

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

MYTHOPOETICS OF POST-SOVIET LITERARY FICTION: VIKTOR PELEVIN AND  
VLADIMIR SOROKIN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SLAVIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

BY  
THEODORE ORSON TROTMAN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  
DECEMBER 2017

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Figure 1: Putin and Zaldostanov at the Sevastopol Bike Show

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## Abstract

I sought to answer four broadly-construed, fundamental questions when writing this dissertation: 1) What is the role of literary fiction in contemporary Russian culture, and what is its relationship with other elements of culture, e.g., mass culture, popular culture, and myth? 2) How is Russian postmodernist literary fiction related to its preceding movements, e.g., Sots-Art, Socialist Realism, and modernism? 3) What is the role of the genre of utopia in the literary culture of the post-Soviet era, and how is such utopianism related to Soviet myth, mass culture, and Socialist Realism? 4) What can the sub-genre of dystopia tell us about the future of Russian literary fiction, and how can we reconcile the current manifestations of dystopian fiction with both extant models of utopian literary fiction and contemporary Russian culture? I answer these questions through engagement with works of writers of particular significance to both post-Soviet, Russian culture and also to the literary culture that it breeds.

No other writers in the post-Soviet era remain as relevant to a study of the place of literary fiction in contemporary Russian culture as Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin. For this reason, I believe that this examination of post-Soviet, Russian literary fiction, through the lens of individual works by Sorokin and Pelevin, will accurately address the contemporary role of literary fiction in Russian culture and helped bridge the gap between Western and Russian understandings of the crisis that has been identified in post-Soviet, literary culture. This examination offers some sort of an answer to the question of the state of literary fiction a quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union and provides an understanding of how post-Soviet literary fiction appropriates myths to influence worldviews and inform post-communist culture.

I concluded that 1) Literary fiction continues to be a mythogenic agent in post-Soviet, Russian culture. 2) Such mythopoesis has contributed to the persistence of the novelistic form, in

that same culture, despite the looming sense of crisis. 3) As it makes its comeback, the genre of Russian literary utopia and, by extension, its subgenre, dystopia, have greatly contributed to the continued centrality of literary fiction to Russian culture.

## Introduction

### Models of Criticism

In his 1993 essay, “Dystrophy of the ‘Thick’ and Bespredel of the ‘Thin’”, about the publishing crisis of the 1990s. Vasilii Aksenov laments the decline of literary magazines like *Novyi Mir* and *Iunost’* and predicts the deterioration of literature “into a rotting underground where, along with everything else, the ‘thick journals’ will also perish.”<sup>1</sup> Nearly a quarter-century later, Aksenov has been proven correct about the relative demise of the “thick journal,” but contrary to his expectations, Russian literature has continued to occupy the center of cultural life. The resilience of literary fiction in Russia can in part be attributed to the rise of diverse and pervasive new media that Aksenov could not have imagined and that have taken up the mantle of the ‘thick journal’ in contemporary, Russian, literary culture and thus avert the crisis that Aksenov describes. And yet, despite the vibrancy of contemporary literary culture in Russia, literary critics in Russia and the West continue to echo Aksenov’s fears that the central importance of literature in Russian cultural life is threatened by a persistent sense of crisis.

Historians and literary scholars, such as Rosalind Marsh and Julie Buckler have echoed Aksenov by claiming that literary fiction has been marginalized in the post-Soviet era and that Russian culture is experiencing a crisis in regard to the diminishing role of the author and his works. This perspective on the decline of literary fiction has some validity if one considers the role of the author in transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era. In his *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*, Andrew Baruch Wachtel provides a nuanced analysis of the relevance of Russian and East European writers and their works in the

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<sup>1</sup> Aksenov, Vasilii and Mozur, Joseph. “Dystrophy of the ‘Thick’ and Bespredel of the ‘Thin’”. *World Literature Today*, Vol. 67, No. 1, Russian Literature at a Crossroads (Winter, 1993), p. 19.

post-Soviet period, in comparison with the Soviet period. Wachtel concludes that the relevance of the post-Soviet writer has waned, in part, due to decreases in print runs, difficulties in earning a living wage as a writer, the disappearance of writers' insulation from market forces, and the sudden appearance of previously inaccessible works of pulp fiction and other commercial, Western literature.

These findings indicate that Russian writers have experienced a crisis in regard to their roles in society. The sudden shift to a capitalist economy after the fall of the Soviet Union contributed to the diversion of Russian readers' attention from such literature. A state monopoly on publication during the Soviet era meant that the official Socialist Realist aesthetic was a precondition for withstanding the critical eye of Soviet censors. Consequently, this monopoly guaranteed success to those writers who adhered to that aesthetic. While the resultant literature was by definition derivative and formulaic, it was also government subsidized and readily available. Thick journals such as *Novyi Mir* serve as prime examples of forums for the mass circulation of officially published cultural products. In the 1960s, *Novyi Mir* published up to 150,000 copies per month.<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet economy of scarcity, even inferior Soviet products were consumed readily. This monopoly also meant that the relatively uninhibited works of dissident writers became a rarer and more valuable commodity. While the significance of such works to Soviet culture was not diminished by the introduction of Western products, the newfound, post-Soviet freedom from censorship drastically reduced the rarity and desirability of dissident literature as consumer products. Meanwhile, a flood of long-desired, chic but pulp Western cultural products entered the Russian market. Such products inevitably diverted the

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<sup>2</sup> Mehnert, Klaus. Trans. Maurice Rosenbaum. *Soviet Man and His World*. Frederick A. Praeger: New York. 1962. p. 138.

attentions of a highly literate society that was largely unused to such an open market and which was starved of Western media exposure.

While the decrease in publication of literary fiction in the early post-Soviet period is, in part, a result of the increased difficulty for writers of earning a living wage at their trade, it also reflects a crisis of collective and individual identity, among Russians, during the early post-Soviet years. Soviet writers of literary fiction often lost their cultural bearings and became suddenly deprived of their subject matter and cultural context. Dissident writers such as Dmitrii Prigov lost a significant portion of their political cache together with their object of dissent. Even Alexander Solzhenitsyn lost a certain amount of popular standing after his long exile, as evinced by the decline and subsequent cancellation of his television program, "A Meeting with Solzhenitsyn", in 1995, just one year after his return to Russia. These occurrences reflect a dissociation of Russians in the post-Soviet period with cultural and artistic forms of the preceding era.

The focus on crises of identity, problems of publication and a decrease in relevance, in analyses of Russian literary fiction, represents a Western critical perspective. In "What Comes after 'Post-Soviet' in Russian Studies", Julie Buckler laments the effects of the concomitant loss of Soviet literature's function of conveying dangerous truths and the transformation of literature from a spiritual activity into a luxury, that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Buckler's focus, indicates that, to the Western eye, the crux of the post-Soviet crisis of Russian literature lies in a decline in significance of literary fiction to Russian life. This notion resonates deeply in her reflection that, in retrospect, "A newly skeptical awareness of literature's function in the

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<sup>3</sup> Buckler, Julie A. "What comes after "Post-Soviet" in Russian studies?". PMLA 124(1): 251-263. 2009. p. 252.

larger cultural contexts of imperial, Soviet, and post- Soviet Russia has overtaken us.”<sup>4</sup> This ‘us’, to whom Buckler refers includes a large circle of Western scholars.

One might reasonably regard the post-Soviet as an ideological space delineated by the decline of official Soviet ideals and the Socialist Realist aesthetic. The Soviet is intrinsically linked with the utopian and the mythic and is ideologically and temporally located somewhere between them; its gaze is fixed on the utopian future, yet its foundations remain rooted in cultural myths. Therefore, whatever trends or phenomena manifest in Russian literature of the historically Soviet or post-Soviet periods that break with the ideologically Soviet might justifiably be labeled post-Soviet. When I use the term ‘post-Soviet’, I employ it in an ideological sense.

There is a disparity between the Western and Russian critical eye toward Russian literary culture. On the one hand, the Western critical eye identifies a reduction in the publication and consumption of serious literature by the Russian public and infers from that circumstance that Russian literature is experiencing a crisis of significance.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the Russian critical eye identifies a very different phenomenon; that readers’ tastes are shifting from a predominant orientation toward previous modes of ‘culturally-relevant’ high art to a postmodern aesthetic.

Russian postmodernism springs out of Socialist Realism, as it at once rejects its aesthetic and acknowledges the influence of Soviet culture and ideology on post-Soviet culture, life, and its experience. Like Western postmodernism, Russian postmodernism remains marked by pluralism, fragmentation, hyper-realism, cynicism, satire, and a rejection of totalizing theories. However, unlike the Western variety, it is not a direct reaction against modernism. Rather, it

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<sup>4</sup> Buckler. “What comes after “Post-Soviet” in Russian studies?”. P. 252.

<sup>5</sup> See Rosalind J. Marsh, Daria Kabanova, and Julie A. Buckler

represents a failed attempt to begin the creation of post-Soviet aesthetic forms, where previous, modernist forms that were suppressed in the Soviet Union, with the rise of Socialist Realism, left off. This failure is, in part, a result of the reconciliation of Russian social attitudes with the impossibility and undesirability of a return to totalizing forms and utopian ideals, following the failure of the Soviet experiment. Consequently, Russian postmodernism is characteristically deconstructive in relation to the objects of its depiction. However, it proves largely constructive in relation to its source material, i.e. the ruins of Soviet society, culture, polity and physical environment.

The disparity between Russian and Western conceptions of postmodernism does not allow for a conclusive answer to the question of what one should call the dominant literary aesthetic in contemporary Russia. How should it be labeled? Does the designation of ‘postmodern’ adequately represent post-Soviet literary fiction? Svetlana Boym proposes a new category of the off-modern, as in the sense of “off-stage, off-key, off-beat and occasionally off-color.”<sup>6</sup> The architecture of this off-modern aesthetic in literature is “the architecture of adventure...something that is about to happen, *á venir*. But instead of opening up into some catastrophic or messianic future, it leads rather into invisible temporal dimensions of the present.”<sup>7</sup> This notion aptly describes one function of Russian literature of the post-Soviet era, as it means that literature models potential, future spaces based on present realities, but it does not fully describe the myth-making and meta-fictive functions of post-Soviet literature. For this reason, perhaps we should opt for another term, such as trans-modern, hypermodern, or post-

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<sup>6</sup> Boym, Svetlana. *Architecture of the Off-Modern*. New York, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press:, 2008. p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Boym. p. 6.

post-modern. The notion of the trans-modern may be as much a misnomer, in application to the Russian literary aesthetic, as postmodern, because neither develops directly out of modernism in Russia. Hyper-modernism also has strong roots in modernism and does not adequately describe the characteristics commonly found in post-Soviet literary fiction. Post-post-modernism, as applicable to the Russian context, does not represent a transcendence of postmodernism, as used to describe Western literature. Its application simply does not make sense in the Russian context. Thus the term postmodernism best serves to describe the predominant characteristics of post-Soviet literary fiction, although it carries with it some unavoidable Western connotations.

The fact that so many terms have been used to describe Russian literary fiction indicates the cultural dynamism of post-Soviet life and a lack of critical consensus about what to make of the post-Soviet. While it might be an oversimplification to lump the majority of post-Soviet literary fiction into the category of postmodernism, the term used to describe such literature is less important than the function of the literature itself. Thus, it will be more relevant and productive to focus on the cultural work that post-Soviet literary fiction has done and continues to do. Consequently, I have opted to describe its aesthetic as Russian postmodernism, as do a large contingent of Western and Russian scholars.

### The Work of Russian Post-Modern Fiction

Russian postmodernism at once emanates from and rejects Socialist Realism, while it proves largely constructive, as opposed to purely deconstructive, in terms of its relationship with culture. The deconstruction that Russian postmodernist literature does is oriented toward Soviet culture, exposing the flaws and preconceptions inherent in Russian culture. Nevertheless, the effect of this deconstruction is that empty realities are replaced with new visions of the future. This technique is strongly evident in the works of such writers as Tatiana Tolstaia, Eduard

Limonov, Viktor Pelevin, and Vladimir Sorokin, among many other authors of post-Soviet literary fiction.

This circumstance is a direct product of the ideological underpinnings of Soviet life and their disintegration. The fall of the Soviet Union brought with it the cataclysmic and abrupt end of national, social, and individual identity for Soviet peoples. It also heralded a break with the utopian future, toward which Soviet generations had striven. Culturally, the end of the utopian project that was the Soviet Union manifested as the loss of more than a social and political infrastructure; it was also the loss of a promised, utopian future,.

Several scholars have explored this loss of culture, identity, and way of life. In her *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym explores the notions of longing and displacement in Soviet culture. Quoting Russian philosopher Petr Chaadaev, Boym remarks, “We, Russians, like illegitimate children, come to this world without patrimony, without any links with people who lived on the earth before us. Our memories go no further back than yesterday; we are as it were strangers to ourselves.”<sup>8</sup> For the post-Soviet generation, this ‘yesterday’ is none other than the Soviet past. Chaadaev’s notion is especially relevant to Russians of the post-Soviet era, as the myths and experience of the Soviet Union have strongly informed contemporary Russian culture. Boym’s analysis of nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon provides a contextually appropriate background for the loss of identity that many former Soviet citizens experienced with the fall of the Soviet Union. It also accurately describes the sense of nostalgia that can be found in much of the common Russian literary criticism of the post-Soviet era; that the new literature is somehow cheapened, and of a less serious variety than its forbearers.<sup>9</sup> Boym’s discussion of nostalgia helps

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<sup>8</sup> Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books: New York. 2001. p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> See Vladimir Kunin.

explain how a critical longing for the forms of a previous generation of Russian literature degrades the experience of post-Soviet literary fiction and denies the irreversibility of the cultural tide that so strongly informs the Russian postmodernist aesthetic.

Similarly, in his *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Alexei Yurchak examines the discursive transformation between media of the 1950s and, that which existed at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. His analysis provides a perspective on Soviet culture as more systemic than analyses that divide Soviet cultural products into official and unofficial categories. In light of Boym's discussion of nostalgia, Yurchak's analysis holds special significance for the genre of utopia in Russian literary fiction. The promise of a very real, future utopia existed as a part of a national and social inheritance for former Soviet citizens. It also formed a portion of their cultural identity. As a utopian project, the Soviet Union was building toward a bright and vibrant future. This future stood as the culmination of the social, political, cultural, and material labor of the Soviet Union. It also constituted the fruition of, or at very least a form of recompense for, all the privations and hardships that were endured by Soviet citizens. That this multifarious and variously-imagined Soviet-utopian future was built more upon myths, perpetuated in mass culture, than upon any tangible reality, helps explain the disintegration of not only positive utopian visions in literature but of individual and cultural identity that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union. This loss underlies Russian postmodernism and helps explain the, at once, cynical and re-constructive aspects of its aesthetic.

Beyond an aesthetic shift to postmodernism, the notion of crisis, to the Russian critical eye, has been shaped by the transfer of the primary forum of literary discussion from those "thick journals" that Aksenov so ardently laments, to the less prestigious, but infinitely more prolific internet.

One of the problems with dealing with Western and Russian criticisms of contemporary Russian writers is how criticism translates across cultural boundaries. As a model, the top echelon of critics in the high-culture-market of the West does not neatly map to the literary culture of Russia. In the West, especially in the United States, there is a significant intellectual separation between everyday readers of literary fiction, writers in the blogosphere, and academics. Among these groups, academics are most seriously regarded in their assessments of Russian literature and culture. Their academic works are published in books and journals and presented at conferences. The forum of this Western, upper-tier criticism, in part, determines the weight that one lends the criticism itself. After all, were Svetlana Boym, Rosalind Marsh, and other well-known critics of Russian culture not distinguished professors and accomplished academics in the West, their works would carry less weight in the formation of a Western view of Russian literature.

No literary or academic elite in Russia is as high profile or as well known in Russia, as the aforementioned scholars are in the West. While there are, of course, many accomplished academics in Russia, who deal with literary criticism and analysis, their academic status does not afford them an especially esteemed or recognized voice in Russian literary culture. In place of such upper echelon critics, there are many less- or moderately-well-known individuals, published in the blogosphere, magazines, and literary journals. Lev Danilkin and Sergei Polotovskii serve as prime examples of the most prevalent variety of literary critic in Russian internet and print culture. Known authors in contemporary Russia, such as Tatiana Tolstaia and Dmitrii Bykov, are respected as literary critics across all media and modes of publication. Finally, a great many individuals publish valuable literary criticism on websites dedicated to literary culture, such as newlit.ru and proza.ru, among numerous others.

This circumstance raises difficulty in selecting critics, with whom to engage and open a dialogue. Why choose to engage with a particular critic as opposed to another? In Western academia, certain voices are nearly impossible to miss, much less ignore. In the Russian blogosphere, critical voices are often virtually anonymous, apart from an often obscure name. In choosing with whom to engage, critics with more cachet better reflect critical consensus. In the blogosphere and internet publication in general, certain critics are simply more popular, with a wider reader base. In print culture this model changes drastically. Journals tend to be populated with articles by academics, such as Olga Bogdanova. Meanwhile, critical books are published both by academics and other authors, such as Sergei Polotovskii. However, such critics' works are less prevalent in book form than in journal, internet, or magazine publication.

### A Focal Point of Crisis

When Russian critics describe problematic aspects of contemporary Russian literary culture, the focus of the criticism is often on the formal qualities of the extant literature, rather than in its significance or consumption. Lev Danilkin remarks that the quality of many works released on a monthly basis in contemporary Russia is lacking.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Aksenov comments that the Russian post-Soviet literary aesthetic reduces “everything to *guignol* - i.e., to that which now is so unfortunately and incorrectly called ‘postmodernism.’”<sup>11</sup> This assertion proves significant, as it levies criticism against Russian postmodernism itself, especially in light of *guignol*’s original function, to entertain children, with the added benefit of being a witty

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<sup>10</sup> "Lev Danilkin: Russkaia literatura ne stala inostrannoi koloniei." Interview by Iurii Troshin. Zhukovskie Vesti. 20 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 Nov. 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Aksenov and Mozur. “Dystrophy of the ‘Thick’ and Bespredel of the ‘Thin’”. p. 18-23

distraction for adults as well. This precedent of not taking Russian postmodernist literature seriously has become a trend in the post-Soviet era.

The crux of the disparity between this Russian view of Russian literary culture and that of the West is not that indigenous criticism is screaming that no crisis exists; crisis is simply not the prevalent mode of criticism to the Russian eye. Rather, Russians are more concerned with trends in the prevalent literature. Thus, the contemporary crisis of Russian literature does not stem from a decrease in literary publication, in the post-Soviet period, or from a decline in influence or significance of literary fiction in Russian culture. It does not even stem purely from a shift in readers' tastes from serious literature to pulp fiction, but from the blurring of forms, in which Russian postmodernism so fluidly engages, combined with the cynicism, uncertainty, and characteristic post-Soviet vernacular, through which, Russian postmodernism addresses the crucial questions of post-Soviet culture. These qualities reflect a playful yet pensive attitude in Russian culture toward the big questions of Russian life and how they can be answered.

Despite these perspectives and the notion of Russian literature as existing in a state of crisis, Russian literary fiction plays vital formative and reflective roles in the production of post-Soviet culture. As this culture, in many ways, diverges from Western culture, the subject matter of its literature differs as well. Russian critics, such as Lev Danilkin, have repeatedly affirmed the importance of literature to Russian cultural life, remarking that unlike contemporary Western literature, "which describes certain global problems of all mankind," Russian literature continues to address problems that remain particular to Russian life.<sup>12</sup> While this difference may boil down

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<sup>12</sup> "Lev Danilkin: Russkaia literatura ne stala inostrannoi koloniei." Interview by Jurii Troshin. "...v kotoroi opisyvaiutsia nekie global'nye problemy chelovechestva ...Russkaia literatura delaetsia na popytke ob'iasnit', pochemu v ietoi strane takie ogromnye prostranstva i kakoi vo vsem ietom smysl."

to fundamental problems and questions that Russia and the West face on their respective cultural fronts, it also demonstrates that Russian literary fiction remains distinctive; it poses questions that are unique to Russian experience and answers those questions in original and productive ways.

Despite the distinctive character of post-Soviet literary fiction, several Russian critics, including Vasilii Aksenov, have also indicated crises of the significance of Russian literature within culture and of the quality of the literature that is being produced. This sentiment at once reflects a Western critical perspective on Russian literary culture and a more political and ideological point of view. Since the early 1990s, the Russian public has increasingly eschewed serious literature in favor of pulp fiction and other popular media. There is a particularly noticeable lament of the lowering of public tastes in Russian media culture, not only by cultural critics and academics in recent years, but also by politicians, including Vladimir Putin. In 2013 Putin reflected, “The main and, I am sure, general worry is today’s decline in interest toward literature, especially among youth. Our country, once the most well-read in the world, can no longer hold any pretense to that honorable title.”<sup>13</sup> While Putin’s commentary on this cultural phenomenon does not by its own merit ascribe to literature some sort of central cultural importance in contemporary Russia, it does reflect the seriousness of literary fiction to Russian national identity, in the post-Soviet era.

Literary fiction has long played an important role in the cultural and intellectual history of Russia. Russians have long looked to literature for answers to serious social, political, and

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<sup>13</sup> "Putin vstrevozen tem, chto rossiiiane vse men'she chitaiut." Russkii Kur'er. N.p., 21 Nov. 2013. Web. 18 Nov. 2014. “Glavnaia i, uveren, obshchaia trevoga — eto segodniashnee padenie interesa k knige, osobenno sredi molodezhi. Nasha strana, nekogda samaia chitaiushchaia v mire, uzhe ne mozhet pretendovat' na eto pochotnoe zvanie.”

philosophical questions.<sup>14</sup> This role of literature is strongly rooted in Russian cultural tradition and has persisted in the post-Soviet era. The Russian fear that a crisis of readership has arisen in society stems from a traditional understanding of what constitutes serious literature. When notable figures, such as Lev Danilkin, numerous critics in the blogosphere, and even politicians lament a decline of readership of literature, they overlook the richness of post-Soviet literary fiction.

Russian literary fiction of the post-Soviet era continues to inform and be informed by Russian culture. It well reflects the crisis that Russian critics have identified. As readers' tastes have changed, the prevalent literary aesthetic in the post-Soviet era has adapted to the post-Soviet cultural experience. Authors have abandoned strict delineations between high and low culture and between the remarkable and the everyday. The break with modernist notions of high and low culture has come to characterize Russian postmodernism. In his *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen clarifies this distinction and the significance of rejecting this hierarchy in literary culture. As Russian postmodern literary fiction eschews the separation between high and low culture, it allows for the introduction of pulp and the quotidian into the sphere of serious, culturally-relevant art. This intermingling does not somehow diminish high art or even elevate elements of pulp media. It creates a new space for the interpretation of culture, not in the interstices between high and low, but apart from such designations entirely. In effect, this phenomenon means that the solutions to personal and social problems of post-Soviet life do not belong exclusively to high culture. Furthermore, such problems and their solutions no longer even can or should be explored in the context of high culture. Rather, everyday problems are

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<sup>14</sup> See "Lev Danilkin: Russkaia literatura ne stala inostrannoi koloniei." Interview by Iurii Troshin.

seriously explored in the style and language of everyday life, with all its vulgarity and complexity. The works of many authors of post-Soviet literary fiction, such as Viktor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, Zakhar Prilepin, and Boris Akunin bridge the gaps between these characteristics. As a result, their works appeal both to an audience attuned to the discourse of serious, culturally-relevant literature, and to readers of pulp fiction. The result is a decrease not in overall readership, but in the production of an outmoded literary aesthetic, that no longer bears a meaningful critical or interpretive relationship with post-Soviet culture. In its place, the hybrid media aesthetic of Russian postmodernism relates to a schismatic post-Soviet culture, torn between the East and the West, the high and the low, in a completely different way that serious literature of a century ago related to contemporaneous Russian culture but with similar import and agency..

This hybrid media aesthetic of Russian postmodernism has become the prevalent mode of Russian literature. Russian postmodern literary fiction is the serious literature of the post-Soviet era. While Russians are reading less in general, Russian literary fiction is not experiencing a crisis of quality and it is not experiencing a crisis of relevance to post-Soviet culture. It is experiencing a paradigmatic shift from serious literature as defined by formal qualities of narrative to serious literature as defined by its relationship with culture. The works of Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin are emblematic of this shift. Their texts are quintessential examples of serious Russian literature of the post-Soviet era, not arcane experimental variations or commercial production.

### Socialist Realism, Mass Culture, and Satire

As Socialist Realism was the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union, its monopoly on culture served to repress natural tendencies in literary expression. This means that Socialist

Realism's monopoly on the production of cultural products suppressed the publication of more grassroots works of literary fiction that arose from Soviet popular culture. Socialist Realism became at once the mode of official cultural production, in the Soviet Union, and an object of dissent for writers of unofficial literature. As an ideologically-based aesthetic, perpetuated officially and without competition through mass culture, Socialist Realism was a crucial system against which dissident and post-Soviet literature reacts. It is significant that Socialist Realism was so widely disseminated in mass culture, because its myths became an integral and unimpeachable part of Soviet cultural consciousness.

There remains inconsistency among definitions of the term 'mass culture'. Some critics, such as Andreas Huyssen and Rosalind Marsh, discuss mass culture as congruous with notions of popular culture. When Huyssen uses these terms, both mass culture and popular culture describe, "a culture of everyday life, as distinct from high culture.<sup>15</sup> Somewhat similarly, when Marsh uses them, they become set in opposition to high culture and describe a culture of popular or mass appeal.<sup>16</sup> Historians James von Geldern and Richard Stites describe Russian mass culture as a top-down phenomenon, which created a monopoly on culture.<sup>17</sup> This definition directly opposes the notion of mass culture as arising out of or conflated with popular culture.

The fact that numerous conceptions of mass culture in Russia exist in contemporary critical literature leads to a confusion of terminology and indicates that there is no definite consensus among critics about what constitutes mass culture. For the sake of clarity, I will treat

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<sup>15</sup>Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 1986. p. vii.

<sup>16</sup>Marsh, Rosalind. *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*. Peter Lang. Bern. 2007. pg. 54.

<sup>17</sup>Von Geldern, James. Stites, Richard. *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 1995.

mass culture of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods in binary opposition to popular culture. I will treat popular culture as culture that arises from the lived experiences of the masses. By contrast, mass culture is a form of culture, generated by an apparatus of the prevailing ideological authority, which is disseminated via channels of mass media and that imposes its own master narrative upon the psychic reality of its consumers. To conceive of mass culture in this fashion may help explain the function of myth in Russian culture, as myth is appropriated by media for the transformation of its discursive forms. Thus, mass culture serves to create and propagate myth.

While satire is not exclusive to the genre of literary fiction, it proves central to understanding the capacity of literary fiction to inform cultural consciousness. This function of satire proves important for an understanding of post-Soviet, Russian literary fiction, because satire has become a characteristic element of Russian postmodernism, and the postmodern best describes the trends of Russian literary fiction in the post-Soviet era.

### Mythopoesis and the Creation of Culture

Soviet myths in Russian postmodern literature employ preconceptions and culturally engendered understandings of natural and social phenomena to shape readers' understanding of life and culture in the post-Soviet era. This notion has been posited by Mikhail Epstein, in his *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* and by Joseph Mozur, in his "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovietism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction."<sup>18</sup> However, these scholars do not

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<sup>18</sup> See: Genis, Alexander. "Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature." *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*. Ed. Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover. Berghahn Books: New York. 1999. and Mozur, Joseph. *Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovietism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction*. World Literature Today, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Spring, 2002), University of Oklahoma.

describe the notion of myth in detail and its function in the formation of culture. They also do not address the preponderance of often variegated definitions of myth, in connection with the Soviet period, in extant literary criticism and scholarship.

There are several conceptions of myth in connection with literary fiction and the realities that it reflects. According to Jean Baudrillard, myth is a “lost referential.”<sup>19</sup> By this, he means, that the decline of strong referentials manifested as a great trauma to his contemporaneous era, and that myth serves to inaugurate a new era, characterized by simulation.<sup>20</sup> For Herbert Marcuse, myth is a buttress of ideology. In his *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, Bruce Lincoln describes myth as “ideology in narrative form”.<sup>21</sup> Such divergent conceptions of what myth is and how it functions in literature, social thought, and cultural consciousness indicate that the influence of myth stretches from cultural formation, to political ideology to psychic reality, as its narratives model worldviews.

As appropriated by Russian, post-Soviet literary fiction, myth addresses and engages the post-Soviet psyche. To this end, it re-contextualizes cultural cues and re-assigns individual codes in psychic space. Specifically, Russian, postmodernist fiction alters the context and associations of the very ideals that are harbored within Soviet myth, and thus manipulates psychic reality. For readers of such fiction, this manipulation of myth alters perceptions of the cultural tradition, which underlies Russian postmodernist literary fiction and informs production of Russian culture in the post-Soviet period.

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<sup>19</sup>Baudrillard. p. 46.

<sup>20</sup>Baudrillard. p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln, Bruce. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. p. 209.

Post-Soviet writers often direct their satire at the myths of the Soviet era, as the function of satire is to provoke both contemplation of its objects and a change in consciousness surrounding those objects. Together, myth and satire in post-Soviet literature serve to kindle cultural awareness and reshape cultural consciousness. It is thus fitting that Soviet myth is a direct product of mass culture, as broadcast over officially-approved mass media. When I refer to Soviet myth, I do not mean to say that Soviet myth includes all the stories that official Soviet culture told about itself, without regard for their factuality or truthfulness. Rather, I will treat as Soviet myth those simulacra that have been propagated by Soviet mass culture and that subsequently have become a part of social consciousness.

The resilience of Soviet, cultural myths and satire, as the prominent mode of cultural expression in literary fiction, exemplifies continuity of modes of identity-formation and cultural expression, between the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. The fact that post-Soviet literary fiction builds upon, rather than eschews, Soviet literary and cultural traditions indicates the centrality of post-Soviet literary fiction in the preservation, reproduction, and transformation of cultural myths.

Because post-Soviet literary fiction often interacts with its Soviet past, appropriates its cultural myths, and manipulates them to reflect and inform post-Soviet culture, literary fiction holds an extremely powerful place in Russian culture and society. Several factors contribute to the maintenance of that position. Russia's rich literary heritage resulted in a populace that regards literature as a respected forum for the resolution of social, political, and personal problems. The failure of the domestic film industry in the late Soviet Union removed from mainstream availability a bulk of the Russian public's readily-consumable mass cultural products. Literary production did not face such a collapse until the 1990s. Because of Soviet

state control of TV and mass media, reading continued to be a dominant mode of media consumption in Russian culture.

### The Problem of Utopia

As it transforms Soviet myths, the genre of literary fiction is reclaiming the utopian dreams that were lost with the fall of the Soviet Union. This fact indicates that remnants of Soviet culture—indeed, even pre-Soviet Russian culture—have found new purpose and direction, insofar as the foundations of the post-Soviet remain rooted in utopian cultural myths of the pre-revolutionary and Soviet period. This framework for addressing much of post-Soviet literary fiction—utopian in its forward gaze, mythic in its orientation to the past—will lead to a more cohesive and systemic understanding of works of contemporary Russian fiction. Works of post-Soviet literary fiction tend to maintain a forward gaze. Russian culture is constantly trying to confront and shape its own identity, beyond its mooring in all things Soviet.

In the context of literary fiction, utopian futurescapes are necessarily predicated upon monological ideals: benefit, nationalism, equality, efficiency, socialism, etc. Dystopian fiction rejects the organization of society around such standards, as it undermines their foundational narratives. In their place, dystopian fiction focuses on mankind's shortcomings and, thus, affirms the pursuit of human moral, intellectual, and cultural advancement, as dystopian fiction serves to comment on the ills of its contemporary society. The genre of literary dystopia therefore carries the implicit critique of the designation of any society as perfect, on the basis of subjective ideals. The problem with subjective ideals lies in the fact that what may constitute perfection for one or even most individuals does not do so for all. Thus the sort of subjectivity that dystopian fiction rejects is a shared subjectivity. This rejection constitutes the fundamental departure of dystopian imagination from positive, utopian dreams in literary fiction. Dystopian futurescapes are not

simply evil societies; they reflect the perils of the universal imposition of subjective ideals, with their primary focus on mankind's failings, instead of its dreams. Thus, they are constantly waving a flag, warning society of impending danger.

In post-Soviet literary production, works of utopia do not seriously posit ideal-type societies. Rather, they serve to comment on the role of contemporary Russia in the generation of variously imagined futurescapes. Visions of the future, largely disconnected from monological ideals and subjective cultural narratives, are replacing the concretely placed Soviet forms and speculative-revolutionary forms of pre-Soviet utopian imagination. This resurgence is more than experimentation in a genre with a long cultural history in Russia; it is also a redirection of Soviet-utopian dreams for a post-utopian society. The Soviet Union may have been a utopian space, but the resonance of its dreams carries even into the post-Soviet era. To whatever degree post-Soviet Russia is also post-utopian, that classification does not preclude utopian imagination of the future. Instead, it has removed the limitation of ideal futurescapes to the Soviet space. In this sense, post-Soviet Russia can also be said to be pre-post-utopian, as the utopian dreams of the Soviet Union were never realized. Thus, writers, who invoke these possibilities in contemporary literary fiction are recreating the Russian genre of utopia.

In her *Sites of Memory: Soviet Myths in Post-Soviet Culture*, Daria Kabanova questions the possibility of literary dystopia in the post-apocalyptic social, cultural, political, and historical space of post-Soviet Russia. She claims that while utopian premises are implicit in dystopian literature, the Soviet Union was no place for dystopia.<sup>22</sup> Practically speaking, dystopia was a

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<sup>22</sup> Kabanova, Daria. *Sites of Memory: Soviet myths in post-Soviet Culture*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2011.

constant undercurrent of utopian discourse in the Soviet culture, as the disconnect between Socialist Realism, as a utopian aesthetic, and everyday life was stark. Dissident cultural products made the disparity even more obvious. After all, one might call the Soviet Union a lived dystopia as much as a lived utopian experiment.

Although Kabanova's analysis explores the utopian function of Socialist Realism and its concomitant repression of mainstream dystopia, it does not account for the emergence of such anti-utopian cultural trends such as Sots-Art and postmodernism. Kabanova's observation, that following the fall of the Soviet Union, rather than an upsurge of dystopian texts and films, a genre of fairy-tale-esque stories emerged that dealt with lived reality and which retained a positive, almost utopian quality, implies that utopianism survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, as an integral element of Russian culture. While such utopian thought remains intrinsic to post-Soviet Russian culture, the pursuit of positive utopia, in the tradition of Thomas More, has been lost in the post-utopian space of post-Soviet Russia. This phenomenon can be partially explained by the postmodern aesthetic, which is characterized by ontological plurality and relativity, i.e., by the inextricability of many often-competing worldviews. This fracture is anathema to monolithic and cohesive systems such as utopia. This circumstance may, in part, explain why no mainstream works of positive utopia have emerged in Russia in recent years.

### Myth, simulacra, and mass culture

As appropriated by post-Soviet literary fiction, Soviet and post-Soviet mass culture describes a myth-oriented artificial culture. This notion of mass culture sheds light on the processes that link mass culture and cultural consciousness; myth informs cultural consciousness, as it produces simulacra, and Russian literary fiction mediates between mass culture as simulacrum and the individual.

Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum, an image that, "has no relation to any reality whatsoever", amply describes a central characteristic of post-Soviet literary fiction.<sup>23</sup> In his, 'The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism', Mikhail Epstein discusses simulacra and simulation in Socialist Realist culture as, "a culture that completely identified reality with ideological mythologies."<sup>24</sup> Mark Lipovetsky reiterates this notion of simulacra as central to culture, within the context of postmodernist literature. In his, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, Lipovetsky remarks that, "in post-Soviet culture, simulation 'devours' reality...Russian postmodernism lays bare...a lingering socialist simulation; it discovers the emptiness underlying any system."<sup>25</sup> These assertions well reflect the progression of Russian postmodernism out of Socialist Realism and explain the relationship between myth, simulation and postmodernism.

The maintenance of continuity with preceding forms and movements—specifically Sots Art and Socialist Realism—is central to Russian postmodernist fiction, because it acknowledges the significance of myth and mass culture in the formation of culture. This continuity is evident in literary fiction, to a greater degree than any other subset of Russian culture, in part due to Russia's long cultural history surrounding the production and consumption of literature and, in part, due to the manner in which Russian postmodernist writers interact with the Soviet past.

Post-Soviet writers build from the ruins of Soviet culture, with an eye on the future of Russian society and its intrinsic problems. Forging new realities from the scraps of the old,

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<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor. 1994. p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Lipovetsky, Mark. Ed. Elliot Borenstein. *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*. Routledge: London, 1999. p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Lipovetsky, Mark. *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*. p. 11.

Russian postmodernist fiction remains distinct from Sots-Art, as I show in chapter X. While Sots-Art parodies, Russian postmodernism satirizes. Sots-Art manipulates its Soviet roots and even Soviet myth, as a form of mimetic ridicule, without the appropriation of myth and its simulation of culture. Russian postmodernism surpasses the functions of Sots-Art, in full consciousness of the productive functions of myth and simulacra, as it not only ridicules but often provokes contemplation or change. When I make this distinction between parody and satire, I mean satire “as the... art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation... as a corrective of human vice and folly.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, I mean parody to describe the modeling and imitation of another work, especially when it, “deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject” or otherwise exaggerates for comic effect.<sup>27</sup> The key differences, as concern the distinction between Sots-Art and postmodernism, lie in satire’s corrective aims and parody’s comic but not corrective effect. Accordingly, I contend that Russian postmodernism is not primarily mimetic in its relationship with its source material, e.g., Soviet culture, propaganda, and myth. Rather, it is complementary and productive, as it appropriates such elements for the transformation of psychic reality and cultural consciousness.

Such scholars as Olga Mesropova, Seth Graham, Amber Day, and Linda Hutcheon make significant contributions to the understanding of satire and humor, as prevalent modes of Russian literary fiction of the post-Soviet era, as they provide insights into how post-Soviet literary fiction interacts with the culture that it models, informs, and reproduces. In their *Uncensored?*

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<sup>26</sup> Abrams, Meyer Howard., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Thomson Wadsworth, 2006. p. 275.

<sup>27</sup> Abrams and Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. p. 26.

*Reinventing Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia*, Olga Mesropova and Seth Graham

illustrate the roles of various modes of humor in post-Soviet media culture. Mesropova's "Of Tears and Laughter: Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia," emphasizes the disconnect between Soviet and post-Soviet humor. Mesropova characterizes the difference between the two breeds of humor as, in a sense, corresponding to the quality and way of life in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. She treats humor, and specifically satire, as a coping mechanism for the ills of society. While Mesropova does not directly assert that the declining state of humor in today's Russian is a result of an increased quality of life, she manages to raise questions about the origins and nature of the changes that have occurred.

Mesropova's analysis strongly informs the study of satire in Russian literary fiction and has far reaching implications for questions of what constitutes Russian post-modernism. While the answer to that question remains to be fully considered, I will say that the disconnect between Soviet and post-Soviet humor is not reducible to changes in quality of life, as a result of the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet system. The fall of the Soviet Union does not serve as an historical indicator of the exact moment of social and cultural change. Rather, it marks the last Soviet action in a series of gradual changes to society and culture that continued until little that was ideologically Soviet remained. The transformation of Russian humor is rooted not in the death of humor itself, but in a metamorphosis of its mode of transmission. Parodic mimesis has been supplanted by satire, and this satire has taken on a central role in the post-Soviet literary fiction, as an element of Russian postmodernism.

Consequently, when Mesropova asks whether satire has “abdicated its central role in Russian literature,” I firmly answer, no.<sup>28</sup> She inquires whether satire has “been reduced to mere entertainment.”<sup>29</sup> I answer, not entirely. I specifically object to the qualifier ‘mere’. This term perpetuates a division of literary culture into categories of high and low, as though the two remain mutually exclusive, in the post-Soviet era. High and low cultures are not mutually exclusive or even typically distinguished from one another, in the context of Russian postmodernism.

In contemporary literature, this satiric relationship can be found in a comparison of the works of Dmitri Prigov or early Vladimir Sorokin with those of Viktor Pelevin. While Sots-Art existed as a rejection of Socialist Realism in its role as the official aesthetic, postmodernism definitively appropriates the mythological apparatus inherent in official Soviet ideology and its formative agents. Russian postmodernist fiction retains the myths of the Soviet period and functionally re-tasks them in psychic reality for the creation of a new perceptive layer. The differentiation between Sots-Art and Russian postmodernism limits the scope of what one might call ‘postmodern’ within Russian literary fiction. It also helps to delineate the functions, objects, and direction of post-Soviet Russian literary fiction, because mythopoesis appears as a central characteristic of Russian, postmodern literary fiction.

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<sup>28</sup>Mesropova, Olga and Seth Graham, eds. *Uncensored?: Reinventing Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia*. Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2008. pp 1.

<sup>29</sup>Mesropova, Olga and Seth Graham, eds. *Uncensored?: Reinventing Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia*. p 1.

## Methodology

Because of the range of authors and texts that fall under the scope of post-Soviet literary fiction, it would prove counterproductive to attempt a survey of elements of myth, satire, utopia and mass culture across the entire range of works of literary fiction. Furthermore, it would be redundant to conduct a survey of the origins and manifestations of Russian postmodernism, as this has been covered by several scholars.<sup>30</sup> My primary focus will be the centrality of Russian literary fiction to post-Soviet culture. Textual analyses will be centered on the appropriation of Soviet mass culture by Russian literary fiction for the transformation of its myths and the subsequent production of new forms of cultural discourse. Furthermore, I will attempt to reconcile this action with the notion of crisis of Russian literature by critical voices in Russia and the West.

I will achieve this goal through extended and detailed engagement with works of superior importance, i.e., works which prove socially and culturally relevant, are well-known and well-read, and which have been the most principal focus of contemporary literary and cultural criticism. These criteria are important, not only in order to limit the scope of discussion of post-Soviet literary fiction, but also to demonstrate the manner in which popular works of literary fiction inform Russian culture in the post-Soviet era.

A great bulk of the extant and emerging scholarship, surrounding Russian literary fiction, centers on Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin. Indeed, it would be difficult to attempt a serious, broad discussion of post-Soviet literary fiction without engagement with these authors. This fact is evident in the sheer volume of scholarship dedicated toward Sorokin and Pelevin.

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<sup>30</sup> See Mark Lipovetsky's *Russian Postmodernism* and Dobrenko and Guenther's *Socialist Realist Canon*.

Even the most cursory search of literary journals evinces the centrality of these two authors to contemporary literary culture and its production. In addition, and possibly more importantly, scholars such as Mikhail Epstein and Mark Lipovetsky have written extensively about both authors and often center their analyses of post-Soviet literature on these authors.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, my analysis of the role of post-Soviet literary fiction in Russian culture will center on Sorokin and Pelevin.

### Viktor Pelevin

Born in Moscow in 1962, Viktor Pelevin published his first short story in 1989. Three years later, he published both his first novel, *Omon Ra*, and a series of short stories, titled *Sinii Fonar'*, which in 1993 won Pelevin both the Russian Little Booker Prize and immediate international recognition. Since that time, Pelevin has published an additional seventeen novels and numerous short stories and essays. These works have garnered much critical attention and popular appeal, both within Russia and abroad. More than those of any other contemporary Russian writer, Viktor Pelevin's works have become the subject of extensive academic research and analysis.

Viktor Pelevin is a household name in Russia. Regardless of age, education, or social strata, Viktor Pelevin is known to the vast majority of Russians. His works are read both by enthusiasts of serious, culturally-relevant literature, and also by readers of Western mass media, pulp fiction, *detektivy*, and other low-brow media. Among critics, his works are almost universally reviewed, regardless of the content of the review; within Russia, reviews of Pelevin's

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<sup>31</sup> See Lipovetsky, Mark. Ed. Elliot Borenstein. *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*. Routledge: London, 1999 and Epstein, Mikhail. *Postmodern v Rossii: literatura i teoriia*. Moscow: LIA Elinina, 2000.

works are obligatory for all serious literary critics. Nevertheless, reviews of Pelevin's works tend to be highly polarized. Few who publish critical reviews of Pelevin's works, write of him neutrally. Russian critics seem to have a love-hate relationship with Pelevin. Many embrace Pelevin's writing style, as a reflection of the dynamic and multi-layered realities of post-Soviet life.<sup>32</sup> Others revile Pelevin for the devaluation of serious Russian literature.<sup>33</sup> This debate brews constantly in Russian literary culture. The fact that it has continued for so long and involves so many critics and scholars, despite Pelevin's longstanding fame, indicates that Russian literature has not been marginalized in post-Soviet culture. Rather, Russian postmodernist literary fiction bridges pulp fiction and high art; this technique consequently increases readership, as it eschews their inherent aesthetic separation and caters to readers of both. Pelevin engages in this technique more profoundly than any other Russian author and, thus, elicits divisive critical consideration.

Russian readers seemed to share this polarized attitude toward Pelevin. At one extreme, in the 1990s, his works would sell out in Russia almost instantly. At the other extreme, in 2002 and 2010 his works became the objects of book burnings and civil protests in Russia, by groups such as *Idushchie Vmeste* and *Nashi*, which take aim at the corruption of Russian culture. While such profoundly negative responses to Pelevin's prose are not in the mainstream, they reveal a keen, social awareness, in Russia, of the power of literary fiction to inform culture. Despite this difference of opinion about the quality of Pelevin's works, no one denies Pelevin's impact on Russian literature or his significance in Russian culture.

This significance is affirmed by the numerous awards that Pelevin has won for his literary works. These include the aforementioned Russian Little Booker Prize in 1993 for *Sinii Fonar'*

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<sup>32</sup> See Lev Danilkin, Sergei Polotovskii, Oleg Golikov.

<sup>33</sup> See Sergei Polotovskii.

and the Interpresskon and Bronzovaiia Ulitka Awards for his novel *Omon Ra*. In 1997, *Chapaev i Pustota* won Pelevin the Russian literary award *Strannik*. In the same year, *Chapaev i Pustota* was shortlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. In 1999, Pelevin's *Generation P* won the Richard Schoenfield German Literary Prize. Many critics and journalists have also documented that Viktor Pelevin had been shortlisted for a Nobel Prize in literature in 2012.<sup>34</sup> The consideration of Pelevin's works for such numerous and various awards evinces the tenor of his general reception and can be used to infer the respective reception of his works in Russia and in the West. Of the awards that Pelevin's works have won or for which they have been seriously considered, four are Western in origin; while, twelve are Russian. In light of Pelevin's consideration for and receipt of such an array of awards, one can gather a strong indication of Pelevin's critical and popular appeal among Western and Russian audiences.

Viktor Pelevin's popularity is the result of a synergy of factors that range from the cultural resonance and prophetic quality of his texts to Pelevin's own publication strategies. In the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia existed in a state of social and political upheaval. Not only did the infrastructure of the former superpower suddenly no-longer function, but its institutions and even people had become defunct. The loss of identity wrought by this apocalypse manifested variously in literature as shining visions of paradise, and as cynical

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<sup>34</sup> Additional prizes include: In 2001, Pelevin was awarded the *Nonino* Prize in Salzburg as the Best Foreign Author. In 2003, Pelevin's *Dialektika Perekhodnogo Perioda iz Niotkuda v Nikuda* won the Russian Apollon Grigor'ev Prize and was shortlisted for the Andrei Bely Prize. It won the National Bestseller Award in the following year. Pelevin's next novel, *Empire V*, was shortlisted for the Russian *Bol'shia Kniga* Award. In 2009, Pelevin's *t* won the third award of the Russian *Bol'shia Kniga* award and the Readers' Choice Vote for that award. Pelevin's 2012 novel, *S.N.U.F.F.*, won the E-Book Award for Prose of the Year. Additionally, Pelevin's various short stories and essays have won six additional prizes both in Russia and abroad.

struggles to regain a sense of identity in a suddenly senseless and unfamiliar world.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps equally as significantly, the loss of the promise of utopian dreams that accompanied the loss of the ideological utopia that constituted the Soviet experiment manifested in literature as a new search for a post-utopian higher purpose.<sup>36</sup> All of Pelevin's novels address these humanistic struggles toward the future, a higher calling, and self-identification. Thus, Pelevin directly addresses his works to a post-Soviet audience that remains conscious of the post-Soviet and post-utopian world, in which they live. For such an audience, Pelevin's texts take on a prophetic quality, in which they address not only the present, in a culturally relevant manner, but also the future.

Additionally, the free and unlimited dissemination of Pelevin's works online makes his texts available to a wide range of domestic and international consumers. On Pelevin's most popular unofficial website (he does not have an official one), nearly all of his short stories are made available free of charge, along with nine of his novels in Russian, several English translations of his novels and stories, and eight of his novels in Russian audio book format.<sup>37</sup> Sergei Polotovskii notes in his *Pelevin i Pokolenie Pustoty* that Pelevin must not greatly object to the rampant copyright violations of his works.<sup>38</sup> Whether as a result of Pelevin's indifference or a purposeful attempt to more widely circulate his works, the internet has become an undeniable mode for readers to acquire and consume Pelevin's texts. Combined with Pelevin's well-known

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<sup>35</sup> See Daria Kabanova's *Sites of Memory: Soviet myths in post-Soviet Culture*, Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev i Pustota, Generation P*.

<sup>36</sup> This is a common theme in all of Pelevin's novel-length works. Pelevin frequently employs mythological figures as surrogates for a higher calling. Pelevin's protagonists frequently struggle toward these often-incomprehensible goals, as part of a personal quest, through the spiritual and cultural wasteland of post-Soviet Russia.

<sup>37</sup> <http://pelevin.nov.ru/>

<sup>38</sup> Polotovskii, Sergei. *Pelevin i Pokolenie Pustoty*. Mann, Ivanov, I Ferber: Moskva, 2012. p. 11

reluctance to be in the public spotlight and his repeated contention that he does not write for his readers, Pelevin's publication methods suggest that he is more interested in the circulation of his works than he is about copyright or financial considerations.<sup>39</sup>

This information allows one to make an important distinction between the reception of Pelevin's works in Russian culture and their popularity worldwide. Abroad, he is variously known, and his work is acknowledged; in Russia, his texts are at once loved and reviled, dismissed and studied, but Pelevin, as an author, is eminently known and respected among fans, scholars, and critics alike. Pelevin's works constitute a quintessential model of Russian postmodernism, as they merge the cynicism and vulgarity of the everyday with serious, culturally relevant art, characterized by fragmentation, pluralism, hyper-reality and satire. The result is a form of literary fiction that erases the cultural boundaries between high and low and forces the mythic, the utopian, and the fantastic to bleed across psychic borders and blend into often troubling yet profound visions of reality.

Conditions in Russia have changed, and with them, reception of Pelevin's works has shifted. An important question, given these changes, is how a writer remains relevant in the face of such events. As Andrew Wachtel elucidates in his *Remaining Relevant after Communism*, "In this [post-communist] environment, the concept of relevance in relation to literature takes on new meaning...Now the author can be relevant to only a segment of the population."<sup>40</sup> The protagonist of Pelevin's *Generation P*, Vavilen Tatarskii, abandons literary writing in favor of exercising "his creativity in an area to which his contemporary society pays more attention", in

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<sup>39</sup> Cowley, Jason. "Gogol a Go-Go." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 22 Jan. 2000. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Wachtel, Andrew Baruch. *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago, 2006. pg. 218.

the form of advertising.<sup>41</sup> Pelevin has not done so, in favor of other strategies for remaining relevant not only after communism, but also after post-communism.

Pelevin's style is due in part to the generation to which he at once speaks and gives voice; the disenfranchised, final, Soviet generation. For this reason, part of Pelevin's loss of appeal in Russia today is tied to his pop-prose aesthetic. To many critics, Pelevin's eclectic blend of the everyday, the magical, the profane, and pop culture with esotericism and Buddhist philosophy no longer resonates with the sociocultural tenor of Russia today, as it is no longer fresh. Pelevin's texts have come to preserve and express the cultural memory of the 1990s, rather than to subvert it. What was then taboo has become familiar and outmoded, as Pelevin's newest criticism centers on his relevance to Russian life.

Pelevin's ability to remain in tune with Russia's sociocultural course and character contributes strongly to his relevance and appeal. Pelevin demonstrates a penchant for prediction in his works, as evinced in his *Chapaev and the Void*, *Generation P*, and more recently, *S.N.U.F.F.*, which presaged recent events in Ukraine.<sup>42</sup> This talent has gained him the designation, 'prophetic', and ties his critical appeal in Russia to his texts' commentary about the realities of Russian life and their fluidity.<sup>43</sup> This connection places Pelevin in an unsteady position, as the appeal of his texts is rooted in a particular cultural frame of reference. One result of this situation is that critical opinion is often quick to tie Pelevin's cultural value to a historical moment. For Natasha Perova, the editor who discovered Pelevin, and who describes him as "the

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<sup>41</sup> Wachtel, pg. 218.

<sup>42</sup> See Mark Lipovetsky, Mikhail Epstein, and Alexander Genis.

<sup>43</sup> Genis, Alexander. "Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature." *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*. Ed. Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover. Berghahn Books: New York. 1999. pg. 214.

voice of a generation,” this moment is the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> This generation is one in exodus from Soviet life, comprised of individuals, who struggled to make the transition from Soviet realities to those of market capitalism, the loss of identity, and the loss of the communist future that they strove to build. Pelevin provided alternative dreams for post-Soviet realities. His visions proved universal in post-Soviet culture, as they were constructed upon the ruins of Soviet myth and culture. For this reason, Pelevin’s perennial exploration of themes intrinsic to the post-Soviet consciousness has proven popular and relevant to the Russia of the 1990s and 2000s; however, it seems, not the 2010s.

Pelevin’s unwillingness either to shift away from literary fiction or to cater to critical expectations helps explain the lower critical estimation of Pelevin’s latest novels. While Pelevin’s adaptation to post-communist conditions drove his relevance and popularity in the post-Soviet era, his perceived lack of adaptation to new conditions in the present day, in part, drives his critical decline. Culturally speaking, the two decades following the fall of the Soviet Union are definitively post-Soviet; wherein, the problems and questions of Russian life largely originate in Soviet times. The crux of the shift in attitudes to Pelevin’s prose is a change in the sociocultural conditions surrounding its production. The big problems of Russian life today no longer stem from the “unexpectedly easy fall of the Soviet Union,” as they often did in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>45</sup> Viktor Pelevin’s particular brand of Russian postmodernism served as an incisive and largely satisfying response to the realities of that era, as it lent an at once humorous and serious perspective to the absurd conditions of post-communist everyday life. Today, Russia’s

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<sup>44</sup> Cowley, Jason. "Gogol a Go-Go."

<sup>45</sup> Genis, Alexander. “Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature.” pg. 212.

problems are intrinsically Russian, beyond the descriptive capacity of the prefix, ‘post-’. Despite the perspective that Pelevin’s newest works have little new to contribute to Russian literature, Pelevin’s work has taken on a new tone; one much more sarcastic and pedantic.

The shift in Pelevin’s tone is evident in his 2014 *Love of Three Zuckerbrins*, where the text addresses familiar themes, such as the elusive organizational structure of the world, illusory realities, and technology. The subject matter of the novel is not entirely new, but its tone sets the novel apart from Pelevin’s previous offerings. Iuliia Kuprina comments, “In [Pelevin’s] new, twelfth novel, obscene language, references to porn, malignantly altered advertising slogans, and biting comments of the current political situation do not look so much clever as sarcastic. The irony has turned into cynicism, and not provocative like everyone expected, but gloomy.”<sup>46</sup> Each of these aspects of the text can be found abundantly in Pelevin’s previous works; references to pornography are found in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, cleverly altered advertising slogans in *Generation P*, biting political commentary in *Hall of the Singing Caryatids*, and obscene language in all of Pelevin’s novels, *Love of Three Zuckerbrins* differs from Pelevin’s previous offerings through its cheerless deployment. Thus, it helps explain the shift in Russian critical perception surrounding Pelevin to its current negative bent. That Kuprina’s criticism is representative of much of the Russian public commentary surrounding Pelevin’s newest works indicates that perhaps literary critics do not view Russia’s recent upheaval as a cultural borderland between the post-Soviet and whatever comes after. Pelevin has long produced text on

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<sup>46</sup> Kuprina, Juliia. "V novoi knige Viktor Pelevin ob"iasniaet, v chem smysl zhizni." Delovoi portal Kapital, 16 Sept. 2014. Web. 9 Oct. 2015. <http://www.capital.ua/ru/publication/29487-retsenziya-na-svezhego-pelevina-knizhnaya-polka> “A v svezhem romane, dvenadcatom poschetu, necenzurnaia leksika, otsylki k porno, zlobno pereinachennye reklamnye slogany, iazvitel’nye kommentarii tekushhei politicheskoi situacii vygliadiat ne stol’ko ostroumno, skol’ko sarkastichno. Ironiya prevratilas’ v cinizm, no ne zadornyi, kak vse ozhidali, a mrachnyi.”

“the windowsill”, as Alexander Genis describes “the boundary between different worlds” that “underlines as well as creates difference”.<sup>47</sup> For Pelevin’s latest output, one such boundary is that between the era of the 1990s to 2000s and the present. Whether the borders, across which Pelevin projects his visions are visible even to him is less important than the prophetic quality of the resultant texts. In either event, Pelevin’s new tone may indicate a tipping point, both in Pelevin’s production and in Russian literary aesthetics.

Pelevin may be producing for a literary culture beyond the era, to which his appeal seems critically tied but with which his prophetic dreams continue to resonate. This fact indicates a change in the times; the era of post-Soviet literary fiction has come to an end for Pelevin, as he adapts to a new cultural era in Russia, creating hybrid discourse. Nevertheless, Pelevin preserves a dedication to the centrality of literary fiction as a generator of meaning in contemporary Russia. His texts’ adaptation to and commentary about specific phenomena in Russian life preserves Pelevin’s relevance beyond the culturally post-Soviet.

Pelevin’s relevance for post-Soviet literature and culture is rivaled by few contemporary Russian writers, none of whom possess Pelevin’s unique brand appeal. This fact does not diminish the relevance of other prominent Russian writers. Rather, it helps justify the volume of critical literature that has been devoted to Pelevin. This relatively unrivaled position in Russian literary culture serves as the primary reason that I have chosen to engage the works of Viktor Pelevin as emblematic of the diversity and influence that Russian literary fiction yields in post-Soviet culture.

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<sup>47</sup> Genis, Alexander. “Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature.” Pg. 217.

## Vladimir Sorokin

Almost as much critical attention has been paid in the post-Soviet period to another Soviet and Russian writer, Vladimir Sorokin. Born in Moscow in 1955, Sorokin has proven to be a dynamic author, screenwriter, and artist. Graduating in 1977 from Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas, with a degree in engineering, Sorokin followed an early educational path that is endemic among members of his generation. Like Pelevin, Sorokin did not pursue a career in his chosen academic field. He instead began working as a graphic artist, designing book covers.

In his *Avtoportret*, Vladimir Sorokin recalls that in the mid-1970s, he found himself in Moscow's artistic underground, in a group of conceptualists, which included Ilya Kabakov and Erik Bulatov, among others.<sup>48</sup> This time was the peak of Sots-Art, and as Olga Bogdanova remarks, Sorokin realized that the Soviet world was at once monstrous and yet possessed its own inimitable aesthetic and which lived according to its own laws.<sup>49</sup> Following this realization, Sorokin began his artistic career in the tradition of the Moscow conceptualists, as he embraced the Sots-Art aesthetic. Sorokin's work continued in the Sots-Art tradition until the early 1990s, when he published his novel, *Roman*, a poem in prose, *A Month in Dachau*, and several short stories, which are distinctly postmodernist.

It is not a coincidence that Sorokin's prose progressed from the more conceptualist and experimental aesthetic of Sots-Art to the more stable forms of postmodernism. In the early 1990s, Russian writers had a complete picture and a clear cultural memory of Soviet life. This

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<sup>48</sup> Bogdanova, O. V. *Kontseptualist, Pisatel' i Khudozhhnik: Vladimir Sorokin*. Saint Petersburg State University: Saint Petersburg, 2005. p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> See Bogdanova, O. V.

final perspective on Soviet culture and institutions, in the knowledge that it was final and inimitable created a literary environment, in which the objects of satire were, for the first time, fully formed, wholly defenseless, and universally recognized. There were no censors to suppress works of fiction, and satire of Soviet institutions had become a wholly cultural rather than political act, as the Soviet government was defunct. Sorokin's earliest works of postmodernism, such as *Roman*, seized upon this opportunity and scathingly satirized nearly every aspect of Soviet life.

Sorokin's absurdism and penchant for cultural introspection in his works, combined with the often violent and grotesque scenarios that he explores have set his works apart from other writers of the early post-Soviet period. The reception of Sorokin's works is often highly polarized. He is often praised for his stark and insightful introspections into Russian culture. However, like Pelevin, Sorokin's works have also been publicly burned and even submerged in toilets.<sup>50</sup> Many of those, who dislike Sorokin's texts, decry them as filth and pornography. Nevertheless, his works constitute both serious literature of the post-Soviet era and obligatory reading for serious literary critics and cultural connoisseurs.

As a result, Sorokin's works have won a variety of awards, including the Russian Booker Prize and the Andrei Bely Prize in 2001, the Liberty Award in 2005, the Gorky Prize in 2010, the *Bol'shaya Kniga* Award in both 2011 and 2014, and an award from the German Ministry of Culture. The lack of diversity among these awards accurately reflects Sorokin's more pronounced and widespread popularity within Russia, as opposed to abroad. This is not to say that Sorokin's works are entirely unpopular in the West; they are simply less well-known, as

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<sup>50</sup> Taratuta, Julija. "Vladimir Sorokin obankrotil "Idushhih vmeste"" Kommersant'. Gazeta Kommersant', 30 Mar. 2004. Web. 30 Nov. 2014. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/461891>

compared with those of an author, such as Viktor Pelevin. This circumstance may be a result of Sorokin's attention to and preoccupation with Russian culture, in particular, in the post-Soviet era.

Unlike that of Viktor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin's relationship with his readers is conventional. He is a critically-acclaimed writer, who addresses important questions of Russian life and culture in his texts. His works are published domestically and abroad, and they sell well. Furthermore, Sorokin regularly conducts interviews, engages in lectures, and makes public appearances. In this aspect of his career, Vladimir Sorokin is a more traditional writer than Pelevin. These aspects of Sorokin's cultural engagement make him a quintessential example of the post-Soviet writer, neither the most popular nor the most eccentric, but active and broadly-reviewed.

While other authors in the post-Soviet era remain relevant to a study of the place of literary fiction in contemporary Russian culture, none match the diverse cultural impact of Sorokin and Pelevin. For this reason, I believe that an examination of post-Soviet, Russian literary fiction, through the lens of individual works by Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin, will accurately address the contemporary role of literary fiction in Russian culture and help bridge the gap between Western and Russian understandings of the crisis that has been identified in post-Soviet, literary culture. Although such an examination will not render a comprehensive picture of contemporary literary culture in Russia, in relation to its Soviet heritage and the myths that underlie it, it will offer some sort of an answer to Aksenov's musing about the state of literary fiction a quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union and provide an understanding of how post-Soviet literary fiction appropriates myths to influence worldviews and inform post-communist culture.

## Modeling Russian literary aesthetics for the future

Viktor Pelevin is among the avant-garde of Russian writers, who recognize the paradigm shift, occurring in contemporary Russian culture, and are adapting to it. Among his peers, Pelevin most conspicuously continues to embrace the novel as the preferred medium for the generation of discourse, as Russian culture transitions out of the post-Soviet mode. No other contemporary Russian writer can boast the mainstream success, critical attention, and cultural relevance that Pelevin enjoys. Those who have achieved critical success, during this time of transition, have mostly either abandoned the novelistic form or eschewed postmodernist aesthetics. Vladimir Sorokin has proven similarly prophetic as Pelevin, as his *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006) and *Sakharnyi Kreml'* (2008) largely have served to foretell the current state of affairs in Russia. While, in recent years, Sorokin has expanded his writing beyond the novel, in preference of the short story and other cultural media, his works demonstrate the relevance of literary fiction in contemporary Russian culture. This relevance persists precisely because of the multifarious adaptations to conditions in contemporary Russia, evinced by its writers. Many contemporary Russian writers do not subscribe to Russian postmodernist aesthetics, feature utopianism in their works, or embrace Soviet mythology, favoring other myths or none at all. The works of perennial critical successes such as Olga Slavnikova, hybrid writers such as Boris Akunin, and recent winners of Russian Booker Prizes such as Vladimir Sharov and Alexander Snegirev represent various other directions that literary aesthetics are taking in Russia today. The aesthetics of Boris Akunin's works are of particular interest, as Akunin crosses genres in his

texts and blends fiction with non-fiction.<sup>51</sup> He also writes under several pen names and produces a greater volume of text than perhaps any active Russian-language writer. While not indicative of common trends in Russian literary culture, these techniques allow Akunin to remain relevant in an era of Russian literary production that does not favor traditional forms of literary fiction for cultural expression. The fact that prominent writers, such as Akunin and Sharov, experience critical success in this environment, even as they experiment in the field of literary production, reflects recognition of a need for new discursive forms for the cultural era that Russia is currently entering. The fact that, like Pelevin, these writers have not abandoned the novel, as they develop new aesthetics for their works of literary fiction, demonstrates the continued resilience of the novel in the face of crisis.

Despite differences in approach to Russia's cultural transformation, among his peers, Viktor Pelevin serves as an exemplar of the successful, contemporary Russian writer, whose works are indicative of the predominant adaptive trends in post-Soviet literary production. Pelevin's works demonstrate that writing continues to be a mythogenic agent in Russian culture and that such mythopoesis has played a central role in the flourishing of literary fiction after the fall of the Soviet Union. Mythmaking and utopian thought continue to inform not only Pelevin's works but also those of a number of active Russian writers, who utilize their continued impact for the generation of new discursive forms and a new subjectivity. The fact that Viktor Pelevin is not only so well but so widely and publicly received indicates the continued centrality of literary fiction to Russian culture, especially as other authors are often similarly reviewed and remain in

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<sup>51</sup> See: History of the Russian State (Istorii Rossijskogo gosudarstva). A series of nonfiction works on Russian history from the 9th century to the 1917 Revolution, complemented by a series of works of literary fiction, which are set in eras that correspond to each entry of documentary nonfiction.

the forefront of Russian culture. The fact that these authors have successfully adapted to modes of post-Soviet cultural production and generated meaning for that culture, utilizing both the remnants and methods of Soviet mass culture, demonstrates the trajectory of Russian literary culture. The aesthetic continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet productions, evinced by writers, such as Sorokin and Pelevin remains distinct a quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union. This continuity does not appear to be diminishing, even as the post-Soviet gives way to a new wave of uniquely Russian literary fiction, with little connection to Soviet life and culture, but with a clear relationship to literature of the 1990s and 2000s. As Pelevin's works and their subsequent criticism evince, Russian literary fiction is entering a new era, beyond the direct influence of Soviet aesthetic forms, social realities, and cultural myths. In whatever manner the post-post-Soviet might be described in upcoming years, its genealogy remains intact, as literary fiction is giving new purpose to utopian dreams of the Soviet Union and re-embraces the mythic traditions of the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras.

When, in 1993, Vasilii Aksenov apprehensively mused that, "It is difficult to predict what Russian literary life will look like a quarter-century from now," he expressed consciousness of a sense of crisis looming over Russian literary culture.<sup>52</sup> While that crisis manifested variously in literary production, from the decline of thick journals, to the sudden inability of writers to earn a living wage, to the large-scale eschewing of the novel as a medium for cultural discourse, it did not result in the marginalization of literary fiction in Russian culture. In this sense, the literary crisis that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union is conceptually similar to the crisis that exists in Russia today. Both are the result of sweeping changes to Russian life, a subsequent scramble

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<sup>52</sup>Aksenov, Vasilii and Mozur, Joseph. "Dystrophy of the 'Thick' and Bespredel of the 'Thin'". p. 19.

for writers to adapt to the new conditions, and an ensuing paradigm shift in literary aesthetics and production. Vasilii Aksenov could not imagine the diverse and pervasive media that would take up the mantle of the ‘thick journal’ in Russian literary culture of the early nineties and thus avert the destiny that he anticipated. He also could not foresee the innovative methods that writers would employ in order to remain relevant in post-Soviet culture. A quarter century later, these methods are apparent, and literary fiction remains at the center of Russian cultural life. On the verge of a new cultural crisis, heightened by renewed censorship of cultural products and reduced freedom of public expression, Russian literary fiction continues to evolve, as it reclaims the utopian dreams of the Soviet Union and cultivates new responses to the ethos of contemporary Russia. While it may remain impossible to predict the exact progression of Russian literary life over the course of the next quarter century, the resilience of Russian literary fiction has been demonstrated. The broad adaptability of Russian writers, from the post-Soviet era to the present, indicates that Russian literary culture likely will not exist in “a rotting underground,” but will continue to produce new and innovative modes of discourse that maintain the prominence of literary fiction in Russian culture.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Aksenov. p. 19.

## **Chapter 1: Myth as History: Mythopoetics in Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void***

The fall of the Soviet Union brought with it the end of a political system and social organization. In a more abstract sense, it also spelled the end to dreams of a utopian future. However, it was not the end of Soviet culture. This fact is not entirely obvious, given a cursory glance at Russia of the 1990s. The Soviet Union itself had been parceled out. Soviet monuments were being destroyed. Capitalism had taken hold, and the Russian market was awash with Western cultural products. Moreover, the advent of the internet was introducing a new medium of cultural production and consumption. Nevertheless, there is significant continuity between the cultures of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia.

Permanent, formal indicators of the endurance of Soviet cultural icons are found in post-Soviet literary fiction. Literary fiction has maintained its relevance in Russian culture by embracing its Soviet heritage. In so doing, literary fiction at once addresses the persistence of Soviet culture and builds upon its foundational myths. Russian writers of post-Soviet literary fiction often appropriate Soviet cultural mythology as a mode of interaction both with latent elements of Soviet society and history and with readers, for whom Soviet cultural forms are not simply memory but part and parcel to their identities.

The interaction of literary fiction with Soviet myths has also become a hallmark of Russian postmodernism. Russian postmodernism is a reaction against Socialist Realism, as Russian postmodernism at once rejects the Socialist Realist aesthetic and acknowledges that aesthetic as part of its own genealogy. Like Western postmodernism, Russian postmodernism is marked by pluralism, fragmentation, hyper-reality, cynicism, satire, and a rejection of totalizing theories. This has manifested itself in the post-Soviet era as the dominant aesthetic. This is not to say that postmodernism has a monopoly on post-Soviet literature; writers such as Boris

Akunin, Dina Rubina, and Aleksandra Marinina, among others, occupy a significant place in contemporary Russian literary culture. Nevertheless, Russian postmodernism has become well-established in the field of serious, culturally-relevant literary fiction.

Many writers of Russian postmodernism, including Zakhar Prilepin, Tatyana Tolstaya, Vladimir Sorokin, and Viktor Pelevin, appropriate elements of Soviet culture and myth in their respective works. Examples include the figure of Joseph Stalin in Sorokin's *Blue Lard* and Yuri Gagarin and the Soviet space program in Pelevin's *Omon Ra*. Among these writers, Viktor Pelevin most conspicuously appropriates mythologized figures from Soviet and pre-Soviet culture and creates satire through them, as a means of capturing and generating meaning for the post-Soviet era. The most illustrious mythologized icon that Pelevin has appropriated, reworked and disseminated to post-Soviet audiences is Civil War hero Vasilii Chapaev in *Chapaev and the Void*. My analysis of Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void* will demonstrate that mythmaking is central to the novel's cultural resonance in the post-Soviet era.

### Pelevin's Chapaev

In 1996, Viktor Pelevin released his third novel, *Chapaev and the Void*, also called *Buddha's Little Finger* in the US and *The Clay Machine Gun*, in the UK. These titles refer to the weaponized little finger of Buddha Anagama, which reduces everything to nothingness by revealing its empty reality. *Chapaev and the Void* brought Pelevin the greatest critical attention of any of his novels, both in Russia and in the West, where he is among the most widely-read of contemporary Russian authors. The novel follows the adventures of Vasilii Chapaev and his legendary cohort through the post-Soviet imagination of the Russian Civil War. This novel was released in the midst of a Russian economic crisis, political instability, and perennial corruption. The mid-1990s were also the height of a Russian, sociocultural identity crisis. Five years

removed from the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians had a clearer perspective on the effects of this fall. The political and economic effects had become evident in both everyday life and mass media. On the cultural front, mass media were avidly and vividly describing the national decline. Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void* explores the effects of the loss of Soviet identity, and reconciles that loss with post-Soviet realities. The novel accomplishes these feats as much through its cast of characters and their deep roots in Russian cultural history as through the construction of a plot or any of the novel's formal features.

The Russian title of the novel, *Chapaev i Pustota*, references two individuals, the well-known historical figure, Vasili Chapaev, and Pelevin's original creation, Pyotr Pustota, who is modeled after Chapaev's legendary assistant, Petka. The name, Pyotr Pustota, which means 'void' in English, holds a double meaning, as it at once references the extra-historical character and the emptiness of, especially post-Soviet, existence, which Pelevin casts as a main theme of the novel. The 'i', in *Chapaev i Pustota*, indicates a correlation of the respective ideas behind each character, as myth underlies the character of Chapaev, and Pyotr's name indicates an equally empty identity.

The dualism inherent in the title extends to the formal qualities of the text. On the surface, *Chapaev and the Void* is an eminently readable piece of pop-prose that begins more like an example of the ever-popular, post-Soviet *detektiv* than a piece of serious literature. This pop-prose incorporates objects of mass culture, such as film, comics, and advertising for the creation of popular art. Accordingly, the language of the novel is that of everyday life; it runs the spectrum from simple to specialized and from neutral to vulgar. Pelevin caters much of the language of the novel to a broad audience, as the novel is addressed broadly and concerns broad themes, including the post-Soviet experience in relation to Russia's cultural and political history,

the constitution and structure of reality, and identity. For this reason, *Chapaev and the Void* alternates between dialogue-based narrative and philosophical monologue. The end product engages its subject matter at once through cultural mythology and through the plot.

The plot of *Chapaev and the Void* follows the psychological development of Pyotr Pustota, as he comes to terms with reality. In this sense, the novel is a *bildungsroman*, as it traces the process of maturation and self-discovery that the protagonist undergoes, in his transition between sociopolitical eras and psychically-constructed spaces. Because Pyotr Pustota is framed as a post-Soviet Everyman, his struggles represent the struggles of Russian society, as it made its transition out of the Soviet period. The fact that Pelevin casts the namesake of Petka, the fool and frequent butt of Soviet-era Chapaev-*anekdoty*, as a personification of the post-Soviet individual was a central factor in the novel's resonance with Russian readers of the 1990s. On the other hand, the novel details a temporal and psychological regression that takes place in the protagonist, as he struggles to grow into realities of post-Soviet existence. In this sense, the novel's treatment of the protagonist has less to do with coming of age as an individual than with his journey between permutations of the Russian *byt* and *bytie* (everyday life and being), while claiming the heritage of a grand yet ruinous past. In light of the deep-rooted Soviet cultural saga surrounding Pyotr Pustota's prototype, the significance of Pyotr's character lies in its resonance with post-Soviet readers.

The novel begins in revolutionary Petrograd, where the protagonist, Pyotr Pustota, is fleeing to Moscow, following his publication of an anti-revolutionary poem. Having killed an intelligence operative and assumed his identity, Pyotr Pustota meets Chapaev and sets off into battle with him, in the role of a *Cheka* officer. At their formal introduction, Pyotr is dumbfounded to find Chapaev waiting for him, playing the piano. Chapaev remarks, "Perhaps

you would be kind enough to assist me? I believe you are acquainted with the piece in question?" As Pyotr acquiesces, he recalls, "Chapaev seemed to have read my thoughts...As though in a trance, I...stood beside him and waited for the right moment before lowering my fingers on to the keys."<sup>1</sup> This exchange sets the tone for the main interaction between these characters throughout the novel; Chapaev is always one step ahead of Pyotr and understands him completely. In this sense, a facsimile of Chapaev seems to be rooted deeply in Pyotr's consciousness.

Accordingly, whenever Pyotr falls asleep, he awakens as a patient in a post-Soviet mental hospital, where he is being treated for split-personality disorder. Volodin, a fellow patient in the mental hospital remarks, "...you, Pyotr, are a prize exhibit. Your false personality is developed in such fine detail that it outweighs the real one and almost entirely displaces it."<sup>2</sup> This development serves as the basis for Pelevin's cultural discourse about identity, as Pyotr's interactions with Chapaev and his therapy in the mental ward shape his conception of reality. This is not to say that post-Soviet individuals are somehow Soviet stereotypes; rather, that as post-Soviet individuals lost their Soviet identities with the fall of the Soviet Union, many became culturally-schizophrenic, torn between sociocultural eras and ways of life. Such individuals are represented in the novel by a motley band of variously afflicted patients, who haunt Pyotr's post-Soviet reality and challenge the notion of reality itself. Each of them harbors a particular delusion about his own reality, which separates him from the shared experience of post-Soviet existence. The novel grounds the delusion of each patient in the literal and figurative mental

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<sup>1</sup> Pelevin, Viktor. *Buddha's Little Finger*. Penguin Books: New York, 2001. pp. 64-5.

<sup>2</sup> Pelevin p. 89

hospital that constitutes post-Soviet existence in a form of ideological, social, or temporal nostalgia.

This nostalgia is most visible in Pyotr's Civil War era escapades with Chapaev. Once Pyotr departs for the front with Chapaev, he is transferred to the Asian Cavalry division, which Chapaev commands. In this action, Pyotr's character follows the story of the historical and mass culture character of Furmanov. Nevertheless, Pyotr is not modeled strictly after Furmanov. He also recalls Chapaev's assistant Petka, and in this role he is absurd. The nostalgia that Pyotr's character invokes is for a time when individuals, identity, and reality were more clearly defined. However, for Pyotr, repressing his life in the post-Soviet mental ward, this reality is lost. Pyotr is drawn deeper into his revolutionary-era fantasy, as he loses his memory after an injury suffered in battle. Subsequently, he discovers that he has become close with Chapaev. Their discussions drive much of the remainder of the plot, which centers on Pyotr's discovery of the memories and identity that he has lost. Instead, through Chapaev, Pyotr discovers the illusory nature of the world and of his own identity. The novel ends with the conclusion of Pyotr and Chapaev's adventures in the revolutionary past, the release of Pyotr from the post-Soviet mental hospital for having overcome his delusion, and the subsequent return of Chapaev in the post-Soviet era. These events unfold, as Pyotr's identity is once again unraveled by the reminder that the external world does exist and that problems do not disappear simply by dismissing them. Chapaev's return indicates that the power of the Soviet myths and myth at large are persistent in post-Soviet cultural consciousness as places of mental refuge from harsh realities. Among Soviet mythologized figures, Chapaev's myth has the greatest resonance in the post-Soviet period, originating in history and culminating in Pelevin's novel.

## Chapaev: from man to myth

Born in 1887, Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev was a successful Russian soldier and Civil War commander. Having joined the Bolshevik party in 1917, Chapaev commanded a rifle division for the Bolsheviks in the Civil War. He died in September of 1919, when his division was ambushed by White Army forces. Chapaev was wounded and forced to flee across the Ural River, where he drowned. His body was never recovered.

Despite this heroic and historic legacy, Vasilii Chapaev was not a sophisticated embodiment of Bolshevik ideology. Chapaev's birth into a peasant family was an automatic black spot on his record. In Bolshevik perception, "the peasantry were...a class of petty bourgeoisie, alien and antagonistic not only to Socialist ideals but to all social progress...any economic improvement of his condition was in their eyes not only without object but even objectionable."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Chapaev was neither well-educated nor keen on instruction. For example, after less than a month of training at the Staff Military Academy in Moscow, Chapaev requested to be recalled to service at the front, due to boredom.<sup>4</sup> This action demonstrates Chapaev's preference for action over deliberation. On the battlefield, Chapaev garnered a reputation for bravado and courage, as opposed to tactical or intellectual prowess. Nevertheless, Chapaev was a natural commander and competent tactician. Consequently, he was well-respected by his subordinates and consistently won battles. During World War I, Chapaev served as a noncommissioned officer in the tsarist army, receiving the Saint George Cross three times for undaunted courage. Having joined the Reds during the Russian Revolution, Chapaev's

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<sup>3</sup> Zenzinov, Vladimir. "The Bolsheviks and the Peasant." *Foreign Affairs*. October, 1925. Accessed, 27 Mar. 2015. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68637/vladimir-zenzinov/the-bolsheviks-and-the-peasant>.

<sup>4</sup> Graffy, Julian. *Chapaev*. I. B. Taurus & Co. Ltd. New York: 2010. p. 3.

reputation and military record led him to be appointed to command a rifle division on the front lines of the war. Much as Chapaev was recruited by the Reds from the tsarist army and used for his reputation and record, after his death, Vasili Chapaev was transformed into a “symbol of peasant know-how and revolutionary courage.”<sup>5</sup> Furmanov’s *Chapaev* inducts the figure of Chapaev into the Soviet imaginary and mass culture, in much the same way that Pelevin later reintroduced Chapaev into post-Soviet mass culture.

The popular figure of Chapaev was first introduced to the Soviet public in 1923, when Dmitry Furmanov published his documentary novel, *Chapaev*. I refer to the text as a novel, even though it is more of a documentary narrative, because despite its lack of formal novelistic qualities, it is often discussed as a novel, and it served “as a model work of Soviet fiction.”<sup>6</sup>

The novel begins in 1919, when workers are preparing to join the fight against the Whites, at the front lines, on the Volga. Fedor Klychkov, a stand-in for the author Furmanov, is among them and constantly hears tales of Chapaev. However, he does not meet Chapaev until the fifth chapter. This delay indicates that even before Chapaev’s induction into Soviet mass culture via Furmanov’s novel and the Vasil’ev Brothers’ film, Chapaev was afforded a legendary status. Subsequent chapters detail Klychkov and Chapaev’s interactions, battles against Kolchak’s forces, victories of the Reds, the cultural activities of Zoia Pavlovna, Chapaev’s final, major victory, Klychkov’s recall from the front, and the narrator’s extended musings about Chapaev. Furmanov notes,

Where is Chapaev’s *heroism*, where are his *heroic deeds*, do they really exist at all, and do heroes themselves exist? ...According to popular belief, ‘Chapaev

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<sup>5</sup> Brintlinger, Angela. *Chapaev and his Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero across the Twentieth Century*. Academic Studies Press. Boston: 2012. p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, Katerina. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington: 2000. p. 85

himself<sup>7</sup> was to be found unfailingly at the Front with his naked sword raised. Chapaev himself laid his enemies low, threw himself into the hottest fighting and was responsible for the outcome.<sup>7</sup>

This commentary demonstrates the sort of heroism that was expected of Chapaev even before his induction into Soviet mass culture and its gallery of heroes. It also indicates the folk tradition that the mythologized Chapaev would follow.

In the novel, one finds an attempt to reconcile the conceptual ideal of Chapaev, with the realities of Bolshevism and Soviet life. Chapaev became an individuated figure of lifelike proportions and realistic depiction. As Stephen Hutchings writes, Furmanov's portrayal of Chapaev, "both increases the conceptual aura surrounding his feats and makes them palpable in a way that a fairy-tale giant would not.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Furmanov humanizes and personalizes the figure of Chapaev creates the first features of his mythology and ushers a simulated image of Chapaev into Soviet mass culture.

That Furmanov's novel was the first of numerous printed contributions to the Chapaev myth places it among the most important examples of Soviet mythmaking in mass culture. Before Furmanov's novel, Chapaev was most well-known for his exploits, as part of an oral tradition. As Furmanov notes, "His glory was carried like down across the steppes and beyond by hundreds and thousands of fighters who had also *heard of him* from others, believed what they had heard, been enraptured by it, embellished and added to it themselves through *their own* invention and carried it further."<sup>9</sup> One step removed from this folk-historical figure, who

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<sup>7</sup> Furmanov, Dmitrii. *Sobranie sochinienii v chetyrekh tomakh*. Moscow, 1960-1. p. 308-9.

<sup>8</sup> Hutchings, Stephen. *Russian Literary Culture in the Camera Age: The Word as Image* London and New York Routledge. p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Furmanov. *Sobranie sochinienii v chetyrekh tomakh*. p. 308-9.

commanded a Red Army division, Furmanov's illustration of Chapaev rendered him as a sort of Cossack hero, who at once embodied the freedom of the steppe and needed to be reined in. As Angela Brintlinger notes, "there was a conflict in Furmanov's concept of the hero. While he still celebrates the elemental in Chapaev, he explicitly connects restraint with being cultured and considers that to be the goal for revolutionary peasants and workers."<sup>10</sup> In combination with his obvious heroism, it is precisely this quality of restraint that makes the figure of Chapaev attractive as an object of appropriation by the Bolsheviks. In Furmanov's *Chapaev*, Vasilii Chapaev possessed the constant and admirable quality of availing himself of the guidance of his Bolshevik commissar. Furmanov's Chapaev was at once a peasant, a brilliant leader, a Bolshevik hero and martyr; he was also an individual in desperate need of membership in a larger collective. In short, he was a deeply humanized character, who wisely turned to his commissar in matters of significance. This factor of Furmanov's portrayal created in Chapaev an archetypical model of the Soviet man, who at once recognizes his personal limitations and subsequently subordinates his, albeit strong, will to that of the collective, as represented by Bolshevism.

Chapaev's journey into individual, political, and class consciousness in Furmanov's novel resonated with readers, as many were forced to face a similar challenge at the time. Chapaev's wartime heroism in the face of both internal and external struggles was a gripping and believable premise for readers, still reeling from the external conflict of World War I and the internal conflicts of the Civil War and the rise of socialism. Furmanov's Chapaev was crafted into an embodiment of this set of struggles and the ability to overcome them. The simple change of the historical Chapaev's unbridled bravery, loyalty, and pride into, first, a Cossack and then

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<sup>10</sup> Brintlinger, p. 49

Bolshevik ideal creates in the figure of Chapaev a revolutionary symbol. Chapaev does not begin his tenure in the gallery of Soviet heroes as a true Bolshevik leader or idealist but as a model of previous eras of Cossack-like bravado. He was subsequently molded into the Bolshevik hero of Soviet and post-Soviet memory through vast mass media exposure.

The Chapaev myth continued to evolve with the release of the Vasil'ev Brothers' 1934 biopic, *Chapaev*. Compared to Furmanov's book, the Vasil'ev Brothers' film removes the delicacy from the character of Chapaev yet continues to personalize him by giving him center stage on the big screen. In this quality, it was a trendsetter for early Soviet film, as, previously, historical film rarely centered on a single individual. This aspect of the film makes perhaps the greatest, single contribution to the Chapaev myth, as it made him a legend.<sup>11</sup> Chapaev's bravery in Furmanov's novel becomes bravado in the film. His confidence becomes not personal but collective, contagious, and idealistic. Finally, his loyalty becomes not only to his men but to their common cause.

These changes in the Vasil'ev Brothers' depiction reflect both the posthumous mass-media transformation of the historical Chapaev into simulacrum and the early success of Soviet mythmaking. They also reflect an ideological shift between revolutionary-era Bolshevism and Soviet culture. The humanized Chapaev of Furmanov's novel served to galvanize the literate peasantry, to a certain extent, and disseminate an idealized image of what even the most uneducated of the peasant and working classes could aspire to, with proper guidance. The Vasil'ev Brothers' film appropriated this image, molded it to reflect the ideals not of the

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<sup>11</sup> Hicks, Jeremy. "Educating Chapaev: From Document to Myth." *Russian and Soviet Film Adaptations of Literature, 1900-2001: Screening the Word*. Eds. Stephen Hutchings and Anat Vernitski. New York: RoutledgeCurzon. 2001. p. 51.

revolution but of the newly-established Soviet regime, and disseminated it to a barely-half-literate population that could nevertheless easily assimilate the message of the film.<sup>12</sup> Thus, for Soviet audiences of the mid-1930s, the figure of Chapaev sprang into existence in Soviet mass culture and was perpetuated in cultural memory from this, rather than his historical form. Thus, Chapaev's appearance on the big screen, in the Soviet Union, played a considerable role in the evolution of cultural consciousness surrounding the figure of Chapaev and of his mythology. Accordingly, the Chapaev of the Vasil'ev Brothers' film is by and large the Chapaev of Soviet cultural memory. Nevertheless, it is two versions removed from the historical figure and constitutes but one stage in the Chapaev myth.

Boris Babochkin's portrayal of Chapaev was so cogent and authentic that, attending a screening of the film in 1934, Chapaev's grown daughter, Klavdiia Chapaeva, exclaimed with teary eyes, "That's really him. That's not the actor, Babochkin, that's my father... It seemed to me that I was watching my father. What amazing similarity; the hair style, the mannerisms, the sharp transitions from hot-temperedness to calm, from severity to laughter—these are the remarkable characteristics of my father."<sup>13</sup> Thus, Babochkin not only served as a faithful representation of the historical Chapaev, but also became the official face of Chapaev for Soviet and post-Soviet generations. The construction of a public face for Chapaev in the popular imagination was an early step toward the establishment of his fully fleshed-out, mythologized figure. In effect, the film contributed critical pieces to the Soviet and, later, post-Soviet conception of Chapaev, but it does not fully represent the Chapaev mythos.

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<sup>12</sup> Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1994. pp. 225-6 & fn. 78 p. 363.

<sup>13</sup> Hartzok, Justus G. *Children of Chapaev : The Russian Civil War Cult and the Creation of Soviet Identity, 1918-1941*. Diss. U of Iowa, 2009. Web. 08 Mar. 2015. p. 2

The already popular figure of Chapaev was further mythologized in Soviet popular culture through an ever-evolving cycle of *anekdoty* that sprang up in the 1930s, immediately after the release of the film. These *anekdoty* center around Vasili Chapaev and his cohort, specifically Petka and Anna, and enjoyed peak popularity between the 1970s and 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Following the incremental evolution of the Chapaev myth from previous iterations, Chapaev *anekdoty* are based almost exclusively on the film rendition of Chapaev, rather than on the Chapaev of Furmanov's novel or the historical figure. These earlier models of the Chapaev figure were simply less well known and less significant to Soviet mass culture than the Vasil'ev Brothers' version. As Seth Graham writes in his 2003, *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, "The symbiotic relationship between the *anekdot* and the hothouse fakelore of Soviet myth production that provided a steady supply of models for it is especially evident in the vast corpus of jokes that feature Vasili Ivanovich Chapaev."<sup>15</sup> This symbiosis drove the continued popularity and evolution of the Chapaev myth in Soviet culture. The genesis of the jokelore surrounding Chapaev is rooted in popular-culture attempts to "shape audience response" to the film.<sup>16</sup> Such attempts became a form of folklore but were published in official sources. For example, Boris Babochkin notes that the directors of Moscow cinemas reported the following *anekdot* in connection with the film: "Are you showing *Chapaev*? / Yes. / Does he drown? / Yes. / That means it's not here. Come on lads, somewhere there's a cinema where he doesn't

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<sup>14</sup> Von Geldern. p. xxvii

<sup>15</sup> Graham, Seth B. *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*. Diss. U of Pittsburgh, 2003. N.p.: n.p., n.d. p. 175

<sup>16</sup> Von Geldern. P. xxvii.

drown.”<sup>17</sup> This example marks among the first popular Chapaev *anekdoty* in popular culture. It also represents a step in the evolution of the Chapaev myth, not only from film to popular culture but also from folklore to parody, as even following the death of the historical Chapaev, competing versions of his final hours sprang up. As Julian Graffy notes, “Some versions even suggested that Chapaev survived the White assault and lived to fight on, attesting to meetings with him months and years later.”<sup>18</sup> The evolution of such folktales testifies to the scale of Chapaev’s influence in the 1930s. From this period onward, Chapaev *anekdoty* became a grassroots phenomenon and were further developed. In this manner, Chapaev *anekdoty* became a mode of popular, unofficial, anti-Soviet satire that survived not only Soviet censorship, but the Soviet Union itself. Moreover, *anekdoty*, involving Chapaev and his cohort, which painted Chapaev as a simpleton and fool, served as satirical social commentary not only against Soviet ideology but about the daily life of Soviet citizenry. It was at once a very real and relatable means of satirizing the mass idealization of Soviet life and a coping mechanism for the harsh realities of Soviet daily life. After the fall of the Soviet Union, these *anekdoty* persisted. Seth Graham notes,

His [Chapaev’s] preeminence as a joke protagonist even today, a dozen years after the end of the Soviet power that he helped establish, was confirmed by a 1999 survey asking Russians about which subjects they most often tell or hear *anekdoty*: 15% named Chapaev; 14%—the New Russians...; 11%—the foul-mouthed class clown, Vovochka; 8%—the Chukchi...; 4%—Jews; 2%—alcoholics and dystrophics; and 1%—Radio Armenia.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Graffy. p. 82. See Chapaev. “*Shedevry Sovietskogo Kino.*” p. 206. Also, for more information about the first Chapaev *anecdote*, see Valerii Frid’s “Kino Moego Detstva.” *Iskusstvo Kino.* 1997, 8, pp. 20-2 (p. 22).

<sup>18</sup> Graffy. p. 3

<sup>19</sup> Graham. p. 176

These numbers tell an astonishing story about the resonance of characters with post-Soviet populations. It is unsurprising that Chapaev is listed. That respondents name him with greater frequency than the New Russians, who are an actual class of individuals in post-Soviet society, indicates that Chapaev's relevance in the post-Soviet period remains significant and widespread. The question of why Chapaev *anekdoty* continued to have relevance for post-Soviet culture outside of notions of nostalgia and Chapaev's universal fame during Soviet times is less important than the interrelation between his *anekdoty* and the mass culture that brought them to life.

There is a certain irony in the re-appropriation of the Chapaev myth from official Soviet mythology into the annals of Soviet popular culture. Chapaev's folklore is intricately interconnected with Soviet mass culture. This fact likely drove his popular appeal, as many of the *anekdoty* that surround the figure of Chapaev poke fun at the very mass culture that generated Chapaev's mythology. The irony is that the selfsame Soviet mass propaganda machine that appropriated the figure of Chapaev, constructed his iconic image, and gave rise to his fame, became the target of his figure's popular re-appropriation in Soviet popular culture, in the form of *anekdoty*. The causality of this phenomenon is entirely explicable. Popular imagination of the Chapaev-figure was more resilient in Soviet and post-Soviet culture than historical or mass-cultural depictions of Chapaev.<sup>20</sup> The legend of Chapaev had become over half a century old, and the version of Chapaev, propagated by mass culture had become minimally relevant to culture of the late-Soviet period. Meanwhile, the historical Chapaev was all but forgotten in mass and popular culture.

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<sup>20</sup> Graham. p. 176

Adaptations of the Chapaev myth existed both in Soviet mass and popular culture. Early versions appeared in official Soviet publication as early as 1940.<sup>21</sup> In the later years of the Soviet Union, satirical versions of Chapaev *anekdoty* appeared in popular culture. They effectively satirized Soviet mythmaking, both because there was adequate time for *anekdoty* to spread in popular culture and because the unassailable myths in mass culture were largely untrue. *Anekdoty*, thus, provided popular tongue-in-cheek commentary about public consciousness of the empty reality surrounding the Soviet hero-as-simulacra. Increasing public recognition of the Soviet hero-as-simulacra, in the late Soviet period, provided the building blocks for the post-Soviet re-appropriation and re-imagination of the figure of Chapaev, his myth, and the application of his cultural function to post-Soviet realities.

The figure of Chapaev is perhaps the most deeply revered and culturally ingrained of the permanent entries into the gallery of Soviet heroes. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the ideals that underlay Soviet cultural forms disappeared from mass culture. This circumstance does not mean that the idols it erected were wholly forgotten. Like a monument raised in the collective imagination of Soviet generations, the figure of Chapaev survived the social and political storms of the early 1990s and reemerged onto the cultural scene of post-Soviet Russia through Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void*, among other depictions in various media. In film, Chapaev appears in Iulii Gusman's *Park Sovetskogo Perioda*, which, as Julian Graffy notes, plays on the Russian title of the movie *Jurassic Park* and features Chapaev's entire cohort.<sup>22</sup> He again appears in the revisionist documentary *Liubov' Chapaia*, wherein Chapaev's romantic interest in

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<sup>21</sup> See *Lektsija Chapaeva o tom, kak odnnomu semerikhu ne bojat'sja* in *Russkii Iumor*, 1940. p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Graffy. p. 102

Furmanov's wife is revealed. Chapaev also figures prominently in Viktor Tikhomirov's *Chapaev-Chapaev*, which deconstructs the Vasil'ev Brothers' *Chapaev* and in so doing affirms his character's value for the post-Soviet era. The figure of Chapaev was not resurrected from the ashes of Soviet ruins. Rather, his figure was so deeply engrained in the cultural consciousness of the Soviet public that when Pelevin re-appropriated it for his own didactic ends, Chapaev remained well-known. Thus, he serves as an effective medium for the transmission of Pelevin's discourse.

Pelevin more fully appropriates the functions of the popular culture manifestation of Chapaev than of the mass cultural Chapaev myth. While the mytho-historical figure of Chapaev became popular because of its propagation through mass culture, the popular culture figure ensured Chapaev's survival into the post-Soviet era. The Chapaev of *Chapaev and the Void* most closely resonates with the Chapaev of Soviet *anekdoty*. Pelevin makes this fact amply clear through a scene near the end of the novel, when Chapaev and Petka are drinking in the *bania* and the weavers, as a stand-in for the Whites, are approaching. Chapaev and Pyotr calmly continue to drink and philosophize about existence before they escape through an underground route.<sup>23</sup> This scene mirrors an *anekdot*, which follows the same model. However, in the *anekdot*, Chapaev asks whether Petka can see the Whites, and Petka indicates that they are blurry. Chapaev responds by indicating that each of them is blurry as well and that they have, thus, camouflaged themselves.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Pelevin's Chapaev is so strongly modeled after the figure of Soviet *anekdoty* is significant for the type of discourse, in which Pelevin engages. Pelevin creates satire

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<sup>23</sup> Pelevin. pp. 297-300.

<sup>24</sup> Domina, Natalya. "Burying Dystopia: The Cases of Venedikt Erofeev, Kurt Vonnegut, and Victor Pelevin." Diss. U of Western Ontario, 2012. Web. 09 Mar. 2015.

as a mode of engaging post-Soviet audiences. The figure of Chapaev sets the tenor of the discourse, such that Pelevin's approach to social commentary is as tongue-in-cheek as the Chapaev *anekdoty*, while the commentary itself remains serious and culturally-relevant. This model of creating discourse in Pelevin's novel is effective precisely because of the wealth of connotations engendered by Chapaev's mass and popular culture mythologization.

Beyond popular culture and *anekdoty*, Pelevin's Chapaev also draws on depictions of Chapaev in Soviet mass culture. While relatively little of Chapaev, as depicted in Furmanov's novel, appears in *Chapaev and the Void*, Pyotr's impressions of and interaction with Chapaev drives the main action of the novel, much as Klychkov's impressions of Chapaev drive Furmanov's novel. Furthermore, Chapaev remains a man of decisive action and authority. The fact that Pelevin's Chapaev has become once again unbridled, without any figure of totalizing authority to reign him in, serves as poignant commentary for the post-Soviet era. Pelevin's depiction of Chapaev once again subordinates the Chapaev myth to the purpose of the writer. In much the same way that the real Chapaev was appropriated by Furmanov to his own ends, the Chapaev appropriated by Pelevin is ostensibly real for Soviet generations. Pelevin's iteration of Chapaev is empowered with all the qualities of each aspect of the Chapaev myth. He is wise, brave, unbridled, fiery yet self-controlled, hilarious, and absurd. But his power, wisdom and influence exist only in the psychic reality of Pyotr Pustota. In *Chapaev and the Void*, Chapaev is presented as simulacrum. While this may not be the final form of the Chapaev myth, it is an acknowledgement of the psychic space that his myth occupies for each generation that embraced it. The space that this myth occupied in Soviet culture made it an obvious candidate for the transmission of Pelevin's cultural commentary, in much the same way that Furmanov's Chapaev was an obvious candidate for film adaptation.

## Structure

The structure of Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void* mirrors the separation between the Soviet-revolutionary and post-Soviet eras. As the novel progresses, the artificial nature of this separation becomes more distinct. In each timeframe of the novel the characters are either the same or transparent representations of a corresponding figure in the other timeframe. As the artificial barriers between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present begin to break down in Pyotr Pustota's mind, the two storylines begin to converge. This convergence emphasizes the lack of a true ontological break for the people of these eras. Much as in the novel, Soviet individuals, cast into post-Soviet life, remained essentially unchanged; only the externally imposed markers of their identification have been altered. Pyotr's successful transition from Soviet to post-Soviet life begins with coming to terms with the fact that he is a part of Soviet history and culture and that these items are part and parcel to his identity; they are not lost with the advent of the post-Soviet era, but inform the new culture and *byt*.

Nevertheless, throughout *Chapaev and the Void*, revolutionary Russia is markedly separated from post-Soviet realities not only temporally, but psychologically. There is very little overlap between events and constructs of the post-Soviet period, in the novel, and the plot of the revolutionary era. The only construct that these periods have in common is the character of Pyotr Pustota himself and the occasional bleeding-through of ideas from one era to another. As his name indicates, Pyotr Pustota is an empty construct, both in terms of individual identity and of his perception from an external perspective. This empty construct is largely filled with projections of readers' consciousness and their perceptions of Petka's role in the Chapaev myth. Pelevin frequently employs this tactic in his works, as he manipulates the subconscious to suspend conscious disbelief and to bridge the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Joseph

Mozur writes, that through this technique, Pelevin, does not “create something new and different.” Rather, he manipulates “what's already up there in the mind”, and reties “the connections that already exist. He creates in that spirit a bric-a-brac wonder from the many fragments of his disjointed time and from the debris of a once great literary tradition.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, the novel serves to lay bare the empty constructs that comprise the terms ‘Soviet’ and ‘post-Soviet’. As post-Soviet reality begins to supplant the myth-based construct of Russia’s revolutionary past in the mind of Pelevin’s protagonist, the structure of the novel reveals the continuity between individual perception of the past and present realities. For Pyotr Pustota and the Russian reader alike, individual perception of Russia’s revolutionary past and of Soviet myths strongly informs perception of present realities. In the case of Pyotr Pustota, consciousness and perception of the Chapaev myth drives his post-Soviet fantasy and also his search for truth and meaning in a preceding era, in which such terms were conceptualized much more concretely. For post-Soviet readers of literary fiction in the 1990s, this search was especially meaningful. *Chapaev and the Void* creates a false dichotomy of past and present in the mind of Pyotr Pustota, which serves as a mode of access to new layers of reality. This action demonstrates the novel’s recognition of its pedigree. The result of this technique is that readers of Pelevin’s *Chapaev and the Void* discover that the revolutionary and Soviet past is temporally removed, but culturally and psychologically inseparable from the post-Soviet present. The figure of Chapaev becomes a font of esoteric knowledge, in the post-Soviet spirit, without diverging from his folk-comedic, Soviet-hero, Cossack, or historical-peasant-commander heritage. For this reason, the Chapaev myth not only serves as an effective tool, with which to interact with post-

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<sup>25</sup> Mozur, Joseph. *Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovietism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction*. World Literature Today, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Spring, 2002), University of Oklahoma. pp. 58-67.

Soviet consciousness; it also remains capable of retaining a central place in Russian culture.<sup>26</sup> In Pelevin's novel, Chapaev's adventures continue, and the site of their continuity is the consciousness of the post-Soviet individual. Pelevin's inclusion of Chapaev in his discourse about the solution to the mental disorders of the patients in the figurative mental ward of post-Soviet Russia evinces the Chapaev myth's cultural significance, in relation to the psychic reality of individuals who lived in Soviet mass culture.

The madness, common to all patients in Pelevin's post-Soviet madhouse but with its unique manifestations in each individual, lends insight into various problems of post-Soviet consciousness and identity. When one reads the novel through the lens of individual characters and their relative experiences of post-Soviet reality, each central character becomes a model for a mode of adaptation to the surrounding world. Pyotr is a schizophrenic, whose psychological disorientation leads him to believe that the imagined world of 1919 is real, while the madhouse of 1991 is a dream. His ostensible cure comes through the Chapaev-inspired realization that the real world does not exist and that consciousness is effectively the only reality that one can know. This sort of solipsism is roundly and abruptly refuted at the end of the novel, in Pyotr's conversation with a taxi driver, who reminds him of the reality of the world and its problems, despite the trauma they may inflict. The driver remarks,

Pretending that you doubt the reality of the world is the most cowardly form of escape from that very reality. Squalid intellectual poverty [...] Despite all its seeming absurdity, cruelty and senselessness, this world nonetheless exists, doesn't it? And all the problems in it exist as well... Therefore talk of the non-reality of the world does not signify a highly developed spirituality, but quite the opposite.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Von Geldern, James. Stites, Richard. *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1995. p. xxvii.

<sup>27</sup> Pelevin. p. 327.

This exchange indicates that the answer to the crises of post-Soviet life and identity are not found in nostalgic myths but in confrontation with present reality. As Chapaev reprises his role as a Civil War commander in the Red Army, doubles as a Zen Buddhist philosopher, and engages in discourse with a delusional Pyotr Pustota, he becomes an example of the sort of empty reality that Pyotr struggles to come to terms with. Chapaev's character can be read as a mode of engaging the Soviet cultural subconscious, in the post-Soviet period. He can also be read as a simulacrum, whose purpose is a form of escape for the post-Soviet mind. For Pyotr, Chapaev is real, but he is not the historical Chapaev. Rather, his character serves as a personification of the Chapaev myth for the post-Soviet era.

#### Post-Soviet Russia as a madhouse

Beyond Chapaev, the chronotope of the madhouse retains a prominent place in Russian culture. Pelevin draws upon a long-standing and well-known Russian literary tradition involving the madhouse. As Angela Brintlinger remarks in her *The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past*, “psychic space is...an expansion of narrative space, and the madhouse acts as the place where that expansion happens. Psychiatric space engenders storytelling, fantasies, hallucinations, and time travel, all of which contribute to making these novels both more intimate and more expansive.”<sup>28</sup> This compounds the narrative space to include multiple eras and settings. Perhaps more importantly, it allows for interaction with various simulacra and myths, such as Chapaev, that can come to life as characters most fully within psychic space. Furthermore, the subordination of the narrative to psychiatric space lends

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<sup>28</sup> Brintlinger. p. 45.

the text greater cultural relevance for former Soviet citizens, as the resultant text draws on literary tradition and history surrounding the madhouse.

In *Chapaev and the Void*, Viktor Pelevin appropriates Soviet history for the establishment of the novel's quasi-historical plots and characters. The fact that Soviet madhouses were populated with individuals, often diagnosed with schizophrenia, whose afflictions ranged from multiple personality disorder to political and sexual deviance, lends context to the notion of the madhouse as a proving grounds for the post-Soviet individual.<sup>29</sup> In the *Chapaev and the Void*, the schizophrenic break between Soviet and post-Soviet mentalities in the post-Soviet individual not only sheds light on the post-Soviet quest for personal identity but the social and cultural rift between the two eras. That the lines between sanity and insanity, normalcy and the bizarre were systematically, politically, and ideologically defined in the Soviet period gives readers a gauge, by which to assess both the mentalities represented in Soviet literature and their post-Soviet descendants, because those delineations copiously bled into Soviet culture. In the post-Soviet era, these lines are drawn more arbitrarily and subjectively. Therefore, as Brintlinger notes, when "Pelevin and Makanin force their readers to resist relegating Soviet problems to Soviet times,"<sup>30</sup> they emphasize the sociocultural continuities between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Pyotr Pustota experiences a crisis of identity and genuinely believes that he is living a fairy tale life in the early post-revolutionary period, replete with the mythical figures of his childhood. He regards his experiences in the literal madhouse of post-Soviet Russia as the truly

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<sup>29</sup> Brintlinger, A. "The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past." *Slavic Review*, 63(1) 2004., p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Brintlinger p. 47.

unreal. This fact testifies that the power of Soviet mythmaking has persisted into contemporary Russia.

Pelevin constructs the characters in the novel in such a manner that each of them reflects the influence of various elements of mass and popular culture. Timur Timurovich Kanashnikov is the doctor, who treats Pyotr Pustota in the post-Soviet mental hospital and eventually declares him cured. His name, one letter removed from the famous Soviet weapon, Kalashnikov, recalls Chapaev's clay machine gun. As Angela Brintlinger notes, Kanashnikov's name also recalls, "*Kanatchikova dacha*," one of the most famous mad asylums in Russia.<sup>31</sup> That Kanashnikov's therapy is considered a cure for Pyotr's schizophrenia reinforces the idea of examining the empty reality of structures, ideology, and even the labels Soviet and post-Soviet, as a means of coming to terms with one's own identity. The failure of his character to rid Pyotr of his delusion also reminds readers that the effects of the loss of identity engendered by the fall of the Soviet Union are not reducible to schizophrenia and remain unmitigated by a solipsistic worldview.

The continued fantasies of other patients in the mental ward reinforce this notion. Maria is a male patient in the post-Soviet mental ward, who has a female alternate personality, with a fixation on Arnold Schwarzenegger. This character can be read as having a fascination with Western culture and its products, at the expense of culturally relevant substance. Maria's schizophrenia can, thus, be interpreted as a result of his complete cognitive disconnect with Soviet and Russian culture and, therefore, with his own history. Volodin is a gangster who hallucinates that he is sitting around a campfire with his comrades, discussing hard questions of life. He constantly likens existential philosophy to the Russian criminal underground and can be

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<sup>31</sup> Brintlinger. p. 47.

read as a New Russian, who has traded on his Soviet heritage and its utopian dream for the sake of a successful transition to capitalism.

That the patients in Pelevin's mental ward serve as archetypes for very real classes of individual that emerged onto the post-Soviet social and cultural scene of the 1990s, does not by itself make Chapaev and his cohort particularly special. The appropriation of the Chapaev myth, which was generated and systematically propagated by the mythmaking apparatus of the Soviet Union, enriches each character with an abundant cultural history and consciousness. The effect of this application is to lend greater depth to each mythologized character than the novel explicitly provides in its exposition. This technique at once exploits and affirms the impact of Soviet cultural history on post-Soviet life and its problems. It also serves as a form of ongoing mythopoesis surrounding the character of Chapaev.

The fracture that exists in the minds of the protagonist is not merely a psychological phenomenon and it is not simply a form of hyperbole or caricature, it is a historical and cultural product of Soviet life. On the surface of Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void*, the post-Soviet individual can be read as the primary object of the novel's satire. However, Brintlinger's conception of the madhouse and its occupant, in the post-Soviet novel, as 'reportage' lends a serious tone to Pelevin's overtly humorous brand of narrative discourse and allows the novel's poignant commentary about the struggles of the individual in post-Soviet life to take center stage.

The centrality of the struggles of the post-Soviet individual in the novel are most clearly articulated in scenes depicting the psychiatric treatment of Pyotr and his fellow patients. Brintlinger notes, "For the patients, Pelevin's psychiatric ward is both a refuge from the insanity

of newly capitalist Moscow and a door to other, transcendent worlds.”<sup>32</sup> While the madhouse serves a refuge from post-Soviet realities, to a certain extent, for Pelevin, the madhouse does much more; it is a place of judgment and social conditioning. The real refuge from post-Soviet madness, in *Chapaev and the Void*, is at once Soviet history and culture, the fantasy that Pyotr constructs, and the void onto which Pyotr projects this fantasy. By constructing his own reality, Pyotr rejects the new post-Soviet world and shields himself from it. In this dynamic, the madhouse offers no refuge but rather mediates between Pyotr’s constructed psychic reality and the external post-Soviet world; it forces him to confront the surrounding world, the absurdity of his situation, and the deep-seated social, cultural, and historical constructs that comprise his fantasy. As Dr. Kanashnikov elucidates in *Chapaev and the Void*,

When the session comes to an end, a reaction sets in as the participants withdraw from the state that they have been experiencing as reality...they return to their own manic obsessions, leaving you isolated. And at that moment, provided the pathological psychic material has been driven up to the surface by the process of catharsis, the patient can become aware of the arbitrary subjectivity of his own morbid notions and can cease to identify with them.<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Kanashnikov’s process of confronting mental illness serves as commentary about how the post-Soviet individual might confront the subjective and arbitrary world around him. In this instance, the madhouse forces each individual to actively construct his or her identity, using whatever raw materials are available, both collectively and individually. In the case of Pyotr Pustota, these materials come from the culture and history of Soviet life, held up as the model of a time when, at very least, identity and values, reality and madness were defined concretely. While as Brintlinger recognizes, this action is neither simply nostalgia nor apology, it represents

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<sup>32</sup> Brintlinger. p. 51

<sup>33</sup> Pelevin, Viktor. *Chapaev and the Void*. Penguin Books: New York. 2001. p. 38

an acceptance and reclaiming of a Soviet history and reality that was lived by author and reader alike. Pelevin's novel engages in the explicit recognition of a way of life that was lived and understood exclusively to the Soviet individual. In the end, Brintlinger's commentary acknowledges that the madhouse represents a place where the post-Soviet individual's search for a point of mooring can finally take place, even if the madness cannot ultimately be expelled.

### Conclusion

The Chapaev figure of Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void* is a postmodern take on the personification of the Chapaev myth. His character is the result of the appropriation of Soviet cultural forms and the creation of historiographic metafiction surrounding the Russian Civil War. This post-Soviet Chapaev serves as a medium for discourse of identity and post-Soviet life. His wild popularity in Russian cultural memory suits him to this task as a ready-made sociocultural mediator. Accordingly, the figure of Chapaev plays the hero to the Russians of the early post-Soviet period, who struggled with the implications of the end of the Soviet experiment. Chapaev's new adventures in this capacity contribute to his larger mythology, increase his perceptive aura for the post-Soviet era, and generate new discourse about the place of the Soviet in the post-Soviet world.

The function of the figure of Chapaev, in *Chapaev and the Void*, models the function of the figure of Chapaev in Soviet culture, to reshape consciousness of history and culture. The crucial difference between Pelevin's deployment of the Chapaev myth and that of the Bolsheviks is that, in Pelevin's novel, Chapaev serves as a mode of satire. Through the figure of Chapaev, Pelevin not only makes fun of Soviet mythmaking but accentuates the role of myth in culture and individual psychic reality. Pelevin's incorporation of the Chapaev myth into the novel also

exposes the cultural and psychological fracture that resulted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The success of Pelevin's appropriation of the Chapaev myth can be gauged not only by critical review but by the renown and readership that the novel has brought its author. While critics either love or hate *Chapaev and the Void*, few thoroughly discount it as pulp fiction. More importantly, the novel set Pelevin on a wider authorial stage. It was his first fully-fledged novel and, as Sergei Polotovskii notes, "reading Russia really came to know and recognize the writer [Pelevin] only after 'Chapaev'."<sup>34</sup> In large part, this recognition can be attributed to the novel's incorporation of Chapaev as a Soviet mass cultural object and as a post-Soviet popular cultural icon; the novel resonated with readers in a way that it could not have, without the appropriation of Chapaev and his cohort. This is not to say that the popularity of the novel unilaterally evinces the relevance of literary fiction to post-Soviet culture. Rather, it indicates that the myths of the Soviet era maintain consequence in the post-Soviet period. In the case of Russian postmodernism, writers utilize the continued impact of these Soviet mythologized forms as a mode of discourse.

Whether accepted as fundamentally true or condemned as propaganda, myth continues its functional role, in relation to post-Soviet, Russian culture. Chapaev at once serves as a representative example of the capacity of myth to shape the cultural consciousness of Soviet generations and continues to contribute to mass culture. The fact that, as appropriated by Pelevin, the image of Chapaev serves to satirize that very same mass culture, highlights the continued

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<sup>34</sup> Polotovskii, Sergei. Pelevin i Pokolenie Pustoty. Mann, Ivanov, i Ferber: Moskva, 2012. p. 78 – «chitaiushchaia Rossia po-nastoiashchemu uznala i priznala pisatelia tol'ko posle "Chapaeva."».

significance of Russian literary fiction as a mode of cultural formation and solidifies Soviet myth as a medium of cultural discourse in the post-Soviet era.

## Chapter 2: From Conceptualism to Postmodernism: Vladimir Sorokin's *The Queue*

### Sorokin's novel as an investigation of the queue

Evgenii Dobrenko has argued that, “Socialist Realism constantly produced new symbolic capital, namely, *socialism*. Evidently, this was the USSR’s only successful product...its main function is not propagandistic but rather aesthetic and transformative.”<sup>1</sup> This statement contradicts the commonly held view that Socialist Realism is primarily Soviet propaganda and suggests that it more fundamentally models certain aspects of Soviet culture. This aesthetic is based upon myths produced in Soviet mass culture for the transformation of everyday realities and the discourse surrounding them. The socialist simulacra, generated in Socialist Realist narratives, became essential to the culture; without them, socialism would not have existed in the Soviet Union. On the basis of this function, the narratives of mass culture became antagonists, against which succeeding aesthetic movements began to react in the late Soviet period. Sots-Art and Russian postmodernism exemplify movements that reject the use of such totalizing narratives in literary aesthetics. While Sots-Art and postmodernism approach narrative in different ways, both react against Socialist Realist aesthetics and discursive hegemony, as they serve to uncover the empty realities behind narratives.

Vladimir Sorokin's *The Queue* (1985), depicts social and economic realities of Soviet life as they never before had been, without the mythologization of Soviet mass culture and mollification by Socialist Realism. At the same time, from a realistic perspective of everyday socioeconomic conditions, the novel reflects Soviet public yearning for a promised future.

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<sup>1</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko. “Socialist Realist Conon: A History”. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Russian Literature*. Ed. Evgeny Dobrenko, Marina Balina. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011. p. 110.

Sorokin's *The Queue* examines the everyday realities behind participation in the act of queuing, as a social and cultural event. An extremely rich historical and economic context surrounds the work, offering the possibility to approach the text as a realist work. While clearly presenting a parody of an everyday experience of Soviet life, *The Queue* does this work in a realistic manner. *The Queue*'s mimetic properties serve not simply to depict Soviet society as it was, but to emphasize the text's lack of reliance on myth or ideology in its representation.

The text follows the daylong experience of a Soviet Everyman, who neither works nor performs any heroic deed. The actions of the protagonist present the Soviet citizen as driven not by communist ideals but by attainment and a preoccupation with Western culture and its products. This notion is evinced in the text by the obsession of those queuing with the product's origins. Even at the end of the novel, when the protagonist is finally promised his choice of goods for sale directly from the supplier, without queuing, he inquires for the third time whether the product really is Western. While, to a certain extent, the importance of the product being Western is attributable to an actual or perceived higher standard of quality of certain Western products, it also indicates an infatuation with the West that did not resonate with Soviet ideals. Moreover, the text inscribes in mass culture the institution of *blat*, the widely understood yet unofficial rules of the queue, and the language of Soviet everyday life. This is not to say that other works had not touched on the realities of procurement in the Soviet Union, or included unsavory language; *The Queue* simply does so without pretense. The protagonist is not industriously or cleverly procuring an item through back channels for the achievement of an admirable goal. The text does not imbue the protagonist's experience in the queue with any assigned meaning. Instead, meaning is inferred by readers' collective experience in the queue. Moreover, the method of attaining the product resonates with former Soviet readers, who

recognize the pervasive reality of *blat*, as it relates to Soviet economics and distribution. While queuing often sufficed to obtain products, procurement through personal connections existed as a reality of everyday life that remained unacknowledged in Soviet mass culture. *The Queue* is a culturally significant work, in part, because of the lucidity with which it reflects Soviet existence and its experience. In this sense, *The Queue* is a quintessentialized excerpt from Soviet everyday life.

While *The Queue* is widely considered Sorokin's first novel, it is, in a sense, not a novel at all; it is a first-person compilation of snippets of conversation and casual encounters, arranged into a picaresque portrait of an everyday Soviet experience. *The Queue* also lacks the characteristic imagery of a prose poem. Rather, its structure is most similar to a play-script.<sup>2</sup> However, unlike a play, the text does not possess a visual element. The purely textual character of *The Queue*, along with Sorokin's sacrifice of authorial voice, makes it equally effective at filling gaps in consciousness surrounding the queue for both former Soviet readers and outsiders, as it dwells on an institution that loomed large in the Western imagination of Soviet life. Sorokin does not describe the institution of the queue, its rules, or its centrality to Soviet everyday life. Readers glean this information from the exchanges between various characters. The conversations scale the full range of social interaction, from small talk, to politics, to slang and vulgarities, to sexual advances and beyond. *The Queue* details the experiences of a single Soviet citizen, waiting in a queue to purchase an unknown yet highly sought-after commodity. The text begins with the protagonist inquiring who is last in line, immediately seeking to establish his own place in it, and then attempting to step away to run some errands. He inquires, "Comrade,

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<sup>2</sup> Rzhevsky, Nicholas. "The Modern Russian Theater". M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2009, p. 258.

who is last in line?"<sup>3</sup> This phrase was ritually used in Soviet everyday life to initiate one's presence in the community of the queue. The opening of the text with this sacramental exchange inducts readers into that community. Through the series of exchanges that recount the ensuing events, Sorokin establishes ground rules for the queue and dispels any expectation that the text will sugarcoat the practical, economic realities behind queue-culture. The text continues with a sequence of exchanges between the protagonist and several other Soviet citizens, who relate various details of their lives, tell stories, engage in small talk, and discuss details of the queue. Through these exchanges, the action of the novel develops, and readers become exposed to the realities of Soviet systems of distribution, the manner in which foreigners and those with connections obtain products without queuing, and the acquaintance of the protagonist with a woman, with whom he later has an affair and who subsequently promises to help him procure the product for which he is queuing. These actions do not reflect a traditional plot with its implicit novelistic organization of the text; the text consists entirely of dialogue between the protagonist and others he encounters. It even features several blank pages, when the protagonist is asleep. In *The Queue*, the actions of characters serve as a vehicle for Sorokin's investigation of the queue, the factors that contributed to its institution in Soviet life, and its legacy.

Written in 1983, *The Queue* was banned for publication in the Soviet Union. Before turning to literary fiction, Sorokin had been a prominent figure among the Moscow Conceptualists, which included dissident artists such as Dmitri Prigov, Ilya Kabakov, and Eric Bulatov, among others. Sorokin's style and association with this group precluded his works from official publication in the Soviet Union. Thus, *The Queue* was first published in France in 1985.

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<sup>3</sup> Sorokin, Vladimir. Trans. Sally Laird. *The Queue*. New York Book Review Classics: New York, 2008. p. 3.

The first English translation appeared in the United States in 1988. In 2008, Sorokin published a retrospective afterword, in which he comments on the history and legacy of the queue. This afterword provides necessary context for readers, who did not experience Soviet everyday life firsthand and signifies a legacy of the institution of the queue in post-Soviet cultural memory.

The main protagonist of *The Queue* is a young man named Vadim. His name is relatively unimportant to the text and is only mentioned as a matter of social convention in the course of his exchanges. Vadim is an intellectual, who studied at Moscow State University, and works as a proof-writer for a technical journal. His role as a Soviet Everyman clashes with both his profession and his membership in the intelligentsia class, as Everymen in Soviet mass culture typically come from the working class. This aspect of the text underscores a sense of philistinism in late Soviet culture, as even individuals, who aspired to a rich intellectual life, submitted to the dullness and bourgeois character of the queue.<sup>4</sup> This departure from Socialist Realist models makes Vadim an early archetype of the post-Soviet man—a perennial intellectual, as a result of burgeoning discourse in the public sphere about social realities, after the fall of the Soviet Union—disconnected from, yet critically shaped by Soviet life. Vadim exemplifies the dissonance between idealized models of the Soviet citizen and the individual of Soviet everyday life. The interactions between Vadim and other characters constitute the entire basis of the text and, by analogy, of Soviet everyday life.

While appearing only intermittently in the text, primarily toward the end, Lyudmila proves among the most significant characters in *The Queue*, as her actions uncover the stark realities of queue-culture and Soviet everyday economics at large. Lyudmila is a manager at the

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<sup>4</sup> See, Kuklin, Lev. "Knights of the Jeans Culture." *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. Moscow State University, 02 Sept. 2015. Web. 16 Mar. 2016.

Moscow store that is distributing the product, for which citizens are queuing. She does not perform any work in the text; her primary achievement is to seduce Vadim. This act affords Vadim a personal contact with access to the desired product and illustrates both the pervasiveness of Soviet black market economics and the role of such dealings in the Soviet culture of *defitsit*. Lyudmila knows both that crowds are queuing for the product that her collective is selling and that the store will not be making sales the next day. Yet, she indifferently withholds this information. Through this action, her character demonstrates the power differential in favor of distributors, over consumers, in Soviet economics. Lyudmila, represents a new archetype of the Soviet worker, stripped of the myth of the New Soviet man. She is an incidental yet familiar voice in a series of everyday exchanges. Similarly, all the other characters in *The Queue* represent types of Soviet individual and serve as vehicles for the advancement of the plot and the text's inherent parody.

A large part of this parody centers on the manner in which characters procure their goods. No character in the primary queue receives goods through the act of queuing. While there are productive queues for other goods that branch off from the main one--we see people obtain kvass, ice cream, etc.--these queues serve to multiply the act of queuing. More than anything else, the primary queue produces other queues and thus feeds a larger economy of waiting. Indeed, the text's parody is strikingly apparent in the manner in which the protagonist is finally and climactically promised the goods that he has queued for through *blat*. The protagonist has queued overnight and followed the official and unofficial rules of the queue, none of which drive him perceptibly closer to attainment of the product. That he finally attains the product through his chance sexual encounter with a woman involved in the distribution of the desired product indicates the secondary position of official rules to personal contacts in Soviet everyday

economics.

One practical consequence of the overlapping and integration of personal and formal relations on systems of distribution is that the procurement of goods and services often depended on an informal order. Employing the notion of *sobornost'*, Professor of Politics and Society, Alena Ledeneva, likens this order to “singing which is not conducted but harmonized.”<sup>5</sup> Social dynamics in the queue and the integration of official channels of procurement with black market contacts serve as excellent examples of such harmony. Textually, *The Queue* expresses this harmony through polyphony, as the text offers a multitude of voices and perspectives that form a cohesive picture of Soviet everyday life and economics. As *The Queue* inscribes this image in mass culture, it gives public voice—literally and figuratively—to the Soviet individuals after which the text’s characters are modeled; voices, which rebut official Soviet narratives.

In *The Queue*, Sorokin creates an exemplar of literary Sots-Art, which parodies Socialist Realist forms and Soviet institutions. A defining feature of Socialist Realist literature, as a model, is tedium, in its effect on the reader, juxtaposed with enthusiasm, from a production standpoint. It maintains a strong emphasis on form, patiently building to an inevitable conclusion. Prominent examples include the works of Fedor Gladkov or Nikolai Ostrovsky. The works of such writers are reductive and limit the potential for expression of Soviet realities. They constitute a form of ideological regurgitation, resulting in simulacra of socialism. The tedium of Socialist Realist fiction and its focus on form replaces production, as such fiction carefully examines Soviet ideology, ideal forms, and myth, without adding anything new to them. In essence, new cultural forms were impossible in Socialist Realism, because both its formula and

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<sup>5</sup> Ledeneva, Alena V. *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1998. p. 83.

subject matter were prescribed. In *The Queue*, Sorokin replaces the typical objects of examination in works of Socialist Realism with Soviet *byt* and uses the text to examine one particular element of Soviet experience. This action creates the parody characteristic of Sots-Art. While Sorokin is the best, if not only example of a Sots-Art writer, this aesthetic is found widely across various media of the late Soviet period, beginning with the works of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, continuing with Dmitri Prigov and the Moscow Conceptualists, and culminating in Russian postmodernism.

*The Queue* demonstrates consciousness of Soviet mass culture, without appropriation of its underlying myths. Conspicuously absent from *The Queue* is the mass cultural myth of Soviet abundance and prosperity, depicted so often in earlier Soviet works. Instead, the text portrays a stark reality, which allows the myths of Soviet mass culture to become blindingly apparent, through their overt omission. Among the most poignant examples of this technique is Sorokin's use of colloquial and even vulgar language in its everyday context. This action creates in the text a dissonance between the language used and the literary context of its consumption. To readers at the time when *The Queue* was published, this language served as an immediately evident marker of the text's departure from Soviet models. Katerina Clark explains,

The language to be used in Socialist Realism was circumscribed. There were to be no sub-standard locutions, no dialecticisms, no scatology, and no abstruse or long-winded expressions - let alone the neologisms and trans-sense language that had been favoured by the Russian avant-garde. In consequence, most socialist realist writers used only a somewhat *comme il faut* version of standard Russian, resulting often in stilted dialogue...<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clark, Katerina. "Socialist Realism in Soviet Literature." Ed. Neil Cornwell. *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*. Routledge: New York, 1998. p. 56.

In *The Queue*, almost the polar opposite is true; the dialogue exudes organically from the described context. Where dialecticisms or colloquial terminology are appropriate, they appear in the text. Where vulgar expressions might naturally occur in everyday life, Sorokin employs them in the text. While *The Queue* remains somewhat mimetic in its relation to the formal construction of Socialist Realist works, the text's lexicon and syntax unambiguously defy Socialist Realist conventions and thus highlight the wide-ranging disparity between Socialist Realist fiction and everyday life. Relating the experience of citizens telling jokes in the queue, Sorokin writes, "I heard a good one the other day too. This guy was using some kind of solvent to clean something, and afterwards he poured it down the toilet. / And forgot to flush it? / You heard the same one? / Yeah. And then he sits down to have a crap, smokes a cigarette and throws it in there... / That's it, and he gets blown up!"<sup>7</sup> The language in this excerpt is sub-standard and contains explicit scatology. The fact that it arises organically from the context and well reflects the language of the queue exemplifies Sots-Art's rejection of Socialist Realist forms. Sorokin's use of language is but one method of highlighting the contrasts between mass culture and lived reality, and it comprises an early example of a writer blurring the lines between high and low culture, a technique that has become characteristic of postmodernism.

Early responses to Sorokin's *The Queue*, outside Russia, were overwhelmingly positive. Common observations in reviews include the notion that Sorokin represents the phenomenon of the queue with optimism and nostalgia, rather than with contempt, as he broadly captures the

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<sup>7</sup> Sorokin, Vladimir. Trans. Sally Laird. *The Queue*. New York: New York Book Review Classics, 2008. p. 117-8.

intricacies of Soviet everyday life, with “a remarkable ear for dialogue.”<sup>8</sup> Such commentary indicates a certain novelty to the notion that queues and queue-culture model a larger portion of the Soviet experience than inadequacies of Soviet infrastructure. This notion is pivotal to American reactions to *The Queue*, as it supplanted preconceptions about Russian realities and offered a balanced account of Soviet everyday life. While criticism of Sorokin’s novel contains various critiques about Sorokin’s style, few reviews disparage the plot, character development, or narrative structure, and almost none deny the text’s significance as a work of literary fiction.

In his 1988 review of *The Queue*, William French critiques Sorokin’s use of the absurd in the text, opining, “Sorokin takes risks that don’t always pay off. There’s a 17-page list of names, for example, when a Soviet bureaucrat calls the roll. Sorokin has some fun with the names - there’s a Tolstoy, a Voznesensky and other Soviet writers, some well-known hockey players and former Soviet heroes, but the joke is carried on too long.”<sup>9</sup> French’s analysis reflects a misunderstanding, in the West, both of the novel and of the institution of the queue, as an integral part of Soviet everyday life. The list of names presented in the text is more than a joke about Soviet bureaucracy and the famous people, who likely avoided standing in them. It exemplifies the pervasiveness of the institution of the queue, and other elements of Soviet everyday culture that remain unrepresented in Soviet official culture. Moreover, it impresses the amount of time invested and tolerance for tedium acquired by average citizens for the shortcomings of the Soviet bureaucracy. While some critics reflected this element of the text in their reviews, others viewed *The Queue* predominantly as parody, without great reflection on the

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<sup>8</sup> Swick, Tom. Rev. of *The Queue* by Vladimir Sorokin. **New York Times**. 02 Oct 1988: BR26.

<sup>9</sup> French, William. Rev. of *The Queue* by Vladimir Sorokin. *The Globe and Mail*. 16 June 1988: C.1

text's cultural significance. This is not to say that *The Queue* is not parodic; rather, that parody is subordinated to the text's formal construction. In 1988, a review published in *Library Journal* describes Sorokin as drawing on a "flair for nonsense" in his production of the text.<sup>10</sup> The events, social institutions, and systems of distribution represented in the text are far from nonsense and resonate strongly with Soviet everyday life. Sorokin's divergence from Socialist Realist aesthetics comprises an early experiment in post-Soviet literary production, in which the formal qualities of the text inform its aesthetic to a greater degree than its content.

While Sorokin's *The Queue* is often read strictly as parody, it is much more than one writer's attempt to poke fun at Soviet queues and the Soviet system at large. It serves as a phenomenological investigation of the structures of tedium, repetition, myth, and tradition in Russian and Soviet consciousness. The tedium of the text is the tedium of simply living. *The Queue* reminds readers that living is comprised of words and deeds, and that narratives are necessarily imposed upon those elements. For this reason, the myths of Soviet mass culture are conspicuously absent from everyday life and, therefore, from the text. Instead, the text explores the traditions, rules, and repeated actions that comprise everyday experience. Consequently, the text raises questions about how myth and narrative color and cloud everyday realities. Sorokin doesn't answer these questions, but he undermines the tedious narratives that have sought to make mythologized representations of identity and reality palatable to the Russian populace. The ability to undermine such narratives formally, without reliance on any competing narrative is perhaps the greatest significance of Sorokin's *The Queue*.

Sorokin's approach to narrative in *The Queue* is unique in Russian literature. While

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<sup>10</sup> Zirin, Mary F. "The Queue, Book Review." *Library Journal*, n.d. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.

modernist works such as Aleksandr Blok's *The Twelve* (1918) and Vladimir Khlebnikov's *Mrs. Lenin* (1908) eschew traditional narrative structures, they are also either poetic or they experiment with narrative form, rather than abandon narrative altogether. *The Queue* exchanges traditional narrative for dialogue, and while it similarly experiments with form, it differs in its overt realism—especially its use of polyphony for the simulation of everyday experience and the displacement of narrative. The fundamental departure of Sots-Art from modernism is a matter of genealogy; modernism does not share common genealogy with Sots-Art. While Sots-Art writers often drew upon modernist aesthetics for the production of their texts, Sots-Art did not take up the ideological mantle of modernism. Russian modernism rejected the tenets of Realism. Sots-Art rejects Socialist Realism but takes no stance in regard to Realism. Socialist Realism was artificially imposed upon Soviet literary culture from the top down; it did not arise organically, as a reaction against modernism. As a result, there is a rift between modernism, with its intrinsic genealogy, and Socialist Realism, along with the forms that developed in reaction to it. Socialist Realism relied on narrative to impose socialist perspectives on everyday culture. As Evgenii Dobrenko notes, “Socialist Realism was not so concerned with producing literature as it was with producing reality itself. This is why Socialist Realism was and remains the only material reality of socialism.”<sup>11</sup> The result is a wholly artificial Soviet mass culture. Sorokin's *The Queue* rejects narrative and creates a composite picture of Soviet life from the basic elements of everyday experience. This technique proves an intermediate approach to narrative, between those of Socialist Realism and postmodernism. Russian postmodernism embraces narrative for the engagement of Russian realities but remains conscious that such narratives exist only as

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<sup>11</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Russian Literature*. Ed. Evgeny Dobrenko, Marina Balina. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011. p. 112.

simulacra. As a result, postmodern literary fiction often comprises a multitude of perspectives and polyphonous narratives for the creation of discourse. Thus, Sorokin's *The Queue* bridges preceding and ensuing literary aesthetics in its approach to the rejection of Soviet narratives. Much of the Russian postmodernist aesthetic in literary fiction is constructed around this sort of prototypical rejection.

### Bureaucracy and the economy of scarcity

Before I delve into the relationship between Sorokin's *The Queue*, mythologizing narratives, and the evolution of literary aesthetics, it is necessary to explore the structures of Soviet everyday life and economics that elevated the institution of the queue to such prominence in Soviet culture that it became a powerful lens for social discourse. Without this critical perspective on queue-culture, it is impossible to fully understand the resonance of *The Queue* with Soviet and post-Soviet audiences or properly place *The Queue* in the Russian literary canon, because Soviet economics are central to the novel's critique.

Several factors contributed to the establishment of queue-culture in the Soviet Union. In his 1936, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Leon Trotsky comments,

The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there are enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there are few goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the Soviet bureaucracy. It "knows" who is to get something and who has to wait.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Trotsky, Leon. . ."Predannaia Revoliutsiia" Segodnia: Prilozhenie K Knige L. Trotskogo "Predannaia Revoliutsiia" Moskva: NII Kul'tury, 1990. Print. "Osnovoi biurokraticheskogo komandovaniia iavliaetsia bednost' obshhestva predmetami potrebleniia s vtekaiushhei otsiuda bor'boi vseh protiv vseh. Kogda v magazine tovarov dostatochno, pokupateli mogut prihodit', kogda hotiat. Kogda tovarov malo, pokupateli vynuzhdny stanovit'sia v ochered'. Kogda ochered' ochen' dlinna, neobhodimo postavit' policeiskogo dlia ohrany poriadka. Takov ishodnyi punkt vlasti sovetskoi biurokratii. Ona "znaet", komu davat', a kto dolzen podozhdat'".

This critique of Soviet bureaucracy suggests that scarcity is the underlying causal factor behind queue-culture. Scarcity certainly precipitated demand in the Soviet economy. However, inefficient implementation and poor planning presented themselves as more basic complications of Soviet systems of production and distribution than scarcity of products. Soviet economist Evsei Liberman expressed this opinion in the 1960s, suggesting that the planned economy contributed to the “economic psychology of the Soviet queue” and institutionalized the element of shortage in the service industry, as people understood that only a certain number of a given product would be produced, rather than as many as the public would buy.<sup>13</sup> These economic realities contributed to the creation of an economy of scarcity, in which some individuals inevitably went without desired commodities. Moreover, the act of queuing perpetuated queue culture, as it captured the imagination of those standing in line; it is extremely productive in this sense, as those who were waiting engaged in a great deal of speculation and produced many objects of desire—considerably outpacing the store’s ability to distribute the desired goods. This subject matter lends itself well to use as a lens for criticism of the Soviet system. That *The Queue* examines the queue as a staple of Soviet life with nostalgia, rather than scorn, reflects the broad resonance of queue culture with Soviet generations. Trotsky’s commentary about the queue is, thus, a fine example of what Sorokin is not doing—writing in the polemical or adversarial modes. Despite the deficiencies of queue culture, Sorokin embraces it as a formative element of Soviet identity.

In his 1990 article, entitled “The Queue”, V. O. Rukavishnikov explains “Queues, large and small, have long been an identifying feature of our reality, an indelible attribute of our way

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<sup>13</sup>Murarka, Dev. “The Compulsive Soviet Queue”. *The Jerusalem Post* (1950-1988); May 12, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Jerusalem Post. p. 5.

of life...disagreeable but inevitable.”<sup>14</sup> The fact that queues were a persistent component of Soviet everyday life made it an effective point of public discontent and an overt marker of the failures of Soviet economics. For this reason, Sorokin’s choice of the institution of the queue to represent Soviet realities allows him to engage the dreams of the Soviet collective, as the queue reflects the Soviet system’s inability to provide, at times, the basic necessities to its citizenry, and more often, the objects of its citizens’ desires. This fact presages the Soviet Union’s ultimate inability to realize its dreams, as evinced by its unexpected fall. Furthermore, the queue represents hypocrisy inherent in the Soviet system, in regard to the communist myth of work as a central component of Soviet life and happiness. As a result of excessive queuing, Soviet citizens made “unjustified expenditures of free time and sometimes even work time in procuring goods and services.”<sup>15</sup> Rukavishnikov notes, “Buyers often spend an average of one hour a day in a number of places buying food (sugar, meat, sausages, baked foods, animal and vegetable oil, fruit, and vegetables); and they spend one to three hours procuring some scarce nonfood items (especially imports).”<sup>16</sup> Among these examples, only foodstuffs warranted compulsory queuing. Rare and imported items, especially those acquired for their cultural cachet, did not. The compulsory waste of personal time and energies on essential items resulted in widespread public dissatisfaction, across professional and geographic bounds, as public perception of the scarcity of goods and services increased.<sup>17</sup> This dissatisfaction is not as evident in regard to scarce, nonfood items. Sorokin’s choice to center his text’s action on the latter variety softens its critique of the Soviet system and underscores the societal effects of queue culture, especially as it engendered a

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<sup>14</sup> Rukavishnikov, V. O. *Soviet Sociology*. September-October 1990. Vol. 29, No. 5. p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Rukavishnikov, V. O. p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Rukavishnikov, V. O. p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Rukavishnikov, V. O. p. 24. Table 2.

social preoccupation with attainment. Thus, the queue, including its problems and public reaction to them, became a universally recognized marker of a particular realm of Soviet desire and discontent. An anonymous Soviet citizen notes in a survey issued by the State Committee of Statistics, “Queues and Shortages are like Siamese twins: if there is a queue, this means that a scarce item has been displayed, and conversely, if there is no queue, then there are no goods, and you can confidently skip this department.”<sup>18</sup> This aspect of queue-culture makes the queue a Pavlovian construct, in which consumers lined up as a reaction to a certain product and eventually would queue even without a visible product; there could, ostensibly, be no product. The Soviet culture accomplished this feat through the association of the social act of queuing with the anti-communist notion of individual attainment; for, the confidence, fostered by the sight of a queue that a rare product was to be had was not collective but competitive. Sorokin taps into this confidence and plays with the Soviet unconscious, surrounding the realities of Soviet life, as juxtaposed with the typical myths explored in Soviet literature. *The Queue* sheds light on the realities that underlie such myths. However, Sorokin does not engage the myths directly. *The Queue* serves as social commentary and poses the question to readers as to what role the queue played in the lives of each Soviet citizen. This tacit inquiry does not diminish the inherent parody in the text, but connects readers with it, through participation in a shared cultural phenomenon.

As a microcosm of Soviet life, socioeconomic conditions, and bureaucracy, Sorokin’s *The Queue* gives readers a first-hand look at multiple aspects of the Soviet bureaucratic system, through the experience of an ordinary queue. It also constitutes a realistic, inside look at Soviet

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<sup>18</sup> Rukavishnikov, V. O. p. 26.

social attitudes. In *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange*, Alena Ledeneva writes that,

The Russian mentality is oriented towards personalizing one's contacts—not only retrospectively, but also today. As a rule, formal contacts in Russia are either based on personal relations or supported by them. Formalities never meant more than personal relations. It is a country governed by mores rather than laws.<sup>19</sup>

The first and most conspicuous instance where this social reality becomes evident in the text is in the internal order of the queue. When Vadim, having entered the line, attempts momentarily to step away, the man standing in front of him suggests that he wait for a woman who has already reserved a space in line behind him, remarking, “I think you better wait for her, ‘cos what can I say if somebody else comes along? If you hold on a moment, she said she wouldn’t be long.”<sup>20</sup>

This brief exchange exemplifies a subset of queue dynamics, namely the unwritten understanding that Vadim will likely lose his place if he leaves momentarily, not because to step away is against the rules, but because queue placement relies on accountability to the individual ahead of him. Without the woman to verify Vadim’s position, anyone could claim the space behind her. A practical effect of this sort of internal, unofficial order dictating the mores of Soviet daily economic life was that individuals in the Soviet economy were often oriented more toward procurement than navigating official circuitry of Soviet bureaucracy, toward modes of getting rather than being given. As Ledeneva notes, “people tried to avoid bureaucracies and formal channels, if possible.”<sup>21</sup> The Soviet queue exemplifies the reasons why, and Sorokin’s novel places those reasons front and center in the Soviet cultural eye. In the Soviet Union, “the

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<sup>19</sup> Ledeneva, p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> Sorokin, Vladimir. Trans. Sally Laird. *The Queue*. New York Book Review Classics: New York, 2008. p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ledeneva, p. 85.

informal ways of dealing with the system were perceived as most natural, simple, and efficient. There was no trust in the formal channels..."<sup>22</sup> These attitudes survived in Russian culture from the early 1920s, when Soviet economic science recognized conditions of shortage, to the post-Soviet era.<sup>23</sup>

Ledeneva demonstrates that Russia runs on a distinctive set of socioeconomic rules. These rules set Russia apart from the rest of the world and justify analyses of the queue as a quintessentially Soviet phenomenon. *The Queue* reflects this unique Soviet character through its peculiar narrative structure. Because the rules of the Soviet economy, as exhibited by the phenomenon of the queue, are unique to Russia, a new and different narrative structure, which was appropriate to the phenomenon of the queue, became necessary to describe those rules for the late Soviet era. This structure diverged as much from Socialist Realist models as the lived realities of Soviet daily life diverged from Soviet everyday mythology.

### Aesthetics in transition

*The Queue*'s realistic depiction of Soviet life, combined with its experimental narrative structure and parody of Soviet institutions complicate its classification. Is this realism? Some sort of neo-modernism? Sots-Art? Postmodernism? Another aesthetic category entirely? The answer to these questions is connected, at once, to the text's approach to narrative and to its departure from Socialist Realism.

The depiction of Soviet life offered in *The Queue* does not stray far from the lived reality of Soviet life. Many actions of the protagonist are crass and sexually motivated. The behavior of the crowd indicates an individualistic and even capitalist drive. In the end, the undisclosed

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<sup>22</sup> Ledeneva, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Ledeneva, p. 87.

commodity, for which the Soviet citizens are queued to purchase, is attained not by waiting in the queue but through connections and elevated status. For Soviet generations, these depictions are not only realistic but also representative of the norm. The absurd also permeates Sorokin's *The Queue*, as the text does not ascribe meaning to the pursuits of the protagonist or of those, whom he encounters. This fact is especially evident in the bourgeois attitudes reflected in the text: the protagonist stands around all day getting drunk, sleeping off a hangover, having sex, and sleeping again, after having been promised his choice of the queue's unnecessary and unknown product. The protagonist is queuing, without regard for work or socialist ideals. He is participating in a cultural event.

Readers become immersed in this cultural event through quintessentially Soviet exchanges, reconstructed in the text. The dominant topic of conversation for those queuing is the product that they are hoping to attain. Individuals speculate about its style, color, quality, and country of origin. What the product itself actually might be seems less important to those queuing. Indeed, readers never learn what the product actually is; though, it is revealed to be American. In the course of the text's various conversations, a certain camaraderie forms among those queuing; they offer casual advice about where to purchase various items and which foreign brands are best. They even attempt to make queuing more pleasant; when someone returning to the queue reports that there is a kvass kiosk nearby, those queuing collaborate to reroute the line to pass by the stand, so that everyone can have a drink without leaving the queue. At no time during these interactions does conversation ever stray far from the product to be had. This fact is palpable in the swiftness with which the conversation turns back to the queue and its product after several pages of amorous exchanges between the protagonist and his new acquaintance. In

*The Queue*, conversation always returns to the product, and the text ends with pillow talk and a final sleepy affirmation of the product's country of origin.<sup>24</sup>

While many of Sorokin's later works, such as *Den' Oprichnika* and *Sakharnyi Kreml'* are firmly postmodernist, *The Queue* is not. Russian postmodernism primarily engages its objects of examination through satire. Examples include Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* and the works of Zakhar Prilepin and Viktor Pelevin. By contrast, *The Queue* serves as an example of literary Sots-Art, which disparages the principles and forms of Socialist Realism through parody and mimesis and, thus, evacuates all meaning from symbols. This parody is aimed squarely at official representations of Soviet life and the mass culture, to which those representations contribute. Like Sorokin's later works, *The Queue* features realistic depictions and the characteristic cynicism of postmodernism. The critical difference lies in *The Queue*'s mode of engagement with its subject matter and its humor; *The Queue* offers parody of Soviet forms and directly represents Soviet life, while postmodernism abandons such forms and satirizes the objects of Soviet myth, ideology, and everyday life.

While *The Queue* accurately depicts many aspects of Soviet everyday life, the text's aesthetic is not Realism, as a formal category. The style of *The Queue* proves inconsistent with literary Realism, in the tradition of Turgenev, Goncharov, or Tolstoy. Unlike these authors, Sorokin does not write in a straightforward style. *The Queue* also does not engage in serious inquiry into the human condition, which serves as a characteristic element of nineteenth century Russian Realism. *The Queue* does, however, share an essential function with Russian Realism; it provides a dissident alternative to governmental hegemony over cultural production, much as

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<sup>24</sup> Sorokin, Vladimir. Trans. Sally Laird. *The Queue*. p. 249.

nineteenth century Realism provided such an alternative to tsarist dictates. This similarity places Sorokin's *The Queue* in a new category of dissident literature, as the text does not explicitly address the socio-economic structures and assumptions that it challenges. Essentially, this alternative perspective serves as a historico-cultural record that readers can look to for insight into conditions of the time.

Sorokin's *The Queue* represents the institution of the queue and other aspects of daily life in the Soviet Union to a degree that was not possible in Socialist Realism. It is a depiction of lived realities of Soviet life, unfiltered through the idealistic lens, which official Soviet texts apply to objects of examination. Evgenii Dobrenko clarifies,

Through Socialist Realism...Soviet reality is translated and transformed into socialism. In other words, *Socialist Realism is the machine that distils Soviet Reality into socialism*...Hence, we can conclude that, if all previous literary movements had produced literature, then in Socialist Realism literature was merely a byproduct of production. The quality of the Socialist Realist product is questionable from an aesthetic point of view because Socialist Realism was not so concerned with producing literature as it was with producing reality itself. This is why Socialist Realism was and remains the only material reality of socialism. Thus, when reading these books today the reader has the unique (if not the only) opportunity to feel as if he were within Soviet socialism...<sup>25</sup>

Sorokin's *The Queue* is not merely a byproduct of cultural production. It reverses the process that Dobrenko describes as its exchanges become literal byproducts of standing in line. Socialist Realism produces socialism; Soviet everyday life produced *The Queue*. Accordingly, the text is uniquely able to reflect material realities of the Soviet Union. Moreover, *The Queue* occupies a unique position on the Russian literary landscape and serves as a prominent transitional form in the evolution of Russian literary fiction out of the Socialist Realist aesthetic. Stylistically, *The*

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<sup>25</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Russian Literature*. Ed. Evgeny Dobrenko, Marina Balina. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011. p. 111.

*Queue* eschews Socialist Realism's formula but exhibits consciousness of the tedium propagated by Socialist Realism. In terms of form, this tedium is that of constructing, with meticulous rigor, a uniquely styled text. Like formulaic Socialist Realist texts, *The Queue* patiently builds toward the culmination of its form and methodical examination of the everyday. In terms of everyday life, the tedium that the text engages is the tedium of simply living, rather than that of the harvest, industry, fatherland, heroism, or other Socialist ideals. This engagement is *The Queue*'s most significant divergence from preceding Socialist Realist forms.

#### Sots-Art vs. postmodernism: *The Queue* vs.. *Sakharnyi Kreml'*

*The Queue*'s preoccupation with products and their origins parodies Soviet culture. *The Queue* characterizes the departure of postmodernism from Sots-Art in literary fiction. One of the best examples of the difference between Sots-Art and postmodernism lies in the contrasting examples of *The Queue* with a chapter of the same name in Sorokin's 2008, *Sakharnyi Kreml'*. The latter text again consists of dialogue without narrative, as individuals stand queuing for some unknown commodity. Like in *The Queue*, the text is comprised of colloquial dialogue, conversation remains casual, the rules of the queue are reiterated, and there is even discussion of the quantity to be distributed. Here, however, those queuing are waiting to issue denunciations against others. These individuals do not procure any product. Rather, they provide the desired commodity and even queue to do so. This model creates satire, as it highlights the inverse function of the queue on individuals, for whom the act of queuing serves as its own end. Those standing to give denunciations in *Sakharnyi Kreml'* are more accurately regarded as participating in a cultural event than hoping to attain some product. In the same way that those queuing at Stalin's funeral attained symbolic capital through participation, so too do those waiting to issue denunciations acquire symbolic capital through the act of queuing. This fact is made blindingly

apparent, as there is no concrete commodity to be had; cultural capital replaces traditional objects of procurement in the post-Soviet reimagination. Parody in *The Queue* becomes satire in the eponymous chapter of *Sakharnyi Kreml'*, as the text serves as a cautionary vision of the future. It is dystopic, set in the world of Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*. This world is a sarcastically constructed idyll, based on the cultural memory of the reign of Ivan the Terrible; the monarchy has been restored and has deeply religious roots. Russia is isolated by a great wall and, thus, is freed from the problems of external influence. Brutality is a way of life, as state sponsored terrorists known as *oprichniki* suppress all forms of dissent by violent means. Thus, the world in which *Sakharnyi Kreml'* is based is one of order and state security, at the expense of individual rights, expression, and civil liberties. Sorokin's new vision of the queue appropriates the cultural memory of the Soviet queue for commentary about the dangers of centralized authority and the state of contemporary Russia. While this interpretation reflects more concrete objects of engagement than the illusory realities and problems of identity that characterize Russian postmodernism of the 1990s, the text's aesthetics are distinctly postmodernist.

Unlike the relatively realistic depiction of life rendered in *The Queue*, the world of *Sakharnyi Kreml'* is hyperreal. Sorokin abandons realism, in the sense of accurate depiction of Russian realities, for scathing satire. At the time of the publication of *Sakharnyi Kreml'*, the phenomenon of the queue no longer existed in its Soviet sense; its post-Soviet illustration is a simulacrum. As Mark Lipovetsky remarks in his, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, "in post-Soviet culture, simulation 'devours' reality...Russian postmodernism lays bare...a lingering socialist simulation; it discovers the emptiness underlying any system."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lipovetsky, Mark. *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*. p. 11.

While Lipovetsky is not talking about former Soviet queues, Sorokin's invocation of the queue in *Sakharnyi Kreml'* reveals the lingering simulation of Soviet dreams in today's Russia; the perennial queue is institutionally defunct, but Sorokin nevertheless uses its memory to make social commentary for corrective effect. While superficially mimetic, parody of his previous work or of Soviet realities is not Sorokin's aim. Rather, the chapter, "The Queue", in *Sakharnyi Kreml'* builds on *The Queue* and the legacy of the institution that inspired it for broader resonance with readers. Thus, its inherent satire serves primarily as a vehicle for social commentary about contemporary Russia.

### Queues and queue-culture

On December 31, 1990, more than thirty thousand people stood in line to be served at the grand opening of the first McDonald's in Moscow.<sup>27</sup> This event marked the greatest number of individuals served on a single day in the history of the McDonald's franchise.<sup>28</sup> It also exemplified the centrality of the queue, as a Soviet institution, on a global stage. Through this event, the Western world witnessed a critical component of Soviet everyday life. This was the epitome of the Soviet queue; the product was Western and therefore valuable. The crowd freely adhered to strict, though unwritten rules of order. In the end, some who queued were turned away empty-handed, as often occurred in Soviet queues. However, in other respects, this was not a typical Soviet queue. In the McDonald's queue, those who were turned away were not denied because of product shortages; the restaurant simply closed for the day. The next morning sales resumed. The only curtailment of customers' ability to purchase products was a limit of ten Big Macs per customer, "to stop them from buying in bulk and reselling at a premium to the hungry

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<sup>27</sup> "Макдоналдс в России." *McDonalds* -. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.

<sup>28</sup> "Макдоналдс в России." *McDonalds* -. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.

crowds queuing outside".<sup>29</sup> This restriction was one of many protections against the Sovietization of McDonald's in Moscow; despite being the largest McDonald's in the world, at the time—seating 700 individuals—the location had only one door, in order to prevent theft.<sup>30</sup> This precaution reflects the pervasive and central reality of black markets to everyday Soviet economics. Another challenge that managers strove to overcome was the maintenance of Western business standards in the Soviet environment. Because McDonald's standards of cleanliness were higher than the Soviet norm for dining establishments, the restaurant established an on-site laundry facility, "where uniforms of the 630-strong staff are washed in three West German machines and ironed by hand."<sup>31</sup> While this action was described as 'practical' by media outlets, it also reflected a set of priorities, peculiar to a Western business model, as compared with the Soviet; while it would be more cost effective for employees to launder their own uniforms, managers were more concerned with cleanliness standards. As operational problems were concerned, hygiene proved relatively simple to solve, in comparison with compensating for the shortcomings of Soviet systems of production and distribution for the ensured supply of quality foodstuffs for the restaurant. McDonald's invested forty million U.S. dollars to build a food-processing facility near Moscow for the production of the "staples of fast-food fare".<sup>32</sup> While the problems solved by this measure proved broad, they were standard for the Soviet Union and foreseeable from a business standpoint. As a result of McDonald's compensation for the problems of Soviet economics and infrastructure, consumers were spared the shortcomings of

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<sup>29</sup> Gumbel, Peter. "Muscovites Queue Up at American Icon: Opening of Soviet McDonald's Is Well-Attended." *Wall Street Journal* (1923 - Current file); Feb 1, 1990; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Wall Street Journal*. p. A6.

<sup>30</sup> Gumbel. p. A6.

<sup>31</sup> Gumbel. p. A6.

<sup>32</sup> Gumbel. p. A6.

Soviet systems of distribution and the backwardness of the Soviet service industry, in which customers had to kowtow to service staff in order to receive goods or service.

Instead of the typical problems of Soviet everyday economics, the usually financially unconcerned Soviet denizens were faced with an unfamiliar challenge; the product was unimaginably expensive. A Big Mac, French fries, and soft drink, at that time, cost 5.65 rubles, the equivalent of the pay for four hours of work at the average salary.<sup>33</sup> Those who queued were willing to pay this price for a variety of reasons, novelty not least among them. No such retail operation had ever been conducted in the Soviet Union; and in a culture so disconnected from yet infatuated with Western cultural and material products, the opportunity to taste a Western way of life—literally and metaphorically—had mass appeal. This experience also served as a sample of the market-landscape to come, as Western goods flooded in but remained inaccessible to the increasingly impoverished populace.

In the retrospective afterword to his 1985 *The Queue*, Vladimir Sorokin explains that in Soviet times, Soviet people could not even imagine a situation, in which there were products to be had but no queue, and all for a lack of money.<sup>34</sup> This is the fundamental inversion of the economic model between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods; the Soviet featured buyers competing for the product of a single seller. The post-Soviet presented many vendors in competition for the capital of individual consumers. In the McDonald's queue, the high price of the product did not dissuade consumers.<sup>35</sup> This instance transpired within the Soviet economic system, under primarily Soviet ownership, and under the peculiar circumstances of Gorbachev's

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<sup>33</sup> Gumbel. p. A6.

<sup>34</sup> Sorokin. *The Queue*. p. 254

<sup>35</sup> Gumbel. p. A6

reforms. This was not an anomaly of the Brezhnev period, but part of a larger landscape of change. It, thus, largely reflected the Soviet market with its intrinsic systems of production, distribution, and consumership. Yet, the official introduction of a Western business model and its corresponding service, quality, and economic standards into the public sphere of Russian daily life heralded a new chapter in the interrelations between consumers and the trade industry. No longer did the Soviet bureaucracy exclusively determine “who is to get something and who has to wait.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, everyone who was willing to pay the market price would get his or her product. Because a significant portion of the population was willing and able to pay the high price at the time, the McDonald’s queue symbolizes an intermediate stage in the transition between Soviet and post-Soviet socioeconomic models.

The McDonald’s queue proved to be among the most noteworthy queues in Soviet cultural memory. It signaled the end of an era in Soviet life and provided a pointed look at the mythic and mass-cultural constructs that led so many to queue for the event. As a deeply ingrained habit of life in the Soviet Union, queue-culture demonstrated the empty reality behind the Soviet myth of abundance. Soviet denizens stood in the hours-long McDonald’s queue, winding through the streets of Moscow, not only for the novelty of a Big Mac or to taste the Western life, with which they had long been infatuated, but also to experience the abundance promised by socialism. Soviet citizens queued as much to participate in the cultural event, marked by the establishment of the queue as to claim a product at its conclusion. This cultural event was a glimpse into the future that Soviet citizens would inherit.

In terms of participation in a cultural event, perhaps only one queue in Soviet memory

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<sup>36</sup> Trotsky, Leon. *"Predannaia Revoliutsiia"* Segodnia: Prilozhenie K Knige L. Trotskogo *"Predannaia Revoliutsiia"*.

surpasses the McDonald's queue. In 1953, following the death of Joseph Stalin, Moscow bore witness to the largest queue in Soviet history. As an example of queue-culture, at the height of the Soviet Union, the Stalin queue demonstrates the power of symbolic capital on Soviet mentalities, as citizens lined up to pay respect to their deceased leader. In his afterword to *The Queue*, Sorokin himself contextually summarizes the significance of this queue:

In essence, during the Stalin years the populace engaged in a daily rehearsal for the Line of all Lines, in which virtually the entire collective body would stretch itself out and in so doing mark the end of the stormy era of the "Uprising Masses." The occasion for such a line arose on March 5, 1953, when the heart of the People's Father and Great Empiricist of the Masses stopped beating. For three days, Stalin's body lay on view in its coffin in the House of Unions in central Moscow so the people could say farewell. The enormous line to see Stalin stretched through half of the capital. Muscovites and pilgrims from cities and villages all over the country came in an endless stream. Russia had never seen such a queue...the collective body was surrounded...by army trucks. On the last night a stampede began. Tears pouring from their eyes as they mourned their Leader, the crowd flattened people against the trucks, trampled them underfoot. No one knows exactly how many people perished that night, but corpses were taken away by the truckload.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the ironic voice with which he makes this reflection, Sorokin characterizes the Stalin queue as a main event, for which preceding queues served as dress rehearsals. Sorokin marks this event as the end of an era—not only the Stalin era but also the era of revolution and privations for the Soviet cause. The Stalin queue also marked a turning point in the function of the queue purely from attainment of a product to participation in a collective experience. Involvement in the Stalin queue was itself a kind of cultural commodity, produced by the communal experience of revolution, the cultural memory of two world wars, the terror of the purges, and economic hardship, bound together by the mass cultural image of Stalin as a people's leader; the act of waiting itself became a signature experience—like making the *hadj*. Thus, this product was

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<sup>37</sup> Sorokin. *The Queue*. p. 258

consumed readily as a mode of communion, and also because it brought closure to an ongoing cultural narrative that defined the era. People queued endlessly to bid farewell not to Stalin himself but to his public persona and all that it represented. Nevertheless, like in any Soviet queue, many citizens waiting in line did not receive the desired product. The fact that so many individuals perished due to a shortage of even the commodities of commemoration and viewership indicates the centrality of shortage to Soviet everyday life.

Sorokin's *The Queue* variously underscores the dissonance between lived reality and the myths, upon which Soviet mass culture was constructed. The cultural phenomenon of the queue typifies lived reality in the Soviet Union, in contrast with the official ideal. Depiction of shortages, overt public consumerism, and the widespread desire for Western products, as compared with Soviet ones, were not allowed or desired components of the official Soviet aesthetic. Sorokin's *The Queue* flaunts this reality for readers in its historical and sociocultural context. While parody and mimesis of the queue, as a quintessential and necessary component of Soviet life, are prevalent throughout the text, Sorokin does not mythologize the queue as such. He venerates it as a seam in the fabric of Soviet society and culture and lauds it as a principal mode of intercourse, socialization, and indoctrination. In the afterword to *The Queue*, Sorokin recalls,

In the 1970s, the carefree days of "stagnation," people no longer stood for butter and sugar, which were in adequate supply thanks to the wise policies of détente and cheap Soviet oil. Instead, they waited in line for "imports": American jeans, German shoes, Italian knitwear. They waited happily, with humor, in a familial atmosphere that was even rather cozy. After an hour of togetherness waiting in line, the man in front of you in a leather cap with a tanned, friendly face might tell you stories of his dangerous work as a geologist in the far north, about a bear hunt that almost turned tragic, about the ecological problems of the northern rivers, about fantastical sunsets in the taiga and songs around the campfire with a guitar. The woman standing behind you, dressed in a colorful sweater, her eyes slightly swollen from tears, would begin with the standard phrase: "All men are the

same," and then tell you about her divorce (which finally went through the day before yesterday) from her alcoholic husband, who shamelessly drank up her mother's life savings (an invalid of labor!) and her father's too (a hero of the battle of Stalingrad!).<sup>38</sup>

Through such occurrences, the phenomenon of the queue united Soviet society, not only in the collective experience of the queue itself, but also through the dialogue produced by such encounters. In *The Queue*, Sorokin distills this collective experience into a vision of Soviet *byt*, through the lens of the queue. He provides both a microscopic and metaphoric illustration of Soviet life, its problems, its affirmations, its values, and its culture. Sorokin notes that the phenomenon of the queue was unknown in Russia prior to the Soviet Union and seems to have died with it. In this sense, the queue is a uniquely Soviet phenomenon. This is not to say that queues did not and do not exist outside of the Soviet Union; rather, that the institution of the queue, with its peculiar organization and societal functions, constituted a ritual of Soviet life. While the queue, as a social institution, did not survive the demise of state subsidies, provided by government ownership of the means of production and distribution, it left a cultural legacy. One notable example is the January 2016 queue to view the works of Valentin Serov at the Tret'jakov Gallery in Moscow. More than one thousand five hundred people queued overnight in the snow, in an action that grabbed headlines nationwide, as the doors were torn from the gallery, and staff was called in to provide food and counseling services to the queuing masses.<sup>39</sup> This action does not reflect merely a herd mentality in the post-Soviet populace but a scarcity of symbolic capital in Russia. Beyond the opportunity to view the works of a renowned artist, those who participated in this cultural event became privy to a point of cultural engagement, magnified by Russia's long

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<sup>38</sup> Sorokin. *The Queue*. p. 259

<sup>39</sup> Vernyj, Mihail. "Ochered' na Serova u "Tret'jakovki" otkarmlivajut tushenkoj i uspokaivajut psihologami." MK.ru, 23 Jan. 2016. Web. 29 Jan. 2016.

artistic tradition and by the cultural context of the queue; queuing to view Serov's works increased the symbolic capital of viewership, which in turn compelled others to queue. This sort of synergistic relationship between the perceived value of commodities and the institution of the queue persists as a remnant of Soviet life. This is not to say that individuals do not queue elsewhere to view artistic displays; rather that Russia's long cultural history surrounding the act of queuing lends additional context and significance to an otherwise mundane act.

The institution of the queue demonstrated that, from a communist standpoint, certain unsavory realities underlay mass cultural imagination of Soviet life, despite their express exclusion from products of Soviet mass culture, as those products were intended to generate the mass cultural imagination. Chief among these realities, depicted in *The Queue*, is a scarcity of consumer products, generated by inadequate economic infrastructure. This circumstance betrays the utter non-existence both of the socialist reality depicted in mass culture and of the future promised by Soviet leaders. Moreover, the consequences of product scarcity in the Soviet Union largely comprised the unacknowledged Soviet *byt*. In this sense, the queue was among the most significant of cultural institutions, as it lent insight into the real, unpoliticized, unromanticized, and unidealized dreams of the Soviet people: a fast-moving queue, a reasonable purchase limit, and well-made products. While these were not the only dreams of the Soviet populace, and they were by no means grand, they were pervasive in Soviet everyday culture. Such desires not only reflect the need for a more efficient infrastructure and consistently and adequately functioning systems of production and distribution, in place of the ubiquitous institution of *blat*; they also reflect the frustrated pathos of generations of Soviet citizens. Sorokin's *The Queue* engages this pathos and serves as a form of catharsis.

## Conclusion

In face of the realities of Soviet everyday life, the unrealized dreams of Soviet mass cultural imagination largely contributed to Sots-Art's rejection of narratives. Socialist Realism operates as substitution—as a proto-Baudrillardian simulacrum—as it deliberately falsifies the real. Sorokin reverses the situation, illuminating real-life conditions and the operation of the imagination in getting people through the tedium of the queue. However, imagination has been diverted by a commodity fetish, which replaces proper objects of socialist desire. (One such object would be the productivity fetish—the desire to increase the collective wealth through earnest labor. Another would be the advancement fetish—the constructive use of leisure time for personal and collective edification.) The loosening of censorship toward the end of the Soviet Union allowed dissident writers the opportunity to voice alternatives to Socialist Realist narratives, such as these proper objects of desire, without fear of reprisals. On one hand, Soviet mass culture gained a plethora of new and interesting forms for the expression of Soviet realities. On the other hand, the loosening of censorship meant the sharp decline and inevitable demise of Socialist Realism, which comprised the canonical core of Soviet mass culture. This vacuum affected the way that writers were situated outside the mainstream; there is no longer a glaring center against which to write in the post-Soviet period. This change triggered the shift from Sots-Art to postmodernism. Despite the derivative quality of the Socialist Realist aesthetic, its decline manifested as a loss to Soviet culture. This was the death knell of Soviet-utopian dreams, as those dreams were constructed upon narratives developed in mass culture.

Vladimir Sorokin's, *The Queue*, at once highlights the inadequacy of the structures and institutions of Soviet life, and demonstrates the formative capacity of Soviet myths on perceptions of reality. The text's ability to do this without reliance on any competing narratives

demonstrates the pervasiveness of simulacra in Soviet mass culture and paved the way for Russian postmodernism. The passing of the Soviet *byt* resulted in entirely new approaches to the economics of everyday life, cultural production and distribution, and self-identification. While, the sociocultural realities that gave rise to Sots-Art were short-lived, the aesthetic changes that they ushered into Russian literary culture proved irreversible. As official Soviet myths began to erode from mass culture, writers responded with the production of new discursive forms. These responses manifest especially in post-Soviet approaches to narrative and in visions of the future.

## Chapter 3: The Mythic and the Utopian: Visions of the Future in Viktor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*

Utopianism, social *and* cultural experimentation, and ...  
Revolution open up new spaces and disclose endless vistas; it  
invites rebirth, cleansing, salvation.

Richard Stites, Revolutionary Dreams

This chapter will explore the intersection of myth and utopia in Viktor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011), a major work of post-Soviet literary fiction. This novel shows the genre of literary fiction reclaiming the utopian dreams that were lost with the fall of the Soviet Union. It indicates that remnants of Soviet culture, in the form of its dreams and mythologies, have found new purpose and direction. Yet, the foundations of the post-Soviet remain rooted in utopian cultural myths of the pre-revolutionary and Soviet period. This framework for addressing much of post-Soviet literary fiction—utopian in its forward gaze, mythic in its orientation to the past—will lead to a more cohesive and systemic understanding of works of contemporary Russian fiction.

*S.N.U.F.F.: A Utopia* was published in 2011. The text describes a dystopian world set several hundreds of years in the future. The novel's exposition details the reorganization of the world's population by persistent, large-scale war. The survivors occupy a land called Urkaina, a thinly veiled reference to Ukraine. The inhabitants are poor and uncivilized savages, called *urks*, who live in squalor and fear. The word *urk* at once references the Russian slang term, *urka*, which connotes a practiced thief and the fictional land, Urkaina. It also recalls the inhuman, barbaric creatures, known as *orcs*, from J. R. R. Tolkien's popular *Lord of the Rings* series. These beings are the deformed warrior-slaves of Sauron, who fight against the more enlightened

races of Middle-Earth. Indeed, Pelevin's *urks* are also often referred to as *orks* in the text. These individuals are dehumanized and subjugated, as they live in the literal shadow of the privileged classes of the post-apocalyptic society. Employing advanced technologies, a floating platform, known as Byzantium, or Big Byz for short, looms directly over Urkaina and houses the super-rich and the intelligentsia. This floating platform recalls the floating structure, known as Laputa, in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which serves as an allegory for the distance that exists between the government and its people. This relationship mirrors that which exists between the Russian government and the Russian populace. Pelevin's decision to subtitle the novel, *A Utopia*, reflects sarcasm about the values of the depicted society as representative of utopia, rather than pessimism about the realization of utopian dreams.

In Big Byz, everything is hyperreal; life is not only comfortable but decadent. Social attitudes and morals are extraordinarily bourgeois, reflecting Western ideals imposed on the Russian futurescape. In this sense, Big Byz lives up to the novel's subtitle, "A Utopia". The novel's primary antagonist, Damilola Karpov, is a talented and intelligent pilot of a covert military drone. He lives in a luxurious apartment in Big Byz, where he has grown obese from a hedonistic and inactive lifestyle. Among his high-tech possessions is a lifelike, female, humanoid robot, named Kaya, whose purpose is not only sex but interpersonal intimacy and the spiritual satisfaction of her owner. Because of Big Byz's advances in the psychology of human happiness, Kaya's artificially intelligent personality is set to the highest levels of "bitchiness and spirituality", in order best to simulate human affect.<sup>1</sup> Kaya and her ilk are indispensable to the function of Big Byz, as the age of consent has been raised to forty-six. This circumstance, like

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<sup>1</sup> Pelevin, Viktor, S.N.U.F.F. EKSMO: Moscow, 2012. pg. 25. "U menja na predel'nyh polozhenijah stojat odnovremенно 'suchestvo', 'soblazn' i 'duhovnost'."

many aspects of Big Byzantine society, occurs as the result of ideological hypertrophy and the domination of public discourse by special interests. This development serves as a sort of hyperbolic satire regarding the fate of western civilization, if allowed to remain on its present course. Pelevin is satirizing American culture, as he draws parallels between Big Byzantine and American cultures. Specifically, Pelevin is referencing that mysterious connection between the East and the West that exists exclusively in the Russian cultural imagination. He achieves this goal through his naming of one of the official languages of Big Byz, ‘Church-English’ and also through his satire of the American democratic process, as the legislature of Big Byz is overrun with lobbyists, much like the American congress; thus, the necessity for robotic sexual companions.

Kaya is a utility for Damilola, as he struggles with self-identification and happiness. Damilola’s function is the surveillance of the Urkainian populace and the production of *S.N.U.F.F.* (Special News Reel/Universal Feature Film). This product is, in fact, the filmed invasion and slaughter of *urks*, by remotely piloted drones, under the pretense of legitimate war—to be distributed to Urkaina, as a means of oppression. Indeed, in the novel, the most important aspect of the maintenance of the utopian superstructure of Big Byz is the production of *S.N.U.F.F.* As Masha Boston notes, “SNUFF is that unavoidable and necessary blending of realms of reality and fiction that signifies the achievement of Utopia.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the function of the production of *S.N.U.F.F.*, in the text, mirrors that of Pelevin’s production of the novel itself, as Pelevin blends reality and fiction in the text for the production of his utopian futurescape. While watching Damilola work, Kaya takes an interest in a young *urk*, named Grym. Following a series

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<sup>2</sup> Boston, Masha. “Church-American in Viktor Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.*”. *Transcultural Studies*, 6-7 (2010-2011), 141-155. p. 145.

of tragic events, Grym is offered the opportunity to start a new life in Big Byz. Grym travels to Big Byz, where he is given a tour and an explanation of the organization of life there, which is superficially ideal, like in works of classic utopian fiction. Grym soon meets and becomes infatuated with Kaya. Despite Damilola's explanations that Kaya is not human, Grym falls in love with her. After much grappling with the notions of reality, self-identification, and love, Kaya abandons Damilola and Big Byz. At the end of the novel, having learned the structure and function of a better-organized society, Grym returns to Urkaina, where he is reunited with Kaya. A battle ensues, and Big Byz explodes, due to the insurgents' sabotage of the anti-gravitation apparatus of Big Byz. In the end, utopia is no more, and only Urkaina remains.

### Soviet utopian fiction

The downfall of the utopian society featured in Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* is analogous to the disruption of the utopian dreams that comprised Socialist Realism, which occurred with the fall of the Soviet Union. Utopian thought manifested strongly in the genre of Soviet science fiction. The possibilities and futurescapes featured in works of this genre reflected the potential, promised by Soviet leaders and inscribed into mass culture by Socialist Realism. Consequently, Soviet science fiction is a virtual treasure trove of visions of the future, informed by Soviet myth and imagination of the future. Such myths are traceable through cultural products in the genres of science fiction and utopia. It is important to separate these categories, because each genre possesses a unique genealogy and relationship with its formative myths. Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish between two distinct kinds of utopia, which I will call kinetic and entropic. I believe that this distinction provides a useful framework for examining the history of utopia in modern Russian literature.

The Soviet experiment, for the first time, opened a conceptual and practical utopian space. The old history had been abolished through the crucible of revolution, and anything seemed possible in Soviet cultural imagination. Thus, the advent of the Soviet Union irrevocably altered the landscape of literary utopia. No longer did utopia describe some interminable and variously imagined nowhere; it had gained a concrete dimension. This development inevitably meant that, in the Soviet cultural imagination, the perfect society could no longer exist anywhere except within the utopian space of Soviet life. For literary fiction, this displacement gave birth to a wealth of speculation in Soviet mass culture about what lived utopia would look like and also heralded the end of traditional utopian fiction in its Russian context.

Utopianism proved to be a pervasive component of Soviet official culture. Socialist Realism models a Soviet-utopian future. While individual works of Socialist Realism tended to illustrate particular elements of socialism, rather than produce complete visions of socialist society Socialist Realism as a whole is a utopian aesthetic, as it generated a cohesive vision of an ideal society, in its canon. This vision is that of a perfect and abundant Marxist-socialist society, replete with New Soviet men and women, in which everyone knows his role and is content. This socialist narrative of the Soviet future dominated mass culture and, in doing so, displaced competing dreams.

In 1908, Alexander Bogdanov, influential Bolshevik leader and political competitor to Vladimir Lenin, published his utopian novel, *Red Star*, followed by its 1913 prequel *The Engineer Menni*. Bogdanov's two novels posit fantastic visions of a possible future, as exemplified by the history of Mars. Though *Red Star* and *The Engineer Menni* incorporate negative elements into their futurescape, these elements do not create dystopias in the texts. Rather, they represent the inscription in Russian culture of common doubts regarding utopian

experimentation, even in the works of key Bolshevik figures. Such works set the stage for the imagination of literary dystopias in the years to follow. *Red Star* and *The Engineer Menni* are examples of what H.G. Wells calls kinetic utopias. In both of these works, the depicted utopia possesses dynamism. The respective sociopolitical orders are able to adapt and evolve beyond the stasis of the previous, “entropic” utopian models. That is to say that multiple ideals can coexist with the construction of a kinetic utopia, on the other side of a qualitative break with previous modes of sociopolitical organization. Kinetic utopias are able to survive precisely because of this coexistence of multiple ideals, as there is no monological system, against which to rebel,

The publication of Evgenii Zamiatin’s, *We*, in 1924, marks a turning point in the aesthetics of the genre of utopia in Russia. It also became a prototypical model of literary dystopia and a foil for More’s *Utopia*. *We* details the structure and function of a future, ostensibly perfect society, known as the One State. In this sense, the text resembles traditional utopias. From a utilitarian perspective, the depicted society is ideal. Every individual, assigned an alpha-numeric code in lieu of a name, serves a purpose. The protagonist, D-503, is the One State’s chief mathematician, in service of its goal, to disseminate the One State’s ideology to the stars, by way of an advanced spaceship. In this role, D-503 models the utopian Man. Even among citizens of the One State, he proves remarkable as a result of his intellect and skills. Nevertheless, he succumbs to the intrigue of the imaginary, in the form of imaginary numbers and their corresponding world. For D-503, the existence of the imaginary becomes intolerable, as it increasingly dominates his thoughts. This development creates dystopia in the text, as the One State suppresses and in extreme cases excises imagination, forcibly relegating the individual to a

function of the collective. The sociopolitical organization in *We* remains static, to the point that entropy prevails. Thus, *We* is an example of an entropic utopia.

Zamiatin defines entropy in *We*, through the character of I-330, wherein he states, “There are two powers in the world – entropy and energy. One leads to blissful rest, to a happy equilibrium; the other – to the destruction of equilibrium; to a tormentingly endless movement”.<sup>3</sup> The impossibility of positive utopia to be sustained in such an environment stems, in part from what Joseph Brodsky called an “end of human thought,” a feature inherent in entropic utopia, as new modes of thought and innovation are systematically suppressed.<sup>4</sup> Or, as Zamiatin remarks, “Fortunately, all truths are erroneous. This is the very essence of the dialectical process: today’s truths become errors tomorrow; there is no final number. This truth (the only one) is for the strong alone.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, an entropic utopia gradually devolves into a dystopia, given sufficient time, as the static ideal proves incapable of sustaining the depicted sociopolitical order. Herein, I do not mean to imply that there is no such thing as a purely utopian novel. I simply mean to say that such novels truly live up to the name *utopia*, meaning nowhere, as an objectively perfect society cannot exist. Such novels also mean “nowhen,” since their order cannot be sustained.

The conception of revolution as a transcendence of the extant, socio-political order makes the Russian Revolution of 1917 a significant moment in the history of utopian literary production, as it grounds the historical context of utopia in the Soviet experiment. This is not to say that other revolutions did not give rise to social change and utopian dreams. The Russian

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<sup>3</sup> Zamiatin, Evgeny, *We*, trans. Randall, Natasha (New York: Modern Library, 2006) p. 144

<sup>4</sup> Dobrenko, Evgeny. Marina Balina. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 2011. Pg. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Zamiatin. "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters." Pg. 2.

revolution of 1917 was special because of the vastness of its transformative potential for Russian life. In his *Revolutionary Dreams*, Richard Stites expounds,

Its [The Russian Revolution's] pathos was deepened by the confluence of two remarkable facets of its history: the traditions of utopian dreaming and alternative life experiments that marked its past and the intersection of the moment of revolution (1917) with the swelling of the twentieth century technological revolution. Russia's was the first revolution to occur when both politics and technology were seen to be globally interlocked. The political side gave its international messianism a special force; its technological side added tremendous Promethean power to its visions and aspirations, releasing a much greater surge of futuristic fantasy than any previous revolution in history.<sup>6</sup>

Mass cultural products of utopian imagination not only bolstered revolutionary sentiment but also assimilated the event, forever shifting the trajectory of utopian dreams. While 1917 inaugurated a surge in works of Russian futuristic fantasy, such works were markedly unlike those of pre-Soviet utopian fiction. One prominent example is Aleksei Tolstoy's, 1923, *Aelita*. The text details a kinetic utopia, wherein, the narrative begins in the Soviet Union, immediately following the Russian Revolution of 1917. An engineer, named Mstislav Los', designs and constructs a revolutionary, new type of rocket and decides to set off to Mars. Seeking a companion for the trip, he leaves Earth with a demobilized soldier, named Alexei Gusev. Upon arriving on Mars, they discover that the planet is inhabited by an advanced civilization. However, the gap between the ruling class and the workers remains large and reminiscent of early capitalism, wherein the workers live in underground tunnels, close to their machines. Mars is now ruled by engineers, but not everything is well with the society. While speaking at an assembly meeting, their leader, Toscoob, says that the civilization's main city must be destroyed, in order to allay the fall of Mars. Aelita, Toscoob's beautiful daughter and the princess of Mars,

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<sup>6</sup> Stites, Richard. *Revolutionary Dreams*. Oxford University Press: New York, 1989. pg. 3.

reveals to Los' that the planet is dying, because the polar ice caps are not melting as they once did and the planet is facing environmental cataclysm. While the intrepid Gusev leads a popular uprising against Toscoob, the more intellectual Los' becomes infatuated with Aelita. When the rebellion is quashed, Gusev and Los' are forced to flee Mars and eventually make it back to Earth. The fate of Aelita remains unknown. However, it is hinted that she survives, as Los' receives radio messages from Mars, which mention him by name. The dystopian elements of the text come in the form of the Martian capitalist society and its mode of resolving its planetary crisis. Thus, the text reflects socialist utopian values, as it exhibits how capitalist societies come to ruin. This fact demonstrates early Soviet utopian dreaming, despite the text's overtly dystopian tendencies.

In comparison with *Aelita*, later examples of Soviet utopian fiction evince the evolution of utopian dreaming in the Soviet Union. Efremov's *Andromeda* (1957) presents a notion of a classic communist utopia, set in a distant future. Throughout the novel, focus is placed on the social and cultural aspects of the society, and the struggle to conquer vast cosmic distances. In this sense, the text resembles a traditional utopia. There are several principal heroes, including a starship captain a number of scientists, and an archeologist. Though the world described in the novel is ostensibly ideal, the text also describes a conflict and its resolution through the voluntary self-punishment of a scientist, whose reckless experiment proved harmful. This fact creates in the text a kinetic utopia, which remained the hallmark of Soviet utopian science fiction.

Indeed, Socialist Realism seemed to prefer kinetic utopias, as opposed to the entropic variety, as evinced by the large scale takeover of official publication in the genre of utopia by kinetic utopian science fiction in the years following the 1917 revolution. Interestingly, however, Socialist Realism as a whole, constitutes an entropic model of utopia, as it embraces an

unchanging, monological ideal, in the form of socialism. This fact helps explain the downfall of the Socialist Realist aesthetic, with the loosening of censorship in the 1980s.

Entropic utopias, by contrast, were actively prevented from being published and instead became a mainstay of samizdat after World War II. The impossibility of positive utopia, in Soviet literary production, outside of Socialist Realist futurescapes, also stems from the subordination of the ideal and the intellect of Man to nature and the material world. Platonov addresses this notion in his, 1930, *The Foundation Pit*, an entropic utopia, wherein the collective will of the workers resists entropy and strives to attain to the ideal of the promised utopian paradise, in which they are supposed to reside. For Platonov, the essential and eternal struggle between Man and nature means the impossibility of the attainment of the ideal; for, as long as the essential individual is subject to nature, he will have needs. Those needs prove to be quite individual to the characters in *The Foundation Pit*, to the end that death becomes an escape from a miserable collective prison for Man's individual essence. Thus, *The Foundation Pit* serves to illustrate the futility of utopian dreams, within the confines of the Soviet Union.

The end of the Soviet Union saw a reversal in the relative status of kinetic and entropic utopia. Entropic utopias like *We* and *Foundation Pit* became central in the social imaginary, displacing Socialist Realism and earlier kinetic utopias like *Red Star* and *Aelita*. No longer were entropic utopias and dystopias consigned to *samizdat* and *tamizdat* models of publication; they had gained an official platform for the dissemination of their competing visions of the future.

Ideologically, socialism was a utopian construct, centered on revolutionizing human social organization. In this sense, the Soviet Union was an experiment in the creation of a utopian space. This circumstance means that, on one hand, Soviet, speculative science fiction was integral for the imagination of Soviet-utopian futurescapes. On the other hand, it means that

the fall of the Soviet Union marked the end of utopia in Russian cultural imagination and the futility of Soviet visions of the future. As a result, the post-Soviet historical and cultural space is also post-utopian. This does not mean that positive visions of the future are impossible in post-Soviet literary fiction but that those futurescapes posited in Soviet mass culture were largely imagined as part of a Soviet-utopian future. The imagination of a positive, post-Soviet futurescape, in the genre of utopia, has not yet been achieved, in part, because of the failure of Soviet utopian dreams to materialize. The absence of positive utopian imagination in the post-Soviet period can also be attributed to the lingering influence of Soviet myths. Russian postmodernism's appropriation of Soviet myths for the generation of new discourse is replacing antiquated, Soviet narratives with contemporary alternatives. This fact has allowed contemporary literary fiction to appropriate the discursive power of Soviet utopianism for the production of post-Soviet dreams.

### Utopia after Communism

In his 2007, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures* Vitaly Chernetsky contends that the rise of postmodernism in both Russia and the West resulted from “the waning of the utopian impulse.”<sup>7</sup> Elana Gomel builds on this idea, noting that, “In the postcommunist world, the failure of utopia has become part of (mis)remembered history...Rather than suffering from amnesia, the Russian literary avant-garde seems to be in the grips of a post-traumatic stress disorder...obsessed with regaining history and time.”<sup>8</sup> This obsession is partly responsible for the Russian postmodernist preoccupation with questions of identity and reality.

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<sup>7</sup> Chernetsky, Vitaly. *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures*. McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal, 2007. pg. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Gomel, Elana. “Viktor Pelevin and Literary Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia.” The Ohio State University Press. *Narrative*, Volume 21, Number 3, October 2013. pg. 309-321.

Exploration of these topics has helped construct a new history for postcommunist Russia, free from the trauma of the loss of its historicity, myths, and dreams. This is not to say that the material facts of Russian history have been misrepresented, but that post-Soviet literary fiction helps make sense of postcommunist history, as it reclaims Soviet myths and dreams. In this sense, utopian thought underlies all of Russian postmodernism. While Gomel considers that “utopian disillusionment has been foundational to postmodernism,” literary fiction of the post-Soviet period evinces renewed affinity for utopian thought.<sup>9</sup> Despite the perceived waning of the utopian impulse and the failure of the Soviet-utopian experiment, postcommunist Russia is afflicted with vivid utopian dreams. These dreams stem from a unique cultural history with utopian thought and differ spatially from Soviet dreams, even as they lend them new function and bearing.

Viktor Pelevin is among an avant-garde of Russian writers today, who appropriate the cultural memory of the Soviet-utopian experiment for the generation of utopian visions of Russia’s future. This is not to say that other writers do not use the memory of the Soviet Union, for the imagination of Russia’s future. Pelevin is simply among the first to do so for the generation of new post-Soviet utopian futurescapes. Viktor Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.* rekindles the imagination of utopia for a Russian literary culture that draws on remnants of the Soviet past for the production of cultural forms.

### *S.N.U.F.F.*: A Kinetic or Entropic Utopia?

In *S.N.U.F.F.* the manner in which the organization of Big Byz is revealed to the protagonist links the novel more closely with models of entropic utopian fiction, in the traditions

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<sup>9</sup> Gomel. “Viktor Pelevin and Literary Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia.” pg. 309.

of Thomas More and Evgenii Zamiatin than with kinetic utopias, in the tradition of Alexander Bogdanov. Viewed as a closed system, without the existence of Urkaina, Big Byz is a positive, entropic utopian society. However, the society of Urkaina is a kinetic utopia; Pelevin allows the society of Urkaina to evolve in its own way, beyond the entropic model of utopia presented in Big Byz. In this sense, Pelevin leverages both models of utopia in the text, for the production of a new hybrid form. As a result, *S.N.U.F.F.* comprises a bridge between models of entropic and kinetic utopia. The effect of this confluence of forms is a marked differentiation in the text between Western influences, as modeled by Big Byz, and purely Slavic inclinations, as modeled by Urkaina. Big Byz's problems, such as the age of consent are not oppressive or totalitarian in nature. They stem from pursuits of human happiness, societal advancement, and democratic ideals. Individualism is not institutionally suppressed but often rewarded, as in the case of Grym. The downfall of the utopian world proved to be entropy and complacency; even without its oppression of the *urks*, Big Byz is ultimately doomed, as the apparatuses that—literally and figuratively—elevated its residents above the lower classes failed. In Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*, the existence of the *urks* serves as a reminder of the undesirable but inexorable and indomitable elements of humanity. *S.N.U.F.F.*, therefore, can be read as having anti-utopian tendencies; the corruption of the government of Urkaina, acts of state-sponsored violence, and the destruction of the ostensibly ideal society point away from positive utopia. From an opposing point of view, the novel's subtitle of, "A Utopia", describes Urkaina at the end of the novel, in a broad sense; the oppression has ended, and the *urks* are newly free to pursue their own dreams for the future, unencumbered by Byzantine idealism. The novel ends on a hopeful note, as Grym and Kaya are left with endless possibilities, newfound introspective awareness, and love, however unconventional. The ending of Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* remains hopeful, as the apocalypse that

befalls Pelevin's depicted society spares a positive protagonist, untainted by the *poshlost'* of Big Byz and its way of life. The novel closes with the demise of the entire dystopic superstructure of the envisioned society and the world is left as a virtual blank slate for the establishment of a new, more perfect society.

Pelevin's depiction of the social dynamic within and between Urkaina and Big Byz is uncannily realistic. On one hand, *S.N.U.F.F.* can be read as a stark illustration of the divide between Russia's elite and ordinary citizens. On the other hand, as Masha Boston notes in her "Church-American in Viktor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*", a title which at once references one of the official languages of Urkaina and refers to the novel's critical attitude toward the romanticization of American culture,

Urkaina's explicitly corrupt government and its savage population is often read as contemporary Russia, while Big Byz appears either as a "promised land" to which the poor savages would like to escape or a space where the Russian political and intellectual elite 'hides' from (its own) barbaric narod.<sup>10</sup>

Pelevin does not simply satirize the narratives that underlay the society of Big Byz or disparage utopian dreams. He generates a cautionary vision of the future, as an illustration of Western influences on Russia, taken to their extremes. The narrative that the text rejects is the superiority of Western values over their traditional Russian counterparts; Pelevin publically has expressed antipathy toward the westernization of Russia. As a result, Big Byz could be interpreted as a Western cultural model superimposed on a traditional Slavic populace. It could also be read as a realization of New Russian prosperity and its cost for the rest of society. Both readings of the separation of social classes in Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* suggest renewed utopian dreams in Russian

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<sup>10</sup> Boston, Masha. "Church-American in Viktor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*". *Transcultural Studies*, 6-7 (2010-2011), 141-155. p. 144

cultural imagination. One can also read the novel as Pelevin rewriting Zamiatin's *We* for contemporary Russia, wherein Big Byz is cast as an allegory for the One State and Urkaina represents the space beyond the Great Wall, brutal and atavistic to be certain, but not without a certain freedom that, for Pelevin, is the *sine qua non* of Russian life.<sup>11</sup>

*Pelevin's S.N.U.F.F.* is neither traditionally utopian nor dystopian; it comprises a hybrid work, which blend positive and negative utopian imagination with the cynicism, hyper-reality, mythopoetics, and satire of postmodernism. Accordingly, it offers some sort of answer as to the fate of utopianism in contemporary literary fiction; it indicates that Russian utopian fiction is making a comeback. This is not to say that Russian postmodernist writers are somehow returning to the forms of Soviet or pre-Soviet literary fiction, for the production of their works; they are not. Rather, they are making use of the utopian aspirations of the Soviet Union for the production of new, idiomatic discourse in the genre of utopia. This process is analogous to that, by which the *Bolsheviks* selected remnants of Imperial culture for appropriation into official Soviet culture. One notable example of such appropriation is the Chapaev myth. After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was no longer a Union of Soviet Writers. Therefore, all official designations of what was acceptable for publication vanished overnight. As a result, writers were at once free to publish what they wanted but they were bound to existing source materials for inspiration. Thus, the most successful writers of post-Soviet literary fiction began to appropriate the dreams and

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<sup>11</sup>For more on American and Western influences in Russian contemporary culture see, for example: Alan M. Ball, *Imagining America: Influence and Images in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Lanham-Boulder-New York-Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Yana Hashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film* (Bristol: Intellect, 2007); Vitaly Chernetsky, *Map : Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (New York, McGill-Queen's Press, ); Stephen Hutchings, *Russian Literary Culture in the Camera Age: The Word as Image* (London and New York Routledge, ).

mythologies of Soviet life, for the production of new discourse. This discourse is idiomatic, in the sense that it flows naturally from the everyday context of its production. Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* presents an excellent example of such discourse, as it at once incorporates the utopian dreams of Soviet life and presents its utopian vision in the postmodernist vernacular.

#### Other works that reimagine the genre of utopia

In the post-Soviet era, writers are reimagining the genre of utopia. Instead of monolithic narratives, characteristic of traditional literary utopia, works of contemporary fiction in the genre of utopia feature narrative polyphony and diversity of perspective. Much like previous entries into the genre, works of post-Soviet, utopian fiction posit idealized visions of the future. However, unlike works of traditional utopian fiction, these visions largely reflect the flaws of contemporary Russia. Such flaws lend the texts dystopic elements. However, the functions of such works differ from those of well-known works of literary dystopia. While, prominent works of post-Soviet literary fiction present predominantly negative visions of the future, recent publications suggest a resurgence of the genre of literary utopia, beyond the utopian historical and cultural space constituted by the Soviet Union. This fact helps distinguish the trajectory of literary fiction in the post-Soviet era, because it indicates that remnants of Soviet culture, in the form of its dreams and mythologies, have found new purpose and direction.

A tendency common to works of post-Soviet literary fiction is a forward gaze. Many works of literary fiction, by several prominent Russian writers, feature works either set in an imagined future or which directly draw on Russia's literary tradition of dystopia. Examples include Olga Slavnikova's *2017*(2006) and Viktor Pelevin's *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* (2014). These works draw on the Soviet past, in order to paint pictures of Russia's future.

In 2017, Olga Slavnikova achieves this goal by meticulously crafting the narrative structure of the novel to mirror the pace of Russian and Soviet life, even as she generates tension between the past and the future. 2017 is set in the year of the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, but the futuristic, dystopian side to the novel is largely indirectly expressed. Part of the action builds up to the celebrations of the anniversary, and things go terribly wrong. Slavnikova writes, "Red Cavalry helmets and White Guard epaulets are going to be firing on each other everywhere, because of the anniversary, and it's going to end in excess..."<sup>12</sup> The protagonist, named Krylov, recognizes the reason for the tragedy of the re-enactment; that so many people get caught up brooding over past losses that they forget to look forward to the future. But this is only one more hallucinatory symptom of a seemingly terminal Russian condition.<sup>13</sup> Slavnikova repeatedly invokes the hallucinatory in her novel; life is not a dream, but this world is inundated with a mythic and even spiritual quality. This mythic quality stems from Slavnikova's appropriation of the myth-making apparatus of the Soviet Union for the generation of new myths in her novel. This process is analogous to that, which Viktor Pelevin uses in the construction of his updated Chapaev myth, in his *Chapaev and the Void*, with one crucial difference; Slavnikova does not appropriate a concrete figure, around which to construct her myth. Rather, she generates a mythic atmosphere in her novel, which mirrors the mythic character of Socialist Realism. Accordingly, the post-Soviet is so strongly defined by the Soviet past that that heritage defines it more concretely than its own attributes. Therefore, works of

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<sup>12</sup> Slavnikova, Olga. 2017: A Novel. The Overlook Press: New York, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Orthofer, M. A. "The Complete Review." 2017 - Olga Slavnikova. N.p., 02 May 2010. Web. 18 May 2017.

post-soviet literary fiction tend to maintain a forward gaze, e.g. Russian culture is constantly trying to confront and shape its own identity, beyond its mooring in all things Soviet.

In Pelevin's *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* (2014), Pelevin achieves this goal of confronting and reshaping the identity of post-Soviet, Russian culture, as the novel remains largely disconnected from the Soviet past, except in its reimagination of Soviet-utopian dreams. The title refers to Sergei Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges*. The *Zuckerbrins* of the title is a combination of the last names of the creator of Facebook and that of one of the co-founders of Google. Pelevin is constantly on the bleeding edge of all the major trends in Russian society. Therefore, a great deal of attention, in the novel, is dedicated to that essential portion of the life of the individual, which is spent online.

The novel consists of three novellas written by the narrator, named Kyklops and the story, which links them together. The main events of this dystopian futurescape are framed by the narrative of Kyklops, which is set in the present. They also affect a completely different future world, which appears to be a satirical version of the Biblical paradise. The longest novella comprises the disturbing description of a future society, which echoes George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Alan Moor's *V. for Vendetta* and, most significantly, the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*. The main character of this story, portrayed in a *Matrix*-like society is a man, named Kesha, who used to be an incorrigible internet troll in his previous life. He and his *partner*, like most of the denizens of this dystopian world, live in a tiny cell in a structure called "cluster", which is several kilometers tall and, from the outside, looks like a massive landfill.

The fact that *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* comprises a dystopia proves significant to the context of its production, as it is the first novel that Pelevin published after his, 2011, *S.N.U.F.F.*,

which is a hybrid work of both kinetic and entropic models of utopian fiction. *S.N.U.F.F.*, evinces the lingering hope both of positive utopian imagination in the years to come and also of a positive outcome for the future of Russia. *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* extinguishes that hope, as it comprises a purely dystopian model of literary fiction, much like that portrayed in the society of Big Byz, in *S.N.U.F.F.* Thus, *Love for Three Zuckerbrins* belies the continued futility of positive utopian imagination, for Pelevin, in the post-Soviet era, as the text portrays Russia's future in the bleakest and most hostile manner possible.

Kesha is connected to a global control system by various cables and tubes, which feed him, wash him, and extract his bodily fluids. Meanwhile, special wires, imbedded directly into his brain, keep him immersed in virtual reality, which proves indistinguishable from lived experience. This situation allows Pelevin to satirize the evils of internet culture, from addiction to social networks to online pornography. This bleak futurescape is ruled by the above-mentioned Zuckerbrins, which are advanced algorithms that continuously transfer power between one another.

The main action of the novel stems from a love triangle between Kesha, his partner Marilyn, and the avatar from Kesha's virtual environment represented as a Japanese schoolgirl. As a corollary to the technological advances of this society Kesha does not actually have physical relations with Marilyn as they meet and make love in a collective cyberscape. In this future environment, Google has developed into a worldwide leader in the manufacture of prosthetic genitals, with which Kesha and Marilyn experience physical pleasure, during their cyberspace trysts. All of this unfolds amidst alarming reports of the cyber-terrorist, Batu Karayev wreaking havoc to the matrix by sending viruses to the servers, which maintain the collective dream of the cluster dwellers. The nightmares triggered by Karayev's program are so powerful

that many of the dreamers actually die, when they experience them. This development, in the text, serves as hyperbolic satire of the function of utopian dreaming in the post-Soviet era, as such dreaming can prove fatal, in its prophetic power, as evinced by *S.N.U.F.F.*’s prediction of events in Ukraine.

The overall premise of the novel is reinforced with the backdrop of the immensely popular video game, *Angry Birds*. The birds in Pelevin’s fictional universe are the arch nemeses of the Kyklops, as they believe him to be an evil god, and they attempt to destroy him through unsuspecting individuals. However, they cannot harm the narrator directly as they exist in an alternate dimension. The assassination attempts by the birds are depicted in a subverted, dreamlike *Angry Birds* manner, as the birds catapult various human beings at the green pig that represents the hateful creator, who is the narrator, Kyklops. Pelevin’s inclusion of the Angry Birds dimension in his narrative reflect some of the current zeitgeist, as he uses it as material for the construction of an alternative vision of Russian society today.

The narrator, like so many of his predecessors in Pelevin’s previous works, becomes a font of secret knowledge. By following a meditative practice discovered in esoteric reading left to him by a relative, the man turns into a nearly omniscient being who can invade the thoughts of other humans and influence their actions. The man realizes that he has become a Kyklops (the spelling of Cyclops in the original Greek), a being of a higher order, whose primary purpose is to preserve balance in the world by preventing the occurrence of certain events, which could cause catastrophic historical changes. One of the first examples, presented in the text, is the fact that the outcome of the recent *coup d'état* in Ukraine depended on whether a certain woman would bring an umbrella with her. Considering the *hyper-newness* of many events mentioned in the story, this inclusion, on Pelevin’s part, evinces the myth-making power of Pelevin’s brand of

postmodernism, as he appropriates and reworks the Greek myth of the Cyclops, for the generation of his dystopian futurescape.

This *hyper-newness* is in fact a staple of any Pelevin novel. In the case of *Love for Three Zukerbrins*, the riots in Kiev, the overthrow of President Yanukovych, and the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia have for the narrator the same topicality as for the readers of the book, as Pelevin incorporates these events into his narrative, both despite and because of the fact that these events occurred so recently in Russian cultural memory. Thus, Pelevin creates a mythic atmosphere in his novel, as the hyper-new quality of these elements of the text combine with the actual myths that Pelevin appropriates in the novel, e. g. Cyclops, etc. The effect of this combination is a mythic ambiance in the text that is not unlike that which Olga Slavnikova generates in her *2017*.

In a similar fashion, Soviet mass culture produced myths that informed imagination of the future. In Soviet cultural imagination, there was no future outside of its Soviet conception. The fall of the Soviet Union occurred relatively abruptly and unexpectedly. For that reason, literary fiction did not produce visions of a post-Soviet future. Because Soviet identity was inextricably tied to foundational myths produced in Soviet culture, in the post-Soviet years, writers frequently draw on Soviet cultural myths for the creation of discourse. When such discourse concerns the imagination of a post-Soviet future, the resultant text features an intersection of the mythic and the utopian. Such intersection indicates a limitation of Russian cultural imagination to produce visions of the future that are narratively disconnected from the Soviet past. This is not to say that visions of a non-Soviet future are impossible in post-Soviet literary culture. Rather, visions of the future are largely informed by the failures of Soviet utopianism. While, after the 1917 Russian Revolution, visions of the future in works of Russian literary fiction necessarily were grounded

in the Soviet experiment, works of post-Soviet utopian fiction necessarily are predicated upon the failure of the Soviet-utopian space to yield a utopian future.

### Conclusion

In the years following the fall of the Soviet Union, the role of myth in literary fiction has evolved. Previously, myths were evoked in literary fiction through the myth-making apparatus of the Soviet Union. In short, myths were created through propaganda and the monopoly on cultural products that Socialist Realism held. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Soviet myths were appropriated and altered, thus creating new myths in place of the old, built on the remnants of Soviet culture. This framework allows for a more cohesive and systemic understanding of works of contemporary Russian fiction, because it contextualizes post-Soviet literary fiction in relation to the cultural trends that gave rise to it.

In *S.N.U.F.F.*, Pelevin implicitly acknowledges the fruitlessness of traditional utopian dreaming, as Big Byz is ultimately destroyed. Big Byz is a promised land only for the naive or uninitiated; even the desperate Grym and preprogrammed Kaya abandon it for unknown vistas, as many of the shortcomings of Big Byz are evident from an internal vantage. The fact that Big Byz is imagined as a paradise by the downtrodden, while it concomitantly oppresses those who idolize it, mirrors the function of cultural myths and narratives on the imagination of utopia in the post-Soviet era. In the context of literary fiction, visions of entropic utopia are necessarily predicated upon monological ideals: benefit, nationalism, equality, efficiency, socialism, etc. Dystopian fiction rejects the organization of society around such standards, as it undermines their foundational narratives. In their place, dystopian fiction focuses on mankind's shortcomings and, thus, affirms the pursuit of human moral, intellectual, and cultural advancement, as dystopian fiction serves to comment on the ills of its contemporary society.

In post-Soviet literary production, works of utopia do not seriously posit ideal-type societies. Rather, they serve to comment on the role of contemporary Russia in the generation of variously imagined futurescapes. For example, *S.N.U.F.F.* does not seriously posit either Big Byz or Urkaina as ideal futures for Russia. Rather, the novel serves to satirize aspects of contemporary Russian society. At the same time, *S.N.U.F.F.* evinces a resurgence of utopianism in contemporary Russian literary fiction. Much as Russian writers appropriated Soviet myths for the generation of new discourse in the 1990s, this work demonstrates that the utopian aspirations of the Soviet Union are being leveraged to bolster the polemical mode in contemporary satire. Visions of the future, largely disconnected from monological ideals and subjective cultural narratives, are replacing the concretely placed Soviet forms and speculative-revolutionary forms of pre-Soviet utopian imagination. The manner in which *S.N.U.F.F.* orients itself in relation to the Soviet past indicates that this resurgence is more than experimentation in a genre with a long cultural history in Russia; it is also a redirection of Soviet-utopian dreams for a post-utopian society. *S.N.U.F.F.* variously demonstrates the inapplicability of the prefix ‘post-’ for the adequate representation of aspects of contemporary Russian life; the Soviet Union may have been a utopian space, but the resonance of its dreams carries even into the post-Soviet era. To whatever degree post-Soviet Russia is also post-utopian, that classification does not preclude utopian imagination of the future. Instead, it has removed the limitation of ideal futurescapes to the Soviet space. In this sense, post-Soviet Russia can also be said to be pre-post-utopian, as the utopian dreams of the Soviet Union were never realized. Thus, writers, who invoke these possibilities in contemporary literary fiction are recreating the Russian genre of utopia. *S.N.U.F.F.* demonstrates this recreation, as the text exemplifies a confluence of traditional utopian dreaming and the prophetic power of Pelevin’s brand of Russian postmodernism.

## **Chapter 4: The Resurgence of Literary Dystopia: Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* as the Ironic Dystopia**

### Introduction

This chapter will explore the resurgence of the genre of literary dystopia in Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006). This novel prophesies the state of today's Russia, as illustrated most vividly by the rise of Aleksandr Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves to a position of power and prominence. Sorokin's novel is noteworthy for its prophetic quality in relation to Russia today. As I will argue, Sorokin's novel introduces a new genre of literary fiction: the ironic dystopia. The novel's prophetic quality is owed to the new genre of literary fiction that it introduces.

On October 14, 2016, more than 100 people gathered for the unveiling of Russia's first and only monument to Ivan IV, who ruled Russia from 1547 to 1584 and earned the moniker "Terrible" due to his brutal policies, including the creation of a secret police—the *oprichnina*—which spread mass terror and executed thousands of people.<sup>1</sup> Officials, despite protests from historians and locals, have lobbied for the rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible's image. Historian Vladislav Nazarov, who specializes in that period, said that the statue serves as yet another symbol dividing Russian society into those favoring Joseph Stalin-like "strongman" rule and others condemning repression and authoritarianism.<sup>2</sup> Dmitrii Krayukhin, an activist, said it showed Russian society's demand for "a heavy hand, for putting state needs several rungs above

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<sup>1</sup> "Russia's First Monument to Ivan the Terrible Inaugurated." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 14 Oct. 2016. Web. 16 May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "Russia's First Monument to Ivan the Terrible Inaugurated." *The Guardian*.

those of the individual.”<sup>3</sup> This fact, for Russia, constitutes an opportunity for nationalist movements and their corresponding figures to take center stage in Russian society.

Among those in attendance at the unveiling ceremony was the leader of the Moscow-based motorcycle club, *Nochnie Volki* (Night Wolves), Aleksandr Zaldostanov. Founded in 1989 by Zaldostanov, the Night Wolves were originally a highly Americanized organization, whose members rode Harley-Davidson motorcycles and wore riding chaps, leathers, and cowboy hats, that were, overall, reminiscent of those worn by the American biker gang, the Hell’s Angels,. This style proves consistent with what one would expect from a late-Soviet biker group, as Western products of consumption were scarce and in vogue. In the late 80s and early 90s, the Night Wolves consorted with underground, countercultural groups, such as the Black Metal band, the Black Aces (Chernie Tuzy).<sup>4</sup> While the group no longer wears cowboy hats, and their riding gear has taken on a decidedly archaic, Russian look, which remains in keeping with the sociocultural changes that occurred concomitantly with the fall of the Soviet Union, the club continues to ride primarily Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

These days, however, the Night Wolves hold close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and actively promote nationalist principles. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, has received Zaldostanov “to discuss patriotic events organized by [the] club.”<sup>5</sup> The club has also made public displays of support for the Russian Orthodox Church. In April 2012, the bikers joined a rally in defense of the Orthodox Christian faith outside Moscow’s

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<sup>3</sup> “Russia’s First Monument to Ivan the Terrible Inaugurated.” *The Guardian*.

<sup>4</sup> “Bajker Hirurg, Biografija, Novosti, Foto.” Uznaj Vce!, [uznayvse.ru/znamenitosti/biografiya-hirurg-zaldostanov.html](http://uznayvse.ru/znamenitosti/biografiya-hirurg-zaldostanov.html).

<sup>5</sup> Wright, Will. "The Rise of Russia’s Night Wolves." *Russia! Magazine - News and trends from Russia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 June 2017. <http://readrussia.com/2015/07/14/the-rise-of-russias-night-wolves/>

Christ the Savior Cathedral, against protesters of the Pussy Riot scandal. Zaldostanov stated, “We wanted to support the Russian Orthodox Church, to show our solidarity, and to stress that we are with them and not with those crazy [antichurch] people.”<sup>6</sup> This statement, combined with the group’s aforementioned actions, demonstrates the deep ties that the group maintains, not only with the Russian Orthodox Church, but even with its leader.

In a 2014 interview with Vladimir Pozner, Zaldostanov expresses his nationalistic views, as he remarks, “being Russian is more than just a nationality. It is a state of the soul...The West is the enemy.”<sup>7</sup> He further expresses the lingering hope that the Russian people will unite against the West, as he further states that the Ukrainians and the Russians are one people and that any differentiation between them is artificially imposed from the West.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves served as boots on the ground in the active demonstration in favor of the annexation of Crimea during its 2014 appropriation by Russia.

Vladimir Putin has also shown his support for the radical group, as in 2012, he rode a three-wheeled Harley-Davidson motorcycle with the group to a rally in Sevastopol, where he participated in the ensuing rally.<sup>9</sup> Zaldostanov and his Night Wolves have flourished in this nationalist ecosystem. The club has received more than one million dollars in grants from the Kremlin to support patriotic performances such as the Sevastopol bike show.<sup>10</sup> In 2013, Putin

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<sup>6</sup> Wright. "The Rise of Russia's Night Wolves."

<sup>7</sup>"Pozner. Aleksandr Zaldostanov Xirurg 02.06.2014." YouTube. YouTube, 31 May 2015. Web. 26 Jan. 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_bRz2F670E8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bRz2F670E8).

<sup>8</sup> "Pozner. Aleksandr Zaldostanov Xirurg 02.06.2014." YouTube. YouTube, 31 May 2015. Web. 26 Jan. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> "Glavnyi motovolk RF rasskazal, pochemu Putin ezdit na traïke?? i o kaprizakh Volochkovoï." Interv'iu zvezd. SEGODNIA, 01 July 2011. Web. 17 July 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Tabor, Damon. "Putin's Angels: Inside Russia's Largest Motorcycle Club." *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, 08 Oct. 2015. Web. 16 May 2017.

awarded the Night Wolves' leader an Order of Honor for his "patriotic education of youth."<sup>11</sup> In June, 2016, the Russian press announced a cosmonaut would carry the club's flag into space. According to Mark Galeotti, Putin turned the club into "auxiliaries of the state" as part of a broader push to turn potential adversaries into compliant allies.<sup>12</sup> However true, these assertions shed little light on how a once-countercultural motorcycle gang has come to wield a position of such power and prominence in modern Russia and what it hopes to achieve. It is also the most vivid realization of a prophetic novel by Vladimir Sorokin.

#### *Day of the Oprichnik* and its prediction of the Night Wolves

Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* describes a future dystopian world, in which the protagonist, Andrei Danilovich Komiaga, sets off on government business, putting down "sedition."<sup>13</sup> Russia's monarchy has been restored. The Kremlin has been repainted its original white, in elision of the Soviet period, on Sorokin's part., and in order to stress this Russian futurescape's connection with Russia's feudal autocratic history. In an effort to achieve national self-isolation, a Great Wall of Russia has been constructed from Europe through the Caucasus to the edge of China. The depicted order is an Ivan-the-Terrible-esque age of pillaging and public flogging, but with modern technologies. Enforcers like Andrei Danilovich, known as *oprichniki*, a name which hails back to the days of Ivan the Terrible, wear long, narrow beards, but they

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<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/putins-angels-inside-russias-most-infamous-motorcycle-club-20151008>

<sup>11</sup> Tabor, Damon. "Putin's Angels: Inside Russia's Largest Motorcycle Club."

<sup>12</sup> Tabor, Damon. "Putin's Angels: Inside Russia's Largest Motorcycle Club."

<sup>13</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. "A Dystopian Tale of Russia's Future." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 12 Mar. 2011. Web. 16 May 2017.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/books/review/book-review-day-of-the-oprichnik-by-vladimir-sorokin.html>.

carry ray guns, instead of swords. The day's first order of business is the execution of a rich noble, who brings to mind the image of the New Russian, who has traded on his Soviet heritage and its utopian dream for the sake of a successful transition to capitalism. He is, thus, possessed of Western ideals that rule his existence, as opposed to purely Slavic inclinations, as modeled by the *oprichniki*. In order of rank, the *oprichniki* gang-rape the noble's wife, an act described in graphic detail. This action underscores the liberties that Sorokin takes in the novel, as despite the text's temporal removal from Soviet-era censorship, Sorokin seems to be revolting against Socialist Realist conventions. The primary tension herein is between the decadent, bourgeois, Western type and the nationalist, virile, Slavic type, who, in the novel, is preferred, as in the depicted society it is not desirable that such an individual as the rich noble procreate. The noble's children are sent to an orphanage to be raised as "honest citizens." And the day has only begun.<sup>14</sup>

*Day of the Oprichnik* comes across almost as extended art-performance through its haunting rituals and bizarreness.<sup>15</sup> Among these rituals is a homoerotic orgy conducted amongst the members of the *oprichniki* only. While, there is little real-life connection between this action, in the novel, and Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves, it is easy to imagine such a group of homophobic, orthodox ultra-nationalists secretly celebrating in such a manner. Because of Sorokin's deep roots in sotsart, it is conceivable that the art-performance inherent in this and similar scenes, in the novel, stems from Sorokin manipulating those Soviet-era conventions, the rejection of which seems to be Sorokin's primary aesthetic aim.

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<sup>14</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. "A Dystopian Tale of Russia's Future."

<sup>15</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. "A Dystopian Tale of Russia's Future."

A soothsayer foretells that Russia will be “all right” while casually and flippantly burning works of classic Russian literature.<sup>16</sup> This action is especially relevant as, in 2002, Sorokin’s works were subjected to book burnings and submersion in toilets by the ultra-conservative group *Idushie Vmeste* (Moving Together).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in the same year, Sorokin, himself, was investigated for the publication of pornography, as a result of asexual encounter between Nikita Khrushchev and Josef Stalin, published in his novel *Blue Lard (Goluboe Salo*, 1999).<sup>18</sup> Andrei Komiaga, however, is not in on the joke, and the oprichniki have seemingly limitless power. These facts change the impression that Sorokin is primarily interested in rejecting Socialist Realism and is complaining about the state of Russian literary fiction. Rather, Sorokin is primarily concerned with the present state of Russian literary culture and is using the rejection of Socialist Realist conventions as commentary on contemporary censorship.

Although quite fantastic at the time of publication (2006), the actions depicted in the novel have come to fruition in contemporary Russia. The function of the *oprichniki* have been adopted in real life by Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves, who also seem to be out of the loop regarding the irony of their own actions in today’s Russia. Zaldostanov even vaguely resembles Andrei Danilovich Komiaga with his pseudo-medieval leather chaps and straps. All of these circumstances serve to bolster the connection between the Night Wolves and the *oprichniki* of Sorokin’s novel and, thus, reinforce the predictive quality of the text.

The world of *Day of the Oprichnik* is constructed as a dystopic idyll, in which a mythologized governance model of the reign of Ivan the Terrible is superimposed on the future

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<sup>16</sup> Kotkin, Stephen. "A Dystopian Tale of Russia's Future."

<sup>17</sup> Evans, Julian. “Burning Books for Putin.” *Questia, The Spectator*, Vol. 296, No. 9193 16 Oct. 2004.

<sup>18</sup> "Russian satirist sued over 'gay Stalin'". *BBC News*. 11 July 2002.

of contemporary Russia. This overlay creates a cyclical temporality in the text, in which Russia's past, present and future merge into an inextricable and inescapable whole. Sorokin seems to suggest that Russia's future, as always, is its past, revealing a biting irony about any notion of historical development. The fact that Sorokin's novel comprises an entropic model of utopian fiction helps diagnose its cyclical temporality, as entropic utopias prove ideologically stagnant. Therefore, the society depicted in the text cannot evolve beyond its monological nationalism. This is, in large part, Sorokin's critique of contemporary Russia, as creeping nationalism has gradually taken over the country. I will call the effect of this temporality futuristic archaism, because the text depicts a futurescape, in which Sorokin looks to the ancient past for inspiration. In a sense, this is Sorokin's diagnosis of the Russian disorder: seeing the future within the structures of the past. While Sorokin's appropriation of a prominent, autocratic reign of terror from Russia's history for the imagination of the future can be viewed as hyperbole, it is more than just a grim and satiric premonition; *Day of the Oprichnik* inherits Russia's Soviet tradition, as it places the dystopian future in a concrete ideological and physical space. It also proves Schopenhauerian, as Russia seems ruled by a dark force, identifiable with the security apparatus: always archaic, always at the cutting edge of technology. However, it differs from Marxist utopianism, as it displaces its vision of the future from Soviet history and Marxist ideology. Thus, the text is idyllic in relation to the state security experienced under oppressive Tsardom and satiric in relation to Russia's future reversion to such autocratic principles. The result is a new genre, ironic dystopia.

#### Dystopia in the West and ironic dystopia in Russia

The history of the genre of dystopia not only provides much needed context for the novel's publication but also disrupts the notion that works of post-Soviet dystopian fiction exist

in some sort of historical vacuum; they do not. Rather, they possess a unique genealogy, which includes works of Soviet and pre-Soviet fiction.

Works of dystopian fiction began to appear in world literature in quick succession following the publication of More's *Utopia*. Joseph Hall's *Another World and Yet the Same* (1605) presents among the first visions of dystopia in literary fiction. The text satirizes contemporary Europe, by comparing it with an imaginary and overtly disagreeable land. In his analysis of the novel, Richard A. McCabe elucidates,

The grotesque antipodean world [...] [the protagonist] discovers is described in vividly imaginative detail with mock-heroic battles, burlesqued orations, outrageously irreverent ceremonies and rituals (at the expense of Rome), and much tongue-in-cheek academic raillery [...] Hall rejected Utopian idealism, choosing to concentrate on men's failings instead of their dreams.<sup>19</sup>

As Hall focuses on the idealistic failures of society, rather than on the actualization of dreams, built upon cultural ideals, he sets a precedent for the aesthetics of the sub-genre of dystopia in the centuries to follow. A common trait of literary dystopia is the rejection of the very ideals, upon which ostensibly perfect societies are constructed. Thus, dystopias differ from entropic utopias, through dystopias' fundamental rejection of ideals and entropic utopias' embracing of the, albeit flawed, ideal. This theme appears in works of literary utopia in the centuries to follow Hall's *Another World and Yet the Same*, including Jules Verne's *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *1984*. This sampling of popular works of dystopian fiction demonstrates the sub-genre's consistent critique of the designation of any society as perfect, on the basis of subjective ideals. The problem with

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<sup>19</sup> McCabe, Richard A. Rev. of *Another World and yet the Same* by Joseph Hall. Oxford University Press. The Review of English Studies, Vol. 35, No. 139 (Aug., 1984), pp. 373-375

subjective ideals lies in the fact that what may constitute perfection for one or even most individuals does not do so for all. Thus, the sort of subjectivity that dystopian fiction rejects is a shared subjectivity. This rejection constitutes the fundamental departure of dystopian imagination from positive, utopian dreams in literary fiction. This departure of dystopia from utopia is related to the distinction between kinetic and entropic models of utopian fiction, through the manner in which entropic utopias eventually devolve into dystopias, given sufficient time, as the subjective ideals, at the heart of the depicted societies, fail to sustain sociopolitical order. This is not to imply an equivalence between entropic utopia and dystopia; they comprise different structures, in literary fiction, and they possess divergent genealogies. Dystopian futurescapes are not simply evil societies; they reflect the perils of the universal imposition of subjective ideals, with their primary focus on mankind's failings, instead of its dreams. Thus, they are constantly waving a flag, warning society of impending danger. Meanwhile, entropic utopias comprise literary attempts to arrange sociopolitical organization around subjective ideals, while continuing to place focus on Man's dreams. Thus, entropic utopias are more optimistic about subjective idealism than dystopias; however, both models of literary fiction demonstrate the failures of such ideals to effect a perfect society. The inclusion of elements of dystopia and its implicit critiques became a defining characteristic of Russian utopian fiction, beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

From its inception, the Russian genre of utopia has included elements of dystopia. This fact creates a unique model of utopian imagination in Russian literary culture. A rich literary tradition in the genre of utopia existed in pre-Soviet Russia. As early as 1835, Russian writer Vladimir Odoevsky produced literary texts in the genre of utopia, including *The Year 4338: Petersburg Letters* (1835), and his more famous, *Russian Nights* (1844)—a collection of essays

and novellas, with a theme of social development and reform. *The Year 4338: Petersburg Letters* includes speculation about future technological developments, as it envisages telephony, air and space travel, and climate control, among other possibilities. Such prediction is characteristic both of traditional utopian fiction and of Soviet science fiction of the century to follow. Odoevsky's works represent among the earliest examples of utopian literary fiction in Russian culture. In *The City without a Name*, a dystopia, published as part of his *Russian Nights* collection, Odoevsky attacks the notion of the universal ideal. The nameless society of his text unites under the common ideal of 'benefit', and fails spectacularly. The monological ideal proves insufficient to unite the people and sustain sociopolitical order. Thus, the society falls to ruin and becomes forgotten by all but one solitary mourner. Because Odoevsky's texts are among the first entries into the genre of utopian literary fiction in Russian culture, these texts indicate an absence of traditional utopian fiction in Russian culture. This fact creates in Russia a unique atmosphere for the imagination of utopian futurescapes.

Despite the popular exploration of dystopia in the early twentieth century, dystopian literature disappeared from Soviet official culture in the early years of the Soviet Union. Because the Soviet Union represented a utopian space, works that cast doubt on the feasibility of such a society became increasingly subject to censorship. Examples include Evgeni Zamiatin's *We*, which was completed in 1921 and first published in English translation in New York in 1924, but not published in the Soviet Union until 1988. As an example of Soviet censorship of works of dystopian fiction, *We* proves significant, as it was the first work of literature to be banned by Glavlit, the Soviet censorship bureau.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> O'Connor, Kevin C. *Intellectuals and Apparatchiks: Russian Nationalism and the Gorbachev Revolution*. New York: Lexington Books, 2008. Pg. 81.

In “Debunking Old Myths and New: Yuri Mamin’s Satires in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema”, Aleksandr Prokhorov discusses the replacing of the carnivalesque in late-Soviet humor with the dystopian. This substitution is natural, given the understanding of utopia as central to all of Soviet mythology. This fact stems at once from the common linking of carnival to the profane; as dystopia laid claim to the ultimate profanity, in the Soviet era—directly contradicting the utopian core of Socialist Realism—dystopia naturally supplanted carnival in Soviet humor. This understanding allows one to take Prokhorov’s claim one step further, to include not only humor but also all cultural products, as Prokhorov writes that, “utopianism remained culture’s prime discourse” in the Soviet era.<sup>21</sup> This situation arose, in large part, due to the adoption of Socialist Realism as the official aesthetic for all of art, including literature. Socialist Realism was inherently a utopian aesthetic, as it crafted in its canon a model for how Soviet life should look.

The profaning of the core of Socialist Realism, through the production of dystopic texts, in the post-Soviet era, transformed into a form of rebellion against Soviet censorship and communist ideology. With the relaxation of censorship in the late Soviet period, works of dystopian literature became increasingly widespread. Texts such as Vladimir Voinovich’s dystopian satire, *Moscow 2042* became indicative of the future of the genre of utopia. No longer did visions of positive Soviet imagination monopolize Soviet mass culture; mainstream competition to official Socialist Realist narratives had become possible. Unlike revolutionary-era works of literary dystopia, such as Evgeni Zamiatin’s *We*, *Moscow 2042* was not a cautionary tale. Instead, it manifested as satire of Soviet ideology, as it exemplified the failures of socialist

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<sup>21</sup> “Debunking Myths Old and New: Iurii Mamin’s Satires in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema.” *Uncensored: Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia*. Eds. Olga Mesropova and Seth Graham. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2008. Pg. 107.

ideals to effect a utopian future. In *Moscow 2042*, the protagonist is a Russian writer, named Kartsev, living in Munich in 1982 (like Voinovich himself), who time travels to a future Moscow of 2042. After the "Great August Revolution", the new leader called "Genialissimus" has greatly altered the conception of the Soviet Union. Because Vladimir Lenin's dream of the world revolution remained unrealized and was later narrowed down to Joseph Stalin's theory of "Socialism in one country", Genialissimus builds "Communism in one city", namely Moscow. The ideology has been transformed into a mishmash of Marxism-Leninism and Russian Orthodoxy, wherein Genialissimus himself is also Patriarch. The country is ruled by CPGB – The Communist Party of State Security, a portmanteau of Communist Party and KGB. The decay from which the Soviet Union suffered has worsened. The rest of the Soviet Union, where people barely survive, has been separated by a Berlin type of wall from the "paradise" of Moscow, where communism has been realized. As in *We*, within the wall everyone gets everything by the communist principle, "according to his needs." However, the people's needs are not determined by the people themselves, but by the Genialissimus. Most people have "ordinary needs", but a chosen few have "extraordinary needs". For the first group, life is dismal even within the privileged "Moscow Republic". The situation finally becomes so desperate that people throw themselves in the arms of the "liberator", a dissident writer and acquaintance of Kartsev, named Sim Karnavalov, who enters Moscow on a white horse and proclaims himself Tsar Serafim the First. Thus, communism is abandoned, as society regresses back into autocracy.

Drawing on subtle indications of a rapprochement between Soviet communism and Russian Orthodoxy, between Marxist utopianism and Christian messianism, Voinovich crafts within the text a model not for how Soviet life should look, as prescribed by Socialist Realism, but of Russia's future, as Voinovich envisioned it, based on the sociopolitical currents of the day.

Because of his talent as a writer, Voinovich predicted accurately in which direction post-soviet Russian society would drift. Karnavalov is widely considered to be a stand-in for Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who Voinovich is lampooning for his self-righteousness; in fact, after his return to Russia in 1995 (check date) Solzhenitsyn in fact became a primary ideologue of a new nationalism.<sup>22</sup> The Genialissimus is a former KGB officer, much like Vladimir Putin, thus, enhancing the predictive quality of the text. A journalist, who almost openly types bitter, critical texts about Genialissimus, works at a computer connected to a false network; his works, unbeknownst to him, go nowhere, as an impotent form of cathartic release from the horror of living in such a society. This is a prophetic metaphor for the sort of freedom of speech that exists in Russia today, as the Russian legislature is controlled by the party United Russia and, therefore, by Putin and the Kremlin. As Tatiana Novikov notes in her, “The Poetics of Confrontation: Carnival in V. Voinovich’s Moscow 2042” “He [Voinovich] exposes the ideologies and stereotypes of the dominant cultural forces in the totalitarian world, in the process deconstructing its cultural myths.”<sup>23</sup> This model presaged the post-Soviet literary appropriation of Soviet utopian dreams for the envisaging of new and unconventional futurescapes.

Sorokin’s works are usually interspersed with Soviet-era references and conventions. The title and twenty-four hour frame of *Day of the Oprichnik (Den' Oprichnika)* bring to mind Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha, 1962)*, a depiction of a Gulag camp that portrays an Everyman-victim who finds dignity through labor, almost like a Socialist Realist hero. The twenty-four-hour frame, in both novels, serves as

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<sup>22</sup>Ryan-Hayes, Karen L., *Contemporary Russian Satire: A Genre Study*. Pg. 197.

<sup>23</sup> Novikov, Tatiana. “The Poetics of Confrontation: Carnival in V. Voinovich’s Moscow 2042”. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. Vol. 42 , Iss. 4,2000.

a microcosm of everyday life. The iterative quality of the texts models the everyday, to the point that readers implicitly understand that the single day represents an entire life, and that many people did not survive such conditions. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* demonstrates how the spark of human dignity can be found in the individual, despite the dehumanizing conditions of the *gulag*, as Ivan Denisovich maintains his dignity, even in the face of the worst that socialism had to offer. Meanwhile, *Day of the Oprichnik* evinces the opposite, as Andrei Danilovich retains none of his individual personality in the face of the depicted society's established ideal, nationalism. Whereas Solzhenitsyn's masterpiece unintentionally demonstrates the deep impact that Soviet tropes had had on its author, Sorokin's satire intentionally shows how Soviet and imperial mentalities persist even in today's Russia.

### Sorokin's Ironic Dystopia

The resurgence of the sub-genre of dystopia in the post-Soviet era indicates both a lingering disillusionment with Soviet utopianism and also a renewed interest in the genre of utopia. *Day of the Oprichnik* evinces this disillusionment, as Sorokin eschews the Soviet past, in favor of Imperial history, upon which to construct his dystopian futurescape. This elision of the Soviet past proves significant to Sorokin's rendition of this post-Soviet futurescape, as it creates a pronounced gap in the text's cyclical temporality, which can only be explained through direct engagement with the Soviet past, by readers, to whom the question is then posed, what relationship the Soviet past holds with the post-Soviet future. This question proves especially poignant, given both Sorokin's history as a Russian postmodernist writer and also the relationship between the former Soviet Union and utopia. The novel also suggests a renewed interest in the genre of utopia through engagement with its sub-genre, dystopia.

There is ample evidence that Sorokin intended his novel as a prescient warning against nascent tendencies in Russian politics and society. Since its publication, the world of Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* has come to life in several unexpected ways, chief among them, the manner in which Zaldostanov and his cohort have taken up the role of the modern day *oprichnina*. In 2014, they served as unofficial enforcers of martial law, during the Russian land-grab in Crimea, and they even functioned as unofficial troops in Russia's offensive against Ukraine. Through these and similar actions, the Night Wolves contribute to an escalating culture of fear and decreased freedoms in Russia today. This culture of terror is among the primary themes in Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*. The fact that Sorokin's novel was able to foretell not only this culture of terror, but also the role of the Night Wolves in its inception, proves telling about the predictive quality of both the novel itself and the literary culture that bred it.

Despite its largely negative depiction of Russia's future and complete elision of Soviet history, *Day of the Oprichnik* reflects Soviet utopian dreams, as Sorokin crafts within the text a model for post-Soviet dystopian literary fiction. Together, these facts mean that *Day of the Oprichnik* comprises a new model of post-Soviet dystopian fiction, which I will call ironic dystopia; wholly postmodern, in relation to the literary cultures that gave rise to it and, thus, possessed of the characteristic cynicism and hyper-reality of Russian postmodernism. Ironic dystopias further possess a certain dramatic irony, vis-à-vis the imagination of the dystopian superstructure of the novel. For example, the *oprichniki* of the novel remain unaware of their real-life modeling, in the form of the Night Wolves, and vice versa. For this reason, the text bridges previous models of dystopian fiction and that of Russian postmodern literary fiction. The fact that Sorokin avoids mention of Soviet history as the plot of his novel unfolds serves to strengthen its connection with Soviet dreams, as its absence becomes marked and is thus notable.

This model recalls works of Soviet dystopian fiction, such as Zamiatin's *We*, which also never directly mentions Soviet life or culture but nevertheless serves as commentary on the feasibility of such a society. *Day of the Oprichnik* models Soviet dreams. One such dream is that of state security. Another is that of national self-isolation. Yet another is that of abundance. Sorokin models these dreams in his novel, as his depicted society proves abundant with products of consumption; there are even books left to burn. Furthermore, the depicted society has achieved both national self-isolation and state security; however, it has done so through the reign of terror, brought to bear by Andrei Danilovich and his cohort. In this sense, Sorokin appropriates the utopian dreams that were lost with the fall of the Soviet Union, for the production of a new model of dystopian fiction; one that has proven to be both prophetic, in relation to today's Russia, and also based on utopian cultural myths.

#### Sorokin and *A Clockwork Orange*

Of all previous literary dystopias Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* shares the most with *A Clockwork Orange*, (1962) Anthony Burgess' novella sets a precedent for the sort of pan-historical thug-topia that one finds in Sorokin's novel, which in turn presages individuals and events in contemporary Russia. Specifically, the protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange* is named Alex a 15-year-old, highly intelligent sociopath living in a near-future dystopian England who leads his gang on a night of opportunistic, random "ultra-violence." Both the Night Wolves and the *oprichniki* of Sorokin's text share striking similarities to Alex and his gang. Alex's friends, called "droogs" in the novel's Anglo-Russian slang, are Dim, a slow-witted strongman, who serves as the gang's muscle; Georgie, an ambitious second-in-command; and Pete, who generally plays along, as the droogs indulge their taste for ultra-violence. This Anglo-Russian slang is

featured strongly in Burgess' novella. As Martin Nixon elucidates in his "The Use and Effects of Fictional Argot in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*",

The use of the fictional language protects us from the full horror of this violence by creating a buffer between the actual events and what the reader comprehends, because many of the words no longer have the same connotations as they do in regular English. Burgess himself said "to tolchock a chelloveck in the kishkas does not sound as bad as booting a man in the guts." Because these are new words in which the reader has no existing emotional investment, the reader doesn't have the same negative association with the action –leaving Burgess free to have Alex do what he wants without the reader judging him so harshly. By disconnecting the emotive response to the words from their meaning, nadsat creates a cushioning layer between the acts of violence and how the reader understands these acts.<sup>24</sup>

This buffer proves crucial to the imagination of *A Clockwork Orange*, because it allows readers to form an empathetic connection with Alex, who is widely considered, "one of the most appallingly vicious creations in...fiction.<sup>25</sup> A similar buffer exists for readers of Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*. Sorokin utilizes a novel technique to alleviate readers' revulsion toward the protagonist; he mixes the familiar with the unfamiliar, such as the familiar Mercedes brand with the Russian suffix –ov, creating the fictional brand Mercedov. Sorokin further imbues his protagonist's despicable acts with humor; popping a severed dog's head on the hood of the vehicle, before setting off on government business is one example of such grim and satiric humor. Thus, Sorokin mitigates the effects of the violence of the novel on readers to a similar degree to that, which Burgess achieves in *A Clockwork Orange*.

Burgess's novella begins with the gang sitting in their favorite hangout, the Korova Milk Bar, and drinking "milk-plus", a drink, which consists of milk laced with the customer's drug of

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<sup>24</sup> Nixon, Martin. "The Use and Effects of Fictional Argot in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*". WordPress. 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Aggelar, Geoffrey. *Anthony Burgess: The Artist as Novelist*. University of Alabama Press: University AL, 1979. Pg173.

choice, preparing for a night of mayhem. The gang accosts a scholar, who is leaving the local library, tearing up his books, in the process. They rob a store, leaving the owner and his wife beaten and unconscious; assault a beggar; then brawl with a rival gang. These actions mirror those that the *oprichniki* of Sorokin's novel engage in, as they too take drugs, before rampaging through the country, wreaking havoc. As Alex and his cohort joyride through the countryside in a stolen car, they break into an isolated home and terrorize the young couple, who lives there. They subsequently beat the husband and brutally gang-rape his wife. This scene proves markedly similar to the rape scene in Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*. The difference, herein, is that, in Burgess' novella, the author describes the act, using euphemism and innuendo, namely a little of "the old in out, in out."<sup>26</sup> He further embellishes euphemistically,

So he did the strong-man on the *devotchka*, who was still creech creech creeching away in very *horrorshow* four-in-a-bar, locking her *rookers* from the back, while I ripped away at this and that and the other, the others were going haw haw haw still, and real *horrorshow* *groodies* they were that then exhibited their pink *glazzies*, O my brothers, while I untrussed and got ready for the plunge.<sup>27</sup>

If one reads this passage solely for its language, ignoring the meaning behind the *nadsat* words, it sounds rather humorous. However, this humor becomes repulsive, when one realizes that what Alex is describing is what he and his *droogs* did before gang raping the *devotchka* (young woman). Sorokin does not disguise the act, in his novel. Rather, he describes the rape in graphic detail. Furthermore, in Sorokin's novel, the rape scene is imbued with purpose and meaning; in Burgess' novella, there is none. This fact underscores Sorokin's critique of contemporary Russia, as the nihilism inherent in the rape scene of Burgess' novella is replaced by ideology, in the form of nationalism, in Sorokin's text. Thus, the nihilistic act is imbued with ideological purpose. This

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<sup>26</sup> Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. New York: Norton, 1963. pg. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Burgess. *A Clockwork Orange*. pg. 29.

is not to suggest that the ideology, inherent in Sorokin's novel, and by extension, in today's Russia, is somehow false and is, in fact, a form of nihilism; it is not, because of the irony with which Sorokin regards this nationalism in the novel. Rather, it is to say that Sorokin appropriates the sort of ultra-violence, portrayed in Burgess' novella for his depiction of Russian nationalism. Unlike Solzhenitsyn, Sorokin is not ringing a bell, saying that this nationalism is actually nihilism, or even that this nationalism is, in fact, bad for contemporary Russia. Instead, Sorokin is poking fun at the fact that contemporary Russian nationalists, like Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves, end up acting in a similar fashion to Alex and his *droogs*. In keeping with the fact that, in terms of genre, *A Clockwork Orange* is closest to an ironic dystopia like *Day of the Oprichnik*, Burgess is also not ringing a bell regarding the state of society. In fact, he regards the violence, inherent in his depicted society with an air of ironic detachment, which remains among the most prominent themes of the novella; that creeping nihilism is gradually taking over society.

Having returned to the Korova, Alex punches Dim for his vulgar response to a woman's operatic singing. Thus, strains within the gang are revealed. This action sets the stage for Alex's ultimate betrayal, murder conviction, and rehabilitation, albeit temporarily. Sorokin does not mirror this strained relationship in his depiction of the dynamic between the *oprichniki*. Because *Day of the Oprichnik* comprises an entropic model of utopian fiction, the depicted society will further devolve into dystopia. Accordingly, even the tight-knit, nationalistic structure of the *oprichnina* can be challenged by time and entropy. On the other hand, Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* helps us to formulate the main distinction between Sorokin's novel and the genre of the dystopia. Although both novels warn against signs of the future as it is coming to pass, Sorokin lacks Burgess's faith that this future can be prevented. This is clear in the cyclical structure of

Russian history as represented in the novel—and as confirmed by subsequent events like the rise of the Night Wolves; this is history as entropy.

#### Zaldostanov's transformation from the late Soviet era to the present

At this point, it is worth briefly exploring Zaldostanov's transformation from Khirurg, in late-Soviet rocker culture into today's Aleksandr Zaldostanov, under Putinism, as they comprise two distinctly different public personas. Zaldostanov of the late-Soviet era was already an aspiring public figure, as he appeared in several TV shows and even a movie.<sup>28</sup> This fact demonstrates Zaldostanov's desire to be constantly in the limelight, from the earliest days of his public life. This is not to imply that Zaldostanov's fame today is some sort of ego-fueled, youthful fantasy come true. Rather, it is simply to note Zaldostanov's preoccupation with being in the public spotlight. This fact is visible nowhere more readily than in Zaldostanov's participation in the 2017 Gaidar forum, wherein Zaldostanov spewed nonsense, calling on the government to 'move the economy':

To make the economy grow, and not in the manner that it is, big financial injections are necessary. Having certain roots, it [the economy] is always easier to move. But now, when the monetary component has crippled itself; money is not enough even to just rest in peace. I do not understand very much in the banking sphere, but I know that the enemy can penetrate you where you yourself have not tried. Therefore, as regards the economy, I am for not being afraid, but making it, so that it goes on its own.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Aleksandr Zaldostanov: biografiâ, lichnaâ zhizn'. Professional'naâ deïatel'nost'." FB.ru. N.p., 01 June 2014. Web. 18 July 2017.

<sup>29</sup> SHestakov, Evgeni. "Blogger do slez rassmeshil Seti "tsitator" Xirurga s Gaïdarovskogo foruma". Viche.net.ua.2017. 17 Aug. 2017. Chtoby èkonomika rosla, a ne kak ona éto delaet, dolzhny byt' bol'shie finansovye vduvaniâ. Imeia pod soboï opredelenny korni, dvigat'sia vsegda legche. No seichas, kogda monetnaia sostavliaushchaia nanesla sebe tiazhelyi uron, deneg ne khvataet dazhe na to, chtoby prosto upokoit'sia s mirom. IA ne ochen' shiroko ponimaiu v bankovskoi sfere, no znaiu, chto vrag mozhet proniknut' tebe tuda, kuda ty i sam ne proboval. Poëtomu, chto kasaetsia èkonomiki, ia za to, chtoby ne boiat'sia, a delat' tak, kak idet samo.

This sort of nonsense serves to underscore the social commentary, in Sorokin's novel, about how real political progress remains impossible in today's Russia, as Zaldostanov stands as the unofficial face of Putin's Russia. This fact proves significant to both the context of the novel's publication and to the sphere of Russian politics, because Zaldostanov has influenced both. This statement also reflects his previous actions in a funhouse mirror, of sorts, as he formerly rebelled against governmental authority. Zaldostanov admits as much in an interview, wherein he states,

What does it mean to "hooliganize"? It was a form of protest. It is now possible to wear long hair and earrings, ride bikes, but try to do it at that time! That protest was still unconscious, coming from somewhere inside. Not against one's native country, but against the obvious lies and hypocrisy of power... By myself, I know... to unite even a hundred people with a common idea, we need strength of spirit and great work.<sup>30</sup>

The Aleksandr Zaldostanov, who rebelled against Soviet authority, in this manner remains substantially different from the Zaldostanov of today's Russia, under Putinism, as he has become the unofficial face of Putin's Russia. The irony of this fact is palpable, not only because of Zaldostanov's previous rebellion against state authority, but also because of Sorokin's prediction of this development, as Sorokin's reluctant prophesying on this point belies the ultimate irony of Zaldostanov's rise to power and prominence; that Zaldostanov and his Night Wolves have come to symbolize those very "obvious lies and hypocrisy of power," through the structures of state

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<sup>30</sup>"Baïker Xirurg: Pochemu v nashej druzhbe s Putinym vse vidiat tol'ko den'gi?" Sobesednik.ru. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 July 2017. – CHto znachit «pokhuliganit»? Èto byla forma protesta. Èto se'chash mozhno nosit' dlinnye volosy, veshat' ser'gi, ezdit' na baïkakh, a poprobovali by vy èto delat' v to vremia! Tot protest byl eshche neosoznannym, shel otkuda-to iznutri. Ne protiv rodnoj strany, a protiv ochevidnoj lzhi i litsemeriâ vlasti... Po sebe znaû: chtoby ob"edinit' dazhe sotni lûdej obshchej ideej, nuzhny sila dukha i ogromnyj trud.

sponsored authoritarianism that they were originally formed to rally against.<sup>31</sup> They have also come to represent the cyclical structures of Russian history that seem to preclude truly progressive politics.

#### Sorokin's reluctant prophesying

In a 2012 interview with Nikolai Aleksandrov, Vladimir Sorokin commented on the uncanny actualization of the novel's dystopian vision of the future. When asked about the perception that *Day of the Oprichnik* and its conceptual sequel, *Sugar Kremlin* had become reality in today's Russia, he elucidated,

This [...] assertion has already become commonplace, unfortunately. And in the last three years or so, it has become all the more obvious [...] As a writer, I am, of course, pleased, but I cannot say that I am pleased as a citizen. Unfortunately, it has all come to pass. Even in certain formal details.<sup>32</sup>

This distinction has roots in Russian social thought of the 1850s, when the poet Nikolai Alekseevich Nekrasov penned his famous poem, "A Poet and a Citizen" (1856), in which he writes, "Therefore, you don't have to be a poet / But you must be a citizen."<sup>33</sup> Unlike previous authors of dystopia, Sorokin feels a stark bifurcation between his position as writer and his position as citizen. He cannot be a writer-citizen. Seeing the future means seeing Russia locked in entropic cycles of history. The predictive quality of Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*,

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<sup>31</sup> "Baïker Xirurg: Pochemu v nasheĭ druzhbe s Putinym vse vidiat tol'ko den'gi?"

<sup>32</sup> Aleksandrov, Nikolaĭ. "Vladimir Sorokin: «Grotesk stal nashim glavnym vozdukhom»." Colta.ru, 15 Nov. 2012. Web. 07 Mar. 2016. "Étot vopros-utverzhdenie uzhe stal obshchim mestom, k sozhaleniiu. Prichem v poslednie goda tri éto stanovilos' vse ochevidnee. Kak literator ia, konechno, dovolen, no ne mogu skazat', chto ia dovolen kak grazhdanin. K sozhaleniiu, éto vse sbyvaetsia. Dazhe v kakikh-to formal'nykh melochakh." (All translations are mine.)

<sup>33</sup> Nekrasov, Nikolai Alekseevich. "Poët i Grazhdanin." Library.ru. Internet-biblioteka Alekseia Komarova, 1856. Web. 02 Aug. 2017. Poëtom mozhesh' ty ne byt', / No grazhdaninom byt' obiazan.

demonstrates how deeply the contemporary Russian ethos is mired in mentalities that stem from previous eras.

The prophetic quality of *Day of the Oprichnik* is tied at once to Sorokin's peculiar brand of Russian postmodernism and to Russia being on a relatively predictable course toward the realization of Putin's nationalistic goals. On the one hand, Sorokin has long been regarded as a prophetic writer. His works have predicted the state of today's Russia, for example. On the other hand, other writers, such as Viktor Pelevin, have done the same in their works. Examples include *S.N.U.F.F.*, in which Pelevin predicts the Russian conflict in Ukraine. This circumstance is largely the result of Putin's rampant nationalistic actions, since his ascent to power. Putin is using Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves not only as unofficial enforcers of the Kremlin's will but also for the street credibility that Putin garners through association with such figures. Zaldostanov is a popular and almost mythic figure in Russia today. His status derives, at once, from his background as an oral surgeon, thus the moniker, The Surgeon (*Khirurg*), and also from his legendary establishment of the largest motorcycle club in Russian history. While his status is not bolstered in any meaningful way by his education, that facet of his personal legacy does contribute to his fame. It offers the public a relatable back-story; Zaldostanov, like many members of his generation, including Sorokin and Pelevin, did not pursue a long-term career in his chosen field of study. Beyond these accomplishments, Zaldostanov's status is bolstered by his association with Putin and the Kremlin. In this sense, Putin and Zaldostanov enjoy a symbiotic relationship, in which Putin feeds on Zaldostanov's *chic*, and Zaldostanov gains political legitimacy.



Figure 1: Putin and Zaldostanov at the Sevastopol Bike Show Source: [http://img.wennermedia.com/480-width/rs-211963-R1246\\_FEA\\_NightWolves\\_B.jpg](http://img.wennermedia.com/480-width/rs-211963-R1246_FEA_NightWolves_B.jpg)

This image proves haunting, in its depiction of the relationship between Putin and Zaldostanov, as Putin is clad not in his traditional suit and tie but in a modish jacket, at the Sevastopol bike show. Meanwhile, Zaldostanov has donned his usual biker vest and hat, resembling the tunics of the *oprichniki*, both from Russian history and from Sorokin's novel. The dynamic between Putin and Zaldostanov stabilizes the legitimizing ideal of contemporary Russia, as nationalism fills the ideological vacuum left by the negation of Soviet utopian values. This is not to say that there was no nationalist impulse in Russia prior to the rise of Zaldostanov

or Putin, for that matter; it is not. Rather, it is to indicate that the pan-historical thug-topia of Sorokin's novel has historical precedent in Yeltsin-era Russia, when mafia types walked the streets with machine guns, as a form of informal security, when the government could not provide it. This fact sets the stage for Zaldostanov and the Night Wolves in the years to follow. Aleksandr Bocharov, in an online article, titled, "Aleksandr Zaldostanov: Biography, Personal Life, and Professional Activities," posed the question, "Isn't the main thing not who he was, but rather, who he has become and who he will be in the future?"<sup>34</sup> This question gets to the heart of the predicament surrounding Zaldostanov; namely, what is one to make of him? Is he simply a nationalist figurehead, who happens to share a friendship with Vladimir Putin? Or is there something more to his public persona? While, the answers to these questions fall outside the scope of inquiry of this chapter, I will attempt to answer the original question, posed by Aleksandr Bocharov; no, who Zaldostanov was remains essential to who he is today, especially because of the irony of who he has become, in relation to who he was.

The greatest irony of Sorokin's novel stems from the manner in which the ironic dystopia differs from classic dystopias; traditional dystopias are meant to wave a flag and, thus, serve as warnings to contemporary society of impending danger. Sorokin's ironic dystopia waves its flag and rings its bell, but Sorokin does not intend his warning to be heeded. In this sense, Sorokin's ironic dystopia is also quite fatalistic, because he understands that it will not be heard. This fact goes back to Sorokin's statement that, as a writer, he is pleased, but as a citizen, he is not, because it belies Sorokin's self-awareness, in the face of his prediction; namely, it points to that

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<sup>34</sup> "Aleksandr Zaldostanov: biografiâ, lichnaâ zhizn'. Professional'naâ deiatel'nost'." FB.ru. N.p., 01 June 2014. Web. 18 July 2017. "Glavnoe ne kem byl, a kem stal. I kem on eshchë budet?".

dichotomy within him; that, as a writer, he knew what would happen in regard to today's Russia, and that is what makes him such a good and relevant writer. However, he is not as good a citizen, because he does not believe in the positive purpose, for which he writes. This sentiment both reflects the inner dichotomy that is occurring within Sorokin and also reinforces his position that Russia's future is both intrinsically linked with the structures and inherently limited by the strictures of the past.

## Conclusion

In 1993, Vasilii Aksenov apprehensively mused that, “It is difficult to predict what Russian literary life will look like a quarter-century from now,” he expressed consciousness of a sense of crisis looming over Russian literary culture.<sup>1</sup> I have addressed the contemporary role of literary fiction in Russian culture and by examining the post-Soviet Russian literary fiction of Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin, which help to bridge the gap between Western and Russian understandings of the crisis that has been identified in post-Soviet literary culture. Although, this examination does not render a comprehensive picture of contemporary literary culture in Russia, in relation to its Soviet heritage and the myths that underlie it, it does offer some sort of an answer to Aksenov’s musing about the state of literary fiction a quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union and provide an understanding of how post-Soviet literary fiction appropriates myths to influence worldviews and inform post-communist culture.

The loosening of censorship toward the end of the Soviet Union allowed dissident writers the opportunity to voice alternatives to Socialist Realist narratives, without fear of reprisals. On the one hand, Soviet mass culture gained a plethora of new and interesting forms for the expression of Soviet realities. On the other hand, the loosening of censorship meant the sharp decline and inevitable demise of Socialist Realism, which comprised the canonical core of Soviet mass culture. This vacuum effected the way that writers were situated outside the mainstream; there is no longer a glaring center against which to write in the post-Soviet period. This change triggered the shift from Sots-Art to postmodernism. Despite the derivative quality of the Socialist Realist aesthetic, its decline manifested as a loss to Soviet culture. This was the death knell of

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<sup>1</sup>Aksenov, Vasilii and Mozur, Joseph. “Dystrophy of the ‘Thick’ and Bespredel of the ‘Thin’.” p. 19.

Soviet-utopian dreams, as those dreams were constructed upon narratives developed in mass culture.

In the years following the fall of the Soviet Union, the role of myth in literary fiction has evolved. Previously, myths were evoked in literary fiction through the myth-making apparatus of the Soviet Union. In short, myths were created through propaganda and the monopoly on cultural products that Socialist Realism held. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Soviet myths were appropriated and altered, thus creating new myths in place of the old, built on the remnants of Soviet culture. This framework allows for a more cohesive and systemic understanding of works of contemporary Russian fiction, because it contextualizes post-Soviet literary fiction in relation to the cultural trends that gave rise to it.

While the crisis of writing at the end of the Soviet Union had various effects, from the decline of thick journals, to the sudden inability of writers to earn a living wage, to the large-scale eschewing of the novel as a medium for cultural discourse, it did not result in the marginalization of literary fiction in Russian culture. In this sense, the literary crisis that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union is conceptually similar to the crisis that exists in Russia today. Both are the result of sweeping changes to Russian life, a subsequent scramble for writers to adapt to the new conditions, and an ensuing paradigm shift in literary aesthetics and production. Vasilii Aksenov could not imagine the diverse and pervasive media that would take up the mantle of the ‘thick journal’ in Russian literary culture of the early nineties and thus avert the crisis that he anticipated. He also could not foresee the innovative methods that writers would employ, in order to remain relevant in post-Soviet culture. A quarter century later, these methods are apparent, and literary fiction remains at the center of Russian cultural life. On the verge of a new cultural crisis, heightened by renewed censorship of cultural products and reduced freedom

of public expression, Russian literary fiction continues to evolve, as it reclaims the utopian dreams of the Soviet Union and cultivates new responses to the ethos of contemporary Russia. While it is impossible to predict the exact progression of Russian literary life over the course of the next quarter century, the broad adaptability of Russian writers, from the post-Soviet era to the present, indicates, that Russian literary culture likely will not exist in “a rotting underground” but continue to produce new and innovative modes of discourse that maintain the prominence of literary fiction in Russian culture.<sup>2</sup>

Viktor Pelevin is among the avant-garde of Russian writers, who recognize the paradigm shift, occurring in contemporary Russian culture, and are adapting to it. Among his peers, Pelevin most conspicuously continues to embrace the novel as the preferred medium for the generation of discourse, as Russian culture transitions out of the post-Soviet mode. No other contemporary Russian writer can boast the mainstream success, critical attention, and cultural relevance that Pelevin enjoys. Viktor Pelevin owes these successes at once to the paradigm shift that has occurred in the Russian literary culture of the early 1990s and to the adaptive techniques that he has employed to stay ahead of the curve.

This relevance persists precisely because of the multifarious adaptations to conditions in contemporary Russia, evinced by its writers. Many contemporary Russian writers do not subscribe to Russian postmodernist aesthetics, feature utopianism in their works, or embrace Soviet mythology, favoring other myths or none at all. The works of perennial critical successes such as Olga Slavnikova, hybrid writers such as Boris Akunin, and recent winners of Russian Booker Prizes such as Vladimir Sharov and Alexander Snegirev represent various other

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<sup>2</sup> Aksenov. p. 19.

directions that literary aesthetics are taking in Russia today. The aesthetics of Boris Akunin's works are of particular interest, as Akunin crosses genres in his texts and blends fiction with non-fiction.<sup>3</sup> He also writes under several pen names, such as Anatolii Brusnikin and Anna Borisova, among others, and produces a greater volume of text than perhaps any active Russian-language writer. While not indicative of common trends in Russian literary culture, these techniques allow Akunin to remain relevant in an era of Russian literary production that does not favor traditional forms of literary fiction for cultural expression. The fact that prominent writers, such as Akunin and Sharov, experience critical success in this environment, even as they experiment in the field of literary production, reflects recognition of a need for new discursive forms for the cultural era that Russia is currently entering. The fact that, like Pelevin, these writers have not abandoned the novel, as they develop new aesthetics for their works of literary fiction, demonstrates the continued resilience of the novel in the face of crisis.

Despite differences in approach to Russia's cultural transformation, among his peers, Viktor Pelevin serves as an exemplar of the successful, contemporary Russian writer, whose works are indicative of the predominant adaptive trends in post-Soviet literary production. Pelevin's works demonstrate that writing continues to be a mythogenic agent in Russian culture and that such mythopoesis has played a central role in the flourishing of literary fiction after the fall of the Soviet Union. Mythmaking and utopian thought continue to inform not only Pelevin's works but also those of a number of active Russian writers, who utilize their continued impact for the generation of new discursive forms and a new subjectivity. The fact that Viktor Pelevin is

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<sup>3</sup> See: History of the Russian State (Istorii Rossiiskogo gosudarstva). A series of nonfiction works on Russian history from the 9th century to the 1917 Revolution, complemented by a series of works of literary fiction, which are set in eras that correspond to each entry of documentary nonfiction.

not only so well but so widely and publicly received indicates the continued centrality of literary fiction to Russian culture, especially as other authors are often similarly reviewed and remain in the forefront of Russian culture. The fact that these authors have successfully adapted to modes of post-Soviet cultural production and generated meaning for that culture, utilizing both the remnants and methods of Soviet mass culture, demonstrates the trajectory of Russian literary culture. The aesthetic continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet fiction, evinced by such writers as Sorokin and Pelevin, remains distinct a quarter century after the fall of the Soviet Union. This continuity does not appear to be diminishing, even as the post-Soviet gives way to a new wave of uniquely Russian literary fiction, with little connection to Soviet life and culture, but with a clear relationship to literature of the 1990s and 2000s. As Pelevin's works and their subsequent criticism evince, Russian literary fiction is entering a new era, beyond the direct influence of Soviet aesthetic forms, social realities, and cultural myths. In whatever manner the post-post-Soviet might be described in upcoming years, its genealogy remains intact, as literary fiction is giving new purpose to utopian dreams of the Soviet Union and re-embraces the mythic traditions of the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras.

Vladimir Sorokin has proven similarly prophetic as Pelevin in such offerings as *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006) and *Sakharnii Kreml'* (2008), which have served to foretell the current state of affairs in Russia. While, in recent years, Sorokin has expanded his writing beyond the novel, in preference of the short story and other cultural media, his works demonstrate the relevance of literary fiction in contemporary Russian culture.

It is not a coincidence that Sorokin's prose progressed from the more conceptualist and experimental aesthetic of Sots-Art to the more stable forms of postmodernism. In the early 1990s, Russian writers had a complete picture and a clear cultural memory of Soviet life. This

final perspective on Soviet culture and institutions, in the knowledge that it was final and inimitable created a literary environment, in which the objects of satire were, for the first time, fully formed, wholly defenseless, and universally recognized. There were no censors to suppress works of fiction, and satire of Soviet institutions had become a wholly cultural rather than political act, as the Soviet government was defunct. Sorokin's earliest works of postmodernism, such as *Roman*, seized upon this opportunity and scathingly satirized nearly every aspect of Soviet life.

Sorokin's absurdism and penchant for cultural introspection in his works, combined with the often violent and grotesque scenarios that he explores have set his works apart from other writers of the early post-Soviet period. The reception of Sorokin's works is often highly polarized. He is often praised for his stark and insightful introspections into Russian culture. However, like Pelevin, Sorokin's works have also been publicly burned and even submerged in toilets.<sup>4</sup> Many of those, who dislike Sorokin's texts, decry them as filth and pornography. Nevertheless, his works constitute both serious literature of the post-Soviet era and obligatory reading for serious literary critics and cultural connoisseurs.

Unlike Sorokin, Viktor Pelevin was relatively unknown, either in Russia or abroad, prior to the fall of the Soviet Union. The success of Pelevin's appropriation of the Chapaev myth can be gauged not only by critical review but by the renown and readership that the novel has brought its author. While critics either love or hate *Chapaev and the Void*, few thoroughly discount it as pulp fiction. More importantly, the novel set Pelevin on a wider authorial stage. It was his first fully-fledged novel and, as Sergei Polotovskii notes, "reading Russia really came to know and recognize

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<sup>4</sup> Taratuta, Ільїа. "Vladimir Sorokin obankrotil "Idushchikh vmeste"" Kommersant'. Gazeta Kommersant', 30 Mar. 2004. Web. 30 Nov. 2014.

the writer [Pelevin] only after ‘Chapaev’.”<sup>5</sup> In large part, this recognition can be attributed to the novel’s incorporation of Chapaev as a Soviet mass cultural object and as a post-Soviet popular cultural icon; the novel resonated with readers in a way that it could not have, without the appropriation of Chapaev and his cohort. This is not to say that the popularity of the novel unilaterally evinces the relevance of literary fiction to post-Soviet culture. Rather, it indicates that the myths of the Soviet era maintain consequence in the post-Soviet period. In the case of Russian postmodernism, writers utilize the continued impact of these Soviet mythologized forms as a mode of discourse.

Whether accepted as fundamentally true or condemned as propaganda, myth continues its functional role, in relation to post-Soviet, Russian culture. Chapaev at once serves as a representative example of the capacity of myth to shape the cultural consciousness of Soviet generations and continues to contribute to mass culture. The fact that, as appropriated by Pelevin, the image of Chapaev serves to satirize that very same mass culture, highlights the continued significance of Russian literary fiction as a mode of cultural formation and solidifies Soviet myth as a medium of cultural discourse in the post-Soviet era.

Vladimir Sorokin’s, *The Queue*, at once highlights the inadequacy of the structures and institutions of Soviet life, and demonstrates the formative capacity of Soviet myths on perceptions of reality. The text’s ability to do this without reliance on any competing narratives demonstrates the pervasiveness of simulacra in Soviet mass culture and paved the way for Russian postmodernism. The passing of the Soviet *byt* resulted in entirely new approaches to the

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<sup>5</sup> Polotovskii, Sergei. Pelevin i Pokolenie Pustoty. Mann, Ivanov, I Ferber: Moskva, 2012. p. 78 – «chitaiushchaia Rossiia po-nastoiashchemu uznala i priznala pisatelia tol’ko posle “Chapaeva.”.

economics of everyday life, cultural production and distribution, and self-identification. While, the sociocultural realities that gave rise to Sots-Art were short-lived, the aesthetic changes that they ushered into Russian literary culture proved irreversible. As official Soviet myths began to erode from mass culture, writers responded with the production of new discursive forms. These responses manifest especially in post-Soviet approaches to narrative and in visions of the future.

In the context of literary fiction, visions of entropic utopia are necessarily predicated upon monological ideals: benefit, nationalism, equality, efficiency, socialism, etc. Dystopian fiction rejects the organization of society around such standards, as it undermines their foundational narratives. In their place, dystopian fiction focuses on mankind's shortcomings and, thus, affirms the pursuit of human moral, intellectual, and cultural advancement, as dystopian fiction serves to comment on the ills of its contemporary society.

*Pelevin's S.N.U.F.F.* is neither traditionally utopian nor dystopian; it comprises a hybrid work, which blends positive and negative utopian imagination with the cynicism, hyper-reality, mythopoetics, and satire of postmodernism. Accordingly, it offers some sort of answer as to the fate of utopianism in contemporary literary fiction; it indicates that Russian utopian fiction is making a comeback. This is not to say that Russian postmodernist writers are somehow returning to the forms of Soviet or pre-Soviet literary fiction, for the production of their works; they are not. Rather, they are making use of the utopian aspirations of the Soviet Union for the production of new, idiomatic discourse in the genre of utopia. This process is analogous to that, by which the *Bolsheviks* selected remnants of Imperial culture for appropriation into official Soviet culture. One notable example of such appropriation is the Chapaev myth. After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was no longer a Union of Soviet Writers. Therefore, all official designations of what was acceptable for publication vanished overnight. As a result, writers were at once free to

publish what they wanted but they were bound to existing source materials for inspiration. Thus, the most successful writers of post-Soviet literary fiction began to appropriate the dreams and mythologies of Soviet life, for the production of new discourse. This discourse is idiomatic, in the sense that it flows naturally from the everyday context of its production. Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* presents an excellent example of such discourse, as it at once incorporates the utopian dreams of Soviet life and presents its utopian vision in the postmodernist vernacular.

In post-Soviet literary production, works of utopia do not seriously posit ideal-type societies. Rather, they serve to comment on the role of contemporary Russia in the generation of variously imagined futurescapes. For example, *S.N.U.F.F.* does not seriously posit either Big Byz or Urkaina as ideal futures for Russia. Rather, the novel serves to satirize aspects of contemporary Russian society. At the same time, *S.N.U.F.F.* evinces a resurgence of utopianism in contemporary Russian literary fiction. Much as Russian writers appropriated Soviet myths for the generation of new discourse in the 1990s, this work demonstrates that the utopian aspirations of the Soviet Union are being leveraged to bolster the polemical mode in contemporary satire. Visions of the future, largely disconnected from monological ideals and subjective cultural narratives, are replacing the concretely placed Soviet forms and speculative-revolutionary forms of pre-Soviet utopian imagination. The manner in which *S.N.U.F.F.* orients itself in relation to the Soviet past indicates that this resurgence is more than experimentation in a genre with a long cultural history in Russia; it is also a redirection of Soviet-utopian dreams for a post-utopian society. *S.N.U.F.F.* variously demonstrates the inapplicability of the prefix 'post-' for the adequate representation of aspects of contemporary Russian life; the Soviet Union may have been a utopian space, but the resonance of its dreams carries even into the post-Soviet era. To whatever degree post-Soviet Russia is also post-utopian, that classification does not preclude

utopian imagination of the future. Instead, it has removed the limitation of ideal futurescapes to the Soviet space. In this sense, post-Soviet Russia can also be said to be pre-post-utopian, as the utopian dreams of the Soviet Union were never realized. Thus, writers, who invoke these possibilities in contemporary literary fiction are recreating the Russian genre of utopia.

*S.N.U.F.F.* demonstrates this recreation, as the text exemplifies a confluence of traditional utopian dreaming and the prophetic power of Pelevin's brand of Russian postmodernism.

Despite its largely negative depiction of Russia's future and complete elision of Soviet history, *Day of the Oprichnik* reflects Soviet utopian dreams, as Sorokin crafts within the text a model for post-Soviet dystopian literary fiction. Together, these facts mean that *Day of the Oprichnik* comprises a new model of post-Soviet dystopian fiction; the ironic dystopia, wholly postmodern, in relation to the literary cultures that gave rise to it and, thus, possessed of the characteristic cynicism and hyper-reality of Russian postmodernism. For this reason, the text bridges previous models of dystopian fiction and that of Russian postmodern literary fiction. Sorokin appropriates the utopian dreams that were lost with the fall of the Soviet Union, for the production of a new model of dystopian fiction; one that has proven to be both prophetic, in relation to today's Russia, and also based on utopian cultural myths.

The greatest irony of Sorokin's novel stems from the manner in which the ironic dystopia differs from classic dystopias; traditional dystopias are meant to wave a flag and, thus, serve as warnings to contemporary society of impending danger. Sorokin's ironic dystopia waves its flag, but Sorokin does not intend his warning to be heeded. In this sense, Sorokin's ironic dystopia is also quite fatalistic, because he understands that it will not be heard. This fact goes back to Sorokin's statement that, as a writer, he is pleased, but as a citizen, he is not, because it belies Sorokin's self-awareness, in the face of his prediction; namely, it points to that dichotomy within

him; that, as a writer, he knew what would happen in regard to today's Russia, and that is what makes him such a good and relevant writer. However, he is not as good a citizen, because he does not believe in the positive purpose, for which he writes. This sentiment both reflects the inner dichotomy that is occurring within Sorokin and also reinforces his position; that Russia's future is both intrinsically linked with the structures and inherently limited by the strictures of the past. Thus, comes the ultimate irony of Sorokin's novel, in light of the fact that Sorokin cannot unite the two portions of his inner self; namely that *Day of the Oprichnik* is written in the form of a warning. However, it comes without any real possibility of response to that warning.

Taken together, these novels demonstrate the centrality of literary fiction in Russian culture. The sense of crisis that has been identified in Russian literary culture remains rooted in the paradigmatic shift that occurred in Russian literature, during the early 1990s and the one, which is occurring in today's Russian literary culture. Accordingly, much of the experimentation that has taken place within the genres of postmodernist literary fiction of the 90s and those of utopia and dystopia of contemporary Russia are part and parcel to that paradigmatic shift. This fact means that Sorokin and Pelevin's works have, in large part, contributed to that shift and, therefore to the continued centrality of literary fiction in the post-Soviet era.

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