drewe's forgery is similar to Kurekhin's hoax. Taken on its own, Kurekhin's statement that Lenin was a mushroom sounds irrational and absurd. In retrospect, it seems baffling, even ridiculous that anyone could have been confused by it. Kurekhin's audiences thought the claim appeared plausible, however, not because they were gullible enough to believe it, but because, like Drewe, Kurekhin had directed their attention away from the "intrinsic quality" (literal meaning) of the statement and onto the flawlessness of the documents (provenance) supporting the statement. Both Kurekhin and Drewe slipped fake evidence into genuine archival materials. In both hoaxes, what mattered was not simply *what* was presented but *how* it was presented.

29. Peter Landesman, "A 20th-Century Master Scam," *New York Times Magazine,* 18 July 1999, 32, 37. See also Laney Salisbury and Aly Sujo, *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art* (New York, 2009).

30. Landesman, "A 20th-Century Master Scam," 37.

31. David Cohen, "Review of Laney Salisbury and Aly Sujo, *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art,*" in ArtCritical.com, at artcritical.com/DavidCohen/2009/DCProvenance.htm (last accessed 15 March 2011). Emphasis in the original.

32. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in James D. Faubion, ed., *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology,* vol. 2 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954—1984* (New York, 1998), 205–22.

33. Ibid., 210, 221.

Kurekhin's hoax, like Drewe's, also exposed a hidden cultural prin-
ciple—the fact that in Soviet state and media discourse, a proposition
could be accepted as factual, not because of its intrinsic quality (its literal
meaning, the falsifiability of its argument, how plausible it sounded), but
because it had been articulated in an authoritative form that, although
"external" to the proposition's literal meaning, could mark it as belonging
to the space of *unquestionable facts.* There was, however, also a crucial dif-
ference between the two hoaxes. Whereas Drewe's goal was to fool both
the experts and the general public, and ideally to never have the con dis-
covered, Kurekhin actually intended his hoax to be discovered and later
to produce laughter that could expose something important about the
Soviet system in 1991.

What, then, exactly did his provocation expose? And why have its po-
litical and ludic effects continued to resonate over the past twenty years?
To answer these questions, we must first contextualize the event within
Kurekhin's broader aesthetic and political project. What other activities
did he pursue in this vein? How did he understand them? How did others
react to them?

The Other

In the 1980s, Kurekhin was known mostly in the informal artistic milieus
of Leningrad and Moscow. After his Lenin-mushroom hoax, however, he
was famous nationally and could pursue grander and more daring experi-
ments. In 1995, Kurekhin publicly announced his support for Aleksandr
Dugin, the ideologue of the extreme nationalist Eurasionism movement
(Evraziistvo), who argued that Russia's cultural, political, and religious
identity made it incompatible with western liberalism.[34] The liberal intel-
ligentsia was extremely hostile to Dugin's ideas, and Kurekhin knew it. In
the fall of 1995, he convinced Dugin to move from Moscow to St. Peters-
burg and to run for a seat in the Duma. He promised to help Dugin in or-
ganizing his election campaign, participated with him in several meetings
with prospective voters, and organized a Pop-Mekhanika performance
entitled "Kurekhin dlia Dugina" (Kurekhin for Dugin) (figure 8).

The reaction of artists, intellectuals, and journalists to these activities
was mixed. Some criticized Kurekhin, others defended him, and most
were completely confused about his intentions. Was Kurekhin seriously
promoting Dugin's nationalistic ideas or was he ridiculing them? Gen-
erating this kind of uncertainty in his audience was an important aspect

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34. In the mid-1990s, Dugin was also associated with Eduard Limonov's National-
Bolshevik Party, the NBP. Later the two had a falling out and became bitter political rivals.
On Eurasianism, see Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Wash-
ington, D.C., 2008); Anton Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism: The New
Right *à la Russe," Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (June 2009): 697–716; Dmitry Shlapentokh,
"Dugin Eurasianism: A Window on the Minds of the Russian Elite or an Intellectual Ploy?"
Studies in East European Thought 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 215–36. See also Sergei
Oushakine, "The Russian Tragedy: From Ethnic Trauma to Ethnic Vitality," *Patriotism of
Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, 2009), 79–129.

Figure 8. Kurekhin (left) and Dugin. A promotional picture for Dugin's election campaign. Kurekhin staged the photo as an ironic imitation of standard communist ideological portraits: face in a semiprofile, glance directed just above the horizon into the future.

of Kurekhin's work more broadly; he cultivated it as part of his aesthetic and political project. This is part of the reason why Kurekhin and his project have always been difficult to describe. The film director Vladimir Nepevnyi, who collected hundreds of hours of documentary footage from Kurekhin's interviews and performances for the 2003 documentary *Kurekhin* concluded: "he never spoke in an open and straightforward way, in his personal voice, not hiding behind his dead irony. A certain character was always speaking instead of him. . . . This was always some provocation. This is why our idea [of showing the *real* Kurekhin] was quite risky and not easy to achieve. I literally had to look for microscopic fragments . . . where he appeared to the viewer without his usual masks."[35] Nepevnyi, who did not know Kurekhin personally, assumed that behind Kurekhin's performance he would find a different "real" person. That this different person never quite emerges in the documentary, however, suggests that Nepevnyi may have been mistaken. Most artists and intellectuals who knew and collaborated with Kurekhin claim that, although he was a genius, it is indeed difficult to explain what he did and who he was. One commentator in a popular weekly magazine wrote: "Every judgment of Kurekhin as a musician, composer, arranger, creator of 'Pop-Mekhanika' is inaccurate. . . . When you faced Kurekhin you instantly faced a problem: Who is he? How to define him, even in terms of his own occupation? What *was* his occupation?"[36] One literary critic agreed: "Maybe he was a genius composer, maybe a thinker-provocateur, maybe a mad showman. Each of these hypotheses, and all of them taken together, are still far from the

35. "Velikii mistifikator Sergei Kurekhin," Pravda.ru, 17 June 2005, at www.pravda.ru/culture/music/modern/17–06-2005/51300-kurekhin-0 (last accessed 15 March 2011).

36. Vladimir Chernov's introductory notes to Aleksandr Kushnir's "Kurekhin," *Ogonek,* 5 June 2000, 48–53. Emphasis in the original.

truth."[37] Even the film director Debizhev, with whom Kurekhin worked on several projects, enigmatically insisted that he "was neither a musician, nor an actor, nor a thinker. He was Kurekhin."[38] The words of another film director, Sergei Ovcharov, seemed to summarize these impressions: "Sergei was an enigma, and those who claim they know him are mistaken."[39]

Many people have described Kurekhin in terms of some radical *otherness*—as a saint, a madman, a man from the future, or even an extraterrestrial. As a musical biography once argued: "Due to some anomalous mistake Kurekhin was born not in his era. He should have been born some time in the third or fourth millennium, when everyone will be as beautiful and intelligent as he is."[40] Sholokhov himself recalled that, "When you faced Kurekhin you faced something divine. A young god descended to Earth, and we were lucky to have met him."[41] The artist Viktor Tikhomirov went one step further, writing: "If we allow that extraterrestrials may live among us, then Sergei Kurekhin was one of them. Extraterrestrial origin is the best explanation of the unusual nature of his charm. . . . When he entered a room, everyone realized that before that moment their life was not life. . . . When he called you on the phone, the call always came as if from a different planet. Everything interested him acutely. Regular human traits expanded in him beyond the limits of the possible."[42] As philosopher Viktor Mazin elaborated, "Sergei Kurekhin is beyond systems and definitions. . . . [He] is a man from outer space. . . . He is curious about life on Earth in all its manifestations. He is interested in the physics of microelements and in the art of 'the New Wild' [*Novykh dikikh*], in Russian religious philosophy and in different schools of semiotics, in psychoanalysis and in the aesthetics of the avant-garde, and in the music of Mozart and Cage."[43] This extraterrestrial curiosity, Mazin suggested, also explained Kurekhin's interest in Dugin: "He also does not fail to visit the headquarters of the National-Bolsheviks. His attitude toward them is the same as toward the democrats-bureaucrats: interest, curiosity, distance. He is an extraterrestrial. He comes to learn and understand, not to keep his distance."[44]

When Kurekhin died unexpectedly in July 1996, at age 42, his death itself produced similar reactions. It seemed uncannily fitting that Kurekhin's death was not only unexpected but also caused by an extremely rare disease, cardiac sarcoma (cancer of the heart). As a commentator in a popular monthly wrote: this disease "happens either once in a hundred

37. Andrei Pirogov and Tekle Gil'man, "Neopredelimyi Kurekhin," March 2001, at www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/200478/ (last accessed 15 March 2011).

38. "Interv'iu s Sergeem Debizhevym (4 maia 2004 goda)," in Karklit, "Fenomen Sergeia Kurekhina."

39. "Velikii mistifikator Sergei Kurekhin."

40. "Pamiati Sergeia Kurekhina," *Music Library,* at muslib.ru/band5444_biography.html (last accessed 15 March 2011).

41. *Programma "Piatoe Koleso": "Lenin-grib."*

42. Viktor Tikhomirov, "V ozhidanii podrostka," *Krasnyi,* April 2004, 36.

43. Viktor Mazin, "Inoplanetianin," *Krasnyi,* April 2004, 38.

44. Ibid.

years, or once in a million patients, or does not exist in nature at all."[45] Some even thought his death was staged, as yet another daring provocation. When the news of his death was announced, *Nezavisimaia gazeta* later claimed, "Everyone laughed: yes, of course, that Kurekhin! He invented yet another gag."[46] Others thought his daring provocations themselves had inadvertently caused the death. One reporter suggested: "Perhaps he glanced into some forbidden spheres."[47] Another elaborated: "According to one legend he died after he called the devil during a spiritual séance; according to another, he fell victim to his own interest in voodoo."[48] Some of the critics who had attacked Kurekhin for his Lenin-mushroom program and his support of Dugin attributed his death to careless joking. Dmitrii Galkovskii wrote that because Kurekhin violated God's command that "one should not mix life with farce," he was exposed to the devil, who did not fail to make a joke in return: "Lenin—mushroom, Kurekhin—cancer."[49] Tat'iana Moskvina agreed, claiming that Kurekhin died because he had lost the ability to distinguish between reality and play, between real human "blood that flows in our veins" and ordinary "cranberry juice."[50]

Suggestions of radical otherness had followed Kurekhin from the beginning, long before he became engaged in political pranks. His first recording of piano improvisations, *The Ways of Freedom,* which was clandestinely made in the Soviet Union in the early 1980s and released in London in 1981 by Leo Records, was met with a mixture of admiration and suspicion: an ordinary human could not play like this. One British musical critic observed that, "Occasionally he plays so fast with such clarity, one is tempted to believe that the tape's been sped up."[51] A later critic, reviewing the twentieth-anniversary reissue of the record in 2001 noted that the tape had indeed been "sped up but it was accidental. . . . Sped up or not it is still a technically impressive achievement . . . it was his rhythmic

45. Ekaterina Sadur, "Sergei Kurekhin: Chernyi romantik," *Domovoi,* no. 1 (2000), at darlok.tomsk.ru/content/kuryokhin/black_romantic/Wcbf03dde48b97.htm (last accessed 15 March 2011).

46. Dmitrii Galkovskii, "Grib: Rusofoby i fungofily," *Nezavisimaia gazeta,* 29 April 2004. Kurekhin's death made the rare disease famous and led to the proliferation of stories about making death part of a scientific experiment, faking it for a joke or in order to change one's identity and name. According to a 2005 bestselling novel by Pavel Krusanov, *Amerikanskaia dyrka* (American Hole), in 1996 Kurekhin staged his death, changed his name and appearance, and relocated to the city of Pskov, where he runs a firm specializing in outrageous practical jokes. The most recent is designed to fool the United States.

47. Ol'ga Tereshkova, "Kultura. Sergei Kurekhin: Ego urok drugim nauka?" *Moskovskii komsomolets,* no. 269 (30 November 2000), at dlib.eastview.com/sources/article.jsp?id=77569 (last accessed 15 March 2011).

48. "Viktor Toporov: Kurekhin pomogaet zagranitse," *Vzglyad. Delovaia gazeta,* 26 October 2005, at www.vz.ru/columns/2005/10/26/10913.html (last accessed 15 March 2011).

49. Galkovskii, "Grib."

50. Sergei Sholokhov, interview with Tat'iana Moskvina on the program *Tikhii dom: Pamiati Kurekhina.* See also Tat'iana Moskvina, *Muzhskaia tetrad',* at librus11.ilive.ro/tatjana_moskvina_muzhskaja_tetrad_57142.html (last accessed 15 March 2011).

51. Chris Kelsey, *All Music Guide,* today.answers.com/topic/the-ways-of-freedom (accessed 17 December 2010; no longer accessible).

accuracy and inventive imagination that allowed the sped up material to become such a phenomenon; a lesser musician would have undoubtedly been dismissed as a charlatan."[52] An American music critic reviewing the same anniversary edition, however, wrote: "Originally released in 1981, this historic recording created controversy both inside and outside the Soviet Union . . . and no—the tapes have not been sped up—this is the ridiculous speed that Sergey excels in!"[53]

Kurekhin's otherness has been compared to that of the traditional Russian figure known as the *iurodivyi* (holy fool).[54] Although some elements of his style can indeed be traced to this cultural trope, others are distinctly late-Soviet and therefore the overall effect is quite unique. A recent cultural history described the ethical position of the medieval *iurodivye* as "monologic," "firmly authoritarian," and infused with a sense of superiority. By breaking social norms, iurodivye demonstrated that there existed another, absolute truth to which they alone had access.[55] Kurekhin's position was different: he did not believe in absolute truth let alone in the idea of having unique access to it. He approached every truth with "interest, curiosity, distance," as Mazin described. This tactic has firm roots in the late Soviet period, when it was practiced by many members of the last Soviet generation, especially within informal artistic milieus. The approach affected not only their artistic style but also their senses of self—as ones in a position of *otherness* toward political and ethical truths as such.[56] Elsewhere I have termed this position *the politics of indistinction.*[57] This is precisely the position that Kurekhin cultivated as an artist and sometimes explained.

Parasite

Although it would be wrong to accept Kurekhin's words about himself at face value, it would be equally wrong to dismiss them outright. In speaking about himself, Kurekhin combined serious commentary *about* his work with the provocative improvisation that was a *part of* his work. Any conversation with Kurekhin, therefore, potentially provided a unique opportu-

52. Bruce Coates in *Rubberneck,* British magazine of experimental music, at www.btinternet.com/~rubberneck/cdlist11.html (accessed 17 May 2006; no longer accessible).

53. Review for New York's Downtown Music Gallery, www.downtownmusicgallery. com/Main/news/20010413.htm (last accessed 15 March 2011). Some musicians attribute the remarkable speed of Kurekhin's piano playing to a "very non-academic position of his hands." See, for example, Sergey Letov, "Brief History of New Improvisatory Music in Soviet Russia," *Special Radio,* at www.specialradio.net/art/003.shtml (last accessed 15 March 2011).

54. "Velikii mistifikator Sergei Kurekhin." See also Chernov, *Introduction.*

55. Sergei A. Ivanov, *Blazhennye pokhaby: Kul'turnaia istoriia iurodstva* (Moscow, 2005), 382.

56. This position should not be confused with immorality—moral judgment was not suspended but instead the unspoken assumptions behind moral judgments were explored.

57. In addition to Kurekhin, two prominent examples of practioners of this politics of indistinction in Leningrad were the Necrorealists and the Mit'ki. See my "Necro-Utopia" and "Suspending the Political."

nity to see his aesthetic-political method from the inside. When I spoke with Kurekhin about his work in April 1995, his improvised comments oscillated between serious analysis and dazzling irony. I started by noting that he often seemed to be laughing at people, ideas, and phenomena, and I asked whether he considered ridicule to be an important element in his artistic style. Kurekhin answered that ridicule is conducted from a position of certainty and that he was suspicious of such positions because they often fail to recognize the uniqueness of a given context:[58]

> I do not relate to any cultural model from the position of ridicule. Because I understand that all cultural models are self-sufficient and internally comprehensive [*samodostatochny i samoznachimy*] and can be evaluated only from the perspective of their own internal dynamics. For example, the aesthetics of the late Soviet period cannot be evaluated against the criteria of postmodernism or the criteria of, say, an African culture. Their terminologies are internal. Certain things that existed during that period, before perestroika, made sense in that context. I understand this now and intuitively understood this then. This is why there is no ridicule in what I do. . . . When I see that something is joked about or ridiculed, I do not like it. I am not a joker. . . . Ridicule is rooted in skepticism toward something and for that reason seems inappropriate to me. Skepticism does not offer any positive program; it is unable to offer any positive construction. Many great thinkers reached skepticism, and it devoured them; among them my favorite philosopher Gustav Shpet. . . . But one must offer some positive construction. Because when a person offers a positive construction he is responsible.

Kurekhin continued: "What I do is something different—it is a form of parasitising on an existing archetype. This is precisely what I do—parasitising. I am a parasite. And also a bastard, a cretin, and a piece of shit." These last words were added with a chuckle, to distance himself from didactic seriousness, but his analysis was anything but a joke. Kurekhin added: "I would like to introduce the word *parasite* as a new term." Indeed, this term proves remarkably precise in describing the politics of his aesthetic method. Kurekhin explained: "A parasite is ambivalent. Being a parasite vis-à-vis a system means, on the one hand, possessing a structure that is completely independent of the system, but, on the other hand, being part of the system, feeding off it. . . . Parasitizing is like looking deep into things—not negating, ridiculing, or judging them, but making visible their internal criteria." Kurekhin suggested that the relation of the parasite to the organism, or system, that it inhabits goes beyond the binary opposition between being a part of something and being an external intruder. Instead, their relationship is symbiotic: the parasite forces the system to *change* in order to accommodate or expel it. As Michel Serres famously pointed out, in French the word *parasite* has three distinct meanings—*social parasite, biological parasite,* and *noise* or *interference* (within a channel of communication).[59] This coincidence of meanings

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58. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995.
59. Serres, *The Parasite.*

is not a chance linguistic occurrence, for the three concepts are actually linked semantically. Consider the meaning of parasite as noise in the channel of communication. In the usual understanding of communication, noise is an unwanted interference in an otherwise clear connection between sender and receiver. Serres argues, however, that noise is actually more complex. Because a communicated message always passes through a medium, we could also say that it passes through noise (from static white noise to mishearings, mistellings, rumors, and so on). Noise, therefore, plays an important constitutive role in communication. This can be extended to the other two senses of parasite—just as noise has a constitutive function in communication, a parasite has a constitutive function in the social or biological organism it inhabits. By means of disorder, the parasite infuses the system with a new order.

Kurekhin's aesthetic approach was to always occupy and cultivate the position of a parasite, who, having infiltrated the system, introduced noise into its authoritative channels of communication. His goal was not to ridicule the system but to give it a new, unfamiliar, way of looking at itself. In this way, he offered the kind of "positive construction" for which he had argued.

This understanding helps to clarify Kurekhin's intentions in the Dugin affair. Kurekhin, I believe, was neither seriously promoting Dugin's ideas nor ridiculing them. He focused on Dugin because the post-Soviet liberal intelligentsia was unanimously hostile to him. By overidentifying with Dugin's illiberal rhetoric, and by doing this through mass forms of communication (in the propaganda materials he devised for Dugin's election campaign, in meetings with the electorate, in the Pop-Mekhanika performance), Kurekhin provoked the moral outrage of the liberal intelligentsia. This outrage revealed the latter's Romantic attachment to the concepts of "freedom" and "democracy" (key terms in the discourse of the time), with each understood as a timeless, ahistorical value, disconnected from concrete contexts (such as the market). Blinded by this Romantic view, the liberal intelligentsia was unable to recognize a fact that would become obvious a few years later: that the post-Soviet advent of *freedom* had actually contributed to the production of new forms of *unfreedom*—particularly the mass impoverishment brought about by the neoliberal reforms of "shock therapy." As Kurekhin put it: "At first there was a feeling that the era of freedom was ascending. Then freedom arrived. But freedom is a dangerous thing."[60]

Many artists who collaborated with Kurekhin suspected that his support of Dugin was a provocation. Two of them even argued that the political campaign was "another version of his Lenin-mushroom [provocation]." By convincing Dugin to run for office in St. Petersburg, "where no one knew him and where most people supported democrats . . . Kurekhin tricked him."[61] The result was Dugin's complete and utter flop at the elec-

60. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995.
61. The two are the musicians Sergei and Egor Letov, who participated in Pop-Mekhanika. See Sergei Zharikov, Sergei Letov, and Egor Letov, "Paradigma svastiki. Ne-

tions. Years later, Dugin himself noted: "Kurekhin was interested in . . . Eurasianism very ironically, with internal irony, if you will. But that irony was not obvious to those who surrounded him, because in that society this topic was taboo."[62]

Several years after Kurekhin's untimely death, Russian intellectuals began to develop a much more critical view of neoliberal reform. Some of the arguments that Kurekhin had articulated in his "support" of Dugin in 1995, all of which had at the time been branded "extremist," ended up in the mainstream of intellectual and political discourse. Among these was his claim that Russia needed to have a viable *national idea* and that this idea would be different from the one in the west.

As with Kurekhin's Dugin affair, considering the criticism that was directed at the Lenin-mushroom program will help us identify what this program ultimately managed to achieve. Dmitrii Galkovskii wrote that the program reduced Lenin from a dictator to a benign joke, averting public criticism from the "communist regime" and making the trial of the Communist Party unlikely.[63] "Of course one may also laugh," argued Galkovskii. "There was much comical in Lenin. But only MAY and only ALSO, as in a free supplement or a cartoon on the last page of a newspaper. But when there is nothing else apart from that, when in the center there are short chuckles, while all over the country there are still monuments on various Lenin Avenues, then, dear sirs, who are you laughing at?"[64] Although Galkovskii's critique was made from a liberal position, it paralleled, almost verbatim, the attacks on Kurekhin from antiliberal camps. Writing in the nationalist *Russkii kur'er,* the poet Konstantin Kedrov described Kurekhin's provocation as an example of insidious postmodernism that holds no values and ideals dear, including the moral foundations of the socialist past: "For a long time all of you have been living in a postmodernist world. They promised you communism and then capitalism, but you ended up in typical postmodernism."[65] Both Galkovskii and Kedrov, in other words, thought that Kurekhin's hoax undermined an essential moral canon of life, without which good and evil could not be measured. The very fact that Kurekhin's treatment of the Soviet system could be identically criticized from two supposedly opposite positions points to the deep paradox within that system, a paradox that Kurekhin's program itself had intended to make visible. What was this paradox?

Before perestroika, political discourse was party-run and adhered to strict forms. The literal meanings of communist ideology were beyond

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dobitaia kontora," *Kontrkul'tura,* December 2001, at www.laertsky.com/sk/sk_003.htm (last accessed 15 March 2011).

62. Aleksandr Lipnitskii, interview with Aleksandr Dugin on the program *Elovaia submarina,* Nostalgia television channel, July 2006.

63. Galkovskii, "Grib." A similar critique was produced by western observers; see Ivor Stodolsky, "Lenin's a Mushroom and Hitler a Superstar: Poshlost' and the Politics of Russian Steb: Extremism and Irony in Russian Nonconformist Culture" (paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research, Budapest, September 2005).

64. Galkovskii, "Grib."

65. Konstantin Kedrov, "Postmodernizm, khot' imia diko . . . ," *Russkii kur'er,* 7 July 2004, at www.sakharov-center.ru/museum/exhibitionhall/religion_notabene/rusk70704.htm (last accessed 15 March 2011).

public discussion, and, therefore, largely irrelevant in most contexts and to most people.[66] During perestroika, however, these literal meanings became the center of public attention. Arguing that the ideals of socialism needed to be cleansed of the distortions imposed on them during the previous periods of Soviet history, the party announced its intention to return to the original ideals, from which a healthier version of socialism could emerge. This goal, however, was marked by an ontological paradox that would become increasingly apparent by the final years of perestroika: since the original ideas of socialism *had* been distorted by the previous periods, it was unclear what they were and how to return to them. A typical article from 1990, published in the monthly party magazine *Kommunist,* reflects this paradox. The article begins by describing the central task of reform in the usual manner: "to cleanse socialism of Stalin's distortions and once again endow it with the true ideals of Marx and Lenin, the soul and heart of socialism that Stalin had stolen." Later, the same article presents the central task of perestroika differently, as, in fact, an attempt to "step on the path of experiments and not dogmas [and] to endow the ideals of socialism with new, earlier unknown content." The task of returning to the *true* ideals of Marxism-Leninism, in other words, had become equated with stepping into the *unknown.*[67]

Kurekhin's hoax aimed to illuminate this paradox. He infiltrated the system's internal structure like a parasite, faithfully reproducing the forms of its political rhetoric (its language, mass media, system of presenting evidence, and its focus on recovering original and previously unknown meanings hidden inside canonical documents, images, and texts) and, in so doing, presented the absurd core of this system that its own reforms had inadvertently unclothed. In truth, the *authentic, uncorrupted foundation* of the Soviet system, to which the party claimed it was necessary to return, could not really be known and was, therefore, open to any interpretation, including the interpretation that it had been a mushroom.

Kurekhin's revelation was clearly comic, causing many people to laugh. It was, however, also tragic, because instead of suggesting that the moral foundation of Soviet history had been distorted during previous periods (by Stalin and others) and could, therefore, be recovered, it suggested that this moral foundation was ephemeral from the outset. Instead of undermining the foundational moral canon, Kurekhin made visible the fact that this canon had always been void.

While very few people claimed to have instantly recognized the program as a hoax, most remembered being perplexed, shaken, and uncertain about what to make of it.[68] They experienced a peculiar mixture of astonishment that such "insanity" could be shown on television, confusion

66. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever.*
67. V. Sogrin, "Levaia, pravaia gde storona? Razmyshleniia o sovremennykh politcheskikh diskussiiakh," *Kommunist,* 1990, no. 3 (February): 36. See a more detailed discussion of this argument in Alexei Yurchak, "If Lenin Were Alive He Would Know What to Do: Banished Life of the Leader," *Qui Parle,* 19 Fall 2011.
68. Some people who watched the program later published their memories of it. In 1991 and in 1995, during fieldwork, I also spoke with many viewers about their experiences.
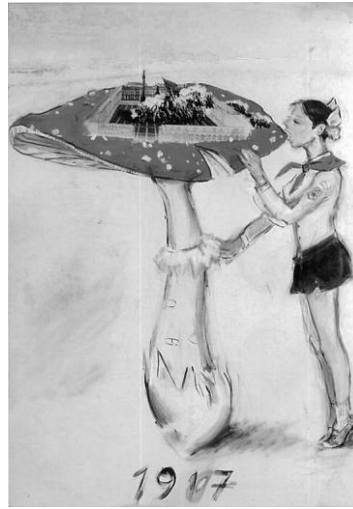
Figure 9. *Red October,* **1917 by St. Petersburg artist Dasha Fursey (2007, oil on canvas). A young pioneer girl is biting a hallucinogenic fly agaric mushroom (***mukhomor***) on top of which the central spectacle of the October revolution— the storming of the Winter Palace—is taking place. According to the artist, the picture is devoted to Kurekhin and reflects today's nostalgia for the naive Romanticism of the Soviet socialist past. The pioneer girl on the picture was not brainwashed by the ideological rhetoric about the October revolution, but rather enticed, inspired, and intoxicated by the Romanticism of its heroic images. Dasha Fursey, interview, St. Petersburg, 21 July 2007. See an extended discussion in Alexei Yurchak, "Post-Post-Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts, and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today," in Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon Jr., eds.,** *What Is Soviet Now: Identities, Legacies, Memories* **(Berlin, 2008), 257–76.**

about whether the program's hosts meant what they were saying to be taken seriously or as a joke, and unpleasantness (though also amusement) that there might be some truth in what was being claimed. In the words of one viewer, "we were laughing, but at the same time looking at each other: what if this is true?"[69] For another, the program was "on the one hand, funny, but on the other, distressing. Physically distressing."[70] For most people, the experience marked the radical break that was taking place in their world. Actor Konstantin Raikin, who was initially fooled by the program but later realized it was a hoax, "suddenly felt that life had changed. . . . For me, he [Kurekhin] is one of those people with whom I associate the feeling of a new era in the life of our country."[71] This feeling was shared by many after the broadcast and continues to be shared today, twenty years later. Although some intellectuals have criticized Kurekhin's

69. A participant in the Russian Web site Dnevniki (Diaries), submitted on 15 March 2006, at www.diary.ru/search/?q=%EF%E5%F0%E5%E4%E0%F7%E0+%EB%E5%ED%E8%ED+%E3%F0%E8%E1 (last accessed 15 March 2011).
70. Svetlana Nosova, interview, St. Petersburg, Summer 1995.
71. Sergei Sholokhov, interview with Konstantin Raikin on the program *Tikhii dom: Pamiati Kurekhina.*

prank, others, including artists and writers, continue to celebrate it as one of the turning points in the perception of the communist project and Soviet history. Some artists have even seen this hoax as an attempt to recover the pure and positive Romanticism at the basis of the communist idea, a Romanticism later forgotten (figure 9).

Kurekhin's prank also reveals something about the genre of comic overidentification more broadly. When this genre mimics dominant forms of political rhetoric, employing mass channels of communication and mediation (which is often possible during a time of change), it can expose unspoken truths about political ideologies that could not have been easily articulated in other forms of critique.[72] Kurekhin performed his comedy at the threshold of a crumbling civilization. His revelations were hilarious, liberating, and devastating all at once. Real comedy, as Serres once wrote, is truly "the parasite of tragedy."[73]

72. An example of how this may work in the west is the group The Yes Men. See Boyer and Yurchak, "American Stiob."
73. Serres, *The Parasite,* 232.