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NCSEER NOTE

This is the third paper in a series based upon the author's research project on Russian philosophical and humanistic thought since 1950. The first was titled New Sects: The Varieties of Religious-Philosophical Consciousness in Russia 1970's - 1980's, distributed by the Council on April 5, 1993. The second was titled The Significance of Russian Philosophy, distributed on July 14, 1993.

In this paper, the author's discussion of a Russian cultural proclivity to accept and present simulation for reality may be of particular interest to negotiators (pp. 2 - 11).
THE ORIGINS AND THE MEANING OF RUSSIAN POSTMODERNISM

Mikhail Epstein

SUMMARY

The phenomenon of postmodernism seems to be purely Western, but in the final analysis it discloses its lasting affinity with some principal aspects of the Russian cultural tradition.

Postmodernism, judging at least by its self-proclamations, has become in the last two or three years the most widespread and active movement in contemporary Russian literature. The Literary Institute in Moscow recently arranged a large-scale conference, devoted exclusively to postmodernism, and Russia’s most advanced critics and writers now swear by this sacred concept.

Only one other instance of such unanimous public enthusiasm inspired by a literary concept leaps readily to mind; this, certainly, is "socialist realism," which was officially proclaimed and established in 1934 to be the single, all-comprehensive method of Soviet literature. This parallel is not arbitrary: what is called postmodernism in contemporary Russia is not only a reaction to its Western counterpart but it also represents a new stage in the development of the same artistic mentality that generated socialist realism. Moreover, both of these movements, socialist realism and postmodernism, turn out to be components of one ideological paradigm deeply rooted in the Russian cultural tradition.

My proposals should be approached not as strict theories, but as rather loose hypotheses which may somehow prove relevant in understanding the turbulent state of contemporary Russian culture.

Among the different definitions of postmodernism, I single out as the most important the production of reality as a series of plausible copies, or what the French philosopher

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1Revised by NCSEER Staff.
Beaudrillard calls "simulation." Models of reality replace reality itself which therefore becomes irrecoverable.

The production of reality seems rather new for Western civilization, but it was routinely accomplished in Russia throughout its history. Ideas always tended to substitute for reality, beginning perhaps from Prince Vladimir and Peter the Great. After the Bolshevik revolution, the simulative nature of reality became even more pronounced. All social and private life was subjugated to ideology, which became the only real force of historical development. Pure ideological simulations of reality were intended to demonstrate the superiority of "concepts" over simple facts.

Conceptualism, the contemporary Russian version of postmodernism, began as a literary movement and flourished in the Soviet Union in the 1970's and 80's. Conceptualism might be called a meta-ideological approach, since it attempts to reflect upon the ideological apriorisms of consciousness. The problematics of the conceptualist movement arose from the density of cliches and stereotypes which dominated Soviet society. Although stereotyping unconsciously pre-conditions thinking, conceptualists propose to undermine it by revealing it to consciousness. If the psychoanalytic project is curing hysteria by bringing repressed impulses to light, the conceptualist project is an "ideo-analysis" which cures the trauma of ideological obsessions by articulating them to consciousness. Like the medieval philosophical movement of the same name, Conceptualism attempts to undermine the realistic fallacy which identifies general or abstract ideas as existing objectively in reality. This was the hidden assumption of the Soviet system: it gave the status of absolute reality to its own ideological pronouncements, for instance, the historical validity of such concepts as communism or socialism. Practically every facet of Soviet life was dictated by ideological presuppositions about the nature of social reality, and conceptualism attempted to disclose the conditional nature of such concepts as constructions proceeding from the human mind or generated by linguistic structures.

As distinct from realistic literature of the Solzhenitsyn type, conceptualism does not attempt to denounce the lie of Soviet ideology (from false ideas to a genuine reality). As distinct from metaphysical poetry of the Brodsky type, it does not turn away from Soviet reality in search of higher and purer worlds (from false reality to genuine ideas). Conceptual
writing, as presented by Ilya Kabakov, Boris Groys, Dmitry Prigov, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Lev Rubinshtein, Vladimir Sorokhin, presents ideas as the only true substance of Soviet life. Paradoxically, false ideas comprise the essence of a genuine reality.

In this way, conceptualists proved to be the first Russian postmodernists, who stopped opposing reality and ideas: whether it be the opposition of true reality to misleading ideas, as in Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov and Grossman, or high ideas to low reality, as the metaphysical and mythological writers did. Conceptualists overcame both realistic traditions and romantic aspirations: they understood that in their country, there is no reality other than ideas and thus pastiche and parody became their main forms.

However, the range of postmodernist phenomena in the Soviet Union cannot be reduced to the conceptualism of 1970s - 80s. It can be traced to the epoch of the thirties through the fifties, even though the prevailing term for this period was "antimodernism," not "post-modernism." The furious struggle against "rotten bourgeois modernism" became the hallmark of Stalinist aesthetics. What was antimodernism in relation to the West was postmodernism in relation to the native, pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary modernist culture.

We can generalize at least to the following postmodernist features of socialist realism:

1. The creation of hyperreality which is neither truthful nor false but is comprised of ideas which become reality for millions of people.

2. The struggle against modernism as an "obsolete" mode of aesthetic individualism and linguistic purism.

3. The erasure of specific Marxist discourse which gradually becomes a pastiche of many ideologies and philosophies, including materialism and idealism.

4. The erasure of specific artistic style and ascension to a new "meta-discursive" level of socialist realism which combines classicistic, romantic, realist and futurist models.

5. The rejection of "subjectivist" and "naive" strategies of discourse and the transition to "quotation marks" as the new mode of hyper-authorship and hyper-personality.

6. The erasure of the opposition between elitist and mass culture.
7. The attempt to construct a post-historical space where all great discourses of the past, those of Homer and Shakespeare, of Pushkin and Tolstoi, find their ultimate resolution.

Certainly, socialist realism still lacks the playful dimension and ironic self-consciousness so typical of mature postmodernism. But socialist realism is only the first stage in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Socialist realism is postmodernism with a modernist face—which wears an expression of absolute seriousness. In other words, Russian postmodernism cannot be fully identified with socialist realism, but it also cannot be divorced from it.

Thus, postmodernism can be seen as a type of culture which developed in both the West and the Soviet Union, although by different methods. The development of Russian modernism was artificially stopped in the thirties, while in the West it developed smoothly up to the sixties. This accounts for the existence of a single postmodernism in the West, and for the two separate postmodernisms that arose in Soviet culture, first in the thirties and then in the seventies. Thus we are obliged to compare not only Russian postmodernism with its Western counterpart, but also to examine the two Russian postmodernisms: socialist realism and conceptualism. Perhaps, the split between them caused both to be so ideologically charged, though with opposing valences. The first postmodernism is explicitly heroic, the second explicitly ironic. The tendency to perceive socialist realism and conceptualism as mutually stimulating aspects of the same cultural paradigm probably will get further support in the course of future reinterpretations of Soviet history in terms of its integrity. Two Russian postmodernisms complement each other and present a more complicated and self-contradictory phenomenon than Western postmodernism which is concentrated in a single period of history.
THE ORIGINS AND THE MEANING
OF RUSSIAN POSTMODERNISM

Mikhail Epstein

The concept of postmodernism in non-Western cultures has been fiercely debated in recent times. A question arises as to whether there is any postmodernism beyond Western culture at all, and if so, is there one postmodernism which is common for the United States, France, Germany, Poland, Russia, Japan, and so on? Or are there as many different postmodernisms as national cultures?

The same discussion has evolved in Russia for the last two or three years. Even in late 1980's "postmodernism" was still a rather exotic term by which highbrow intellectuals could distinguish each other. However, it very quickly became a trite word endlessly repeated in nearly every critical article. Postmodernism, judging at least by its self-proclamations, became the most widespread and active movement in contemporary Russian literature. To cite a young, influential critic, "today postmodernist consciousness, continuing its successful and smiling expansion, remains probably the only aesthetically vital moment in literary development. Postmodernism today is not just a fashion, it is the condition of the atmosphere, one may like or dislike it, but now only postmodernism is topical... it is the most vital, the most aesthetically relevant constituent of contemporary culture, and among its best samples one finds excellent literature." In addition, the Literary Institute in Moscow recently arranged a large-scale conference, devoted exclusively to postmodernism, and Russia's most advanced critics and writers now swear by this sacred concept.

Only one other instance of such unanimous public enthusiasm inspired by a literary concept leaps readily to mind; this, certainly, is "socialist realism," which was officially proclaimed and established in 1934 to be the single, all-comprehensive method of Soviet literature. I will try to show that this parallel is not arbitrary: what is called postmodernism

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1Viacheslav Kuritsyn. "Postmodernizm: novaja pervobytnaja kul'tura". Novyi mir, 1992, No. 2, pp. 227, 232. All works cited from Russian sources were translated by the author.
in contemporary Russia is not only a reaction to its Western counterpart but it also represents a new stage in the development of the same artistic mentality that generated socialist realism. Moreover, both of these movements, socialist realism and postmodernism, turn out to be components of one ideological paradigm deeply rooted in the Russian cultural tradition.

I trust that my proposals will be approached not as strict theories, but as rather loose hypotheses which may somehow prove relevant in understanding the turbulent state of contemporary Russian culture.

I have deliberately titled this article after the famous work of Nikolai Berdiaev, The Origins and the Meaning of Russian Communism (Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma, Paris, 1955). Communist teachings came to Russia from Western Europe and seemed at first completely alien to this backward, semi-Asiatic country; however Russia turned out to be the first nation to attempt to enact these teachings on a world-wide scale. Berdiaev has shown convincingly that communism was intimately linked to the entire spirit of Russian history long before Russia learned anything about Marxism.

The same paradox, in my view, relates to the problem of Russian postmodernism. A phenomenon which seems to be purely Western, in the final analysis exposes its lasting affinity with some principal aspects of the Russian national tradition.

Among the different definitions of postmodernism, I would single out as the most important the production of reality as a series of plausible copies, or what the French philosopher Beaudrillard calls "simulation." Other features of postmodernism, such as the waning of comprehensive theoretical metanarratives, or the abolishment of the oppositions between high and low, elitist and mass culture, seem derivative of this phenomenon of hyperreality. Models of reality replace reality itself which therefore becomes irrecoverable.

Indeed, the previous dominant trends in Western twentieth century culture such as avant-gardism and modernism were elitist in that they pitted themselves against the reality of mass society either because of an alienation from it (modernism) or because of an effort to transform it in a revolutionary way (avant-gardism). As for metanarratives such as Marxism and Freudianism, their main task was to unmask the illusions of consciousness (ideological
perversions) in order to disclose the genuine reality of material production or libidinal energy.

Yet, once the concept of reality ceases to operate, these metanarratives, which appeal to reality, and elitist arts, which oppose it, begin to wane.

The appeal to a reality principle underlies the phenomena of great Western science, philosophy, and technology and thus may be considered the cornerstone of all Western civilization. According to this principle, reality must be distinguished from all products of human imagination and there are practical means which permit the establishment of truth as a form of correspondence between cultural concepts and reality. Science, technology, and even the arts strive to break through different subjective illusions and mythological prejudices to the substance of reality by way of objective cognition, practical utilization, and realistic imitation, respectively. The last great metanarratives of Western civilization, those of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, are still permeated by an obsession with capturing reality and they relentlessly attempt to demystify all illusory products of culture and ideology.

During the twentieth century, however, an unexpected twist transformed these highly realistic and even materialistic theories into their own opposites. While Marxism, Freudianism, and Nietzscheanism all appeal to reality as such, they also produce their own highly mythologized and aestheticized realities, and more sophisticated tools of political and psychological manipulation. Reality itself disappears, yielding to the most refined and provocative theories of realities and, next, to the practical modes of the production of reality. Now in the late twentieth century, what is produced is objectivity itself, not merely separate objects.

In other words, what we now see as reality is nothing more than a system of secondary stimuli intended to produce a sense of reality, or what Baudrillard calls "simulation." In spite of any seeming resemblances, simulation is the opposite of what was understood as imitation during the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. Imitation was an attempt to represent reality as such without any subjective distortions. Simulation is an attempt to substitute for reality those images which appear even more real than reality itself.

The production of reality seems rather new for Western civilization, but it was routinely accomplished in Russia throughout its history. Ideas always tended to substitute for
reality, beginning perhaps from Prince Vladimir who in 988 adopted the idea of Christianity and implanted it in a vast country where there were almost no Christians.

Peter the Great ordered Russia to educate itself and vigorously introduced newspapers, universities, academies. But they appeared in artificial forms, incapable of concealing their deliberateness, the forced order of their origination. In essence, we are dealing with the simulative, or nominative, character of a civilization composed of plausible labels: this is a "newspaper," this -- an "academy," this -- a "constitution"; not having grown naturally from the national soil, these things were planted from above in the form of smoothly whittled twigs -- perhaps they would take root and germinate. Too much came from the idea, the scheme, the conception, to which reality was subjugated.

In his book Russia in 1839, Marquis de Coustine describes the simulative character of Russian civilization in which the plan, the preceding concept, is more real than the production brought forth by that plan. "Russians have only names for everything, but nothing in reality. Russia is a country of facades. Read the labels - they have 'society,' 'civilization,' 'literature,' 'art,' 'sciences' - but as a matter of fact, they don't even have doctors. If you randomly call a Russian doctor from your neighborhood, you can consider yourself a corpse in advance. /.../Russia is an Empire of catalogues: if to run through the titles, everything will seem beautiful. But... open the book - and you will discover that there is nothing in it.... How many cities and roads exist only as projects. Well, the entire nation, in essence, is nothing but a placard stuck over Europe...."²

One can ascribe this negative reaction to a foreigner's malevolence, but Aleksandr Herzen, for one, believed that Marquis de Coustine had written a fascinating and intelligent book about Russia. Moreover, a worshipper of Russian national roots, Ivan Aksakov, one of the most sincere and ardent Slavophiles of the 19th century, held a similar opinion. He recognized the same concepts of "intentionality" and "counterfeit" as basic to his native civilization. "Everything in our country exists 'as if', nothing seems to be serious, authentic; instead, everything has the appearance of something temporary, false, designed for show--

from petty to large-scale phenomena. 'As if' we have laws and even 15 volumes of the code of laws... whereas half of these institutions do not exist in reality and the laws are not respected."

Even the syntactical constructions of de Coustine and Aksakov coincide: "they have society - but as a matter of fact", "we have laws - whereas in reality." Both authors, from diametrically opposite standpoints, indicate the "halved" and chimerical character of Russian civilization. For de Coustine it is insufficiently European; for Aksakov, insufficiently Russian. But the result is the same: the ostentatious, fraudulent nature of the civilization begets external, superficial forms, devoid of both genuine European and intrinsic Russian contents, and remains a tsardom of names and outward appearances.

This nominative civilization, composed of names, discloses its nature in Russian postmodernist art, which shows us a label pulled off of emptiness. Conceptualism, the prevailing trend in contemporary Russian art, is a set of labels, a collections of facades lacking the three other sides.

The most grandiose simulacrum, or "concept" that expressed the simulative nature of Russian civilization was, of course, Petersburg itself, erected on a "Finnish swamp."

"Petersburg, the most abstract and intentional (or imaginary - umyshlennyi) city on the

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4Is it not this "nominativity," this pure concern with names, that gives rise to the sinister power of the nomenklatura, that is those people selected by no one and by no means meritig their stature, but who are named "secretary," "director," or "instructor" and have received power by virtue of these names.

globe," wrote Dostoevsky, who experienced the reality of the city as one composed entirely of fabrications, designs, ravings, and visions lifted up like a shadow above rotten soil, unfit for construction.

Shakiness was laid into the very foundation of the imperial capital, which subsequently became the cradle of three revolutions. The realization of its intentionality and 'ideality', simply by not having firm soil beneath itself, gave rise to one of the first, and most ingenious, literary simulacrum -- in Dostoevsky: "A hundred times, amidst this fog, I've been struck with a strange but importunate reverie: 'And what, if this fog were to scatter and depart for the above, wouldn't this entire rotten, slimy city take off with it, wouldn't it rise up with the fog and disappear like smoke, and the prior Finnish swamp remain, and, in the middle of it, for beauty, I think, the bronze horseman on his hotly breathing, exhausted horse?" (A Raw Youth, emphasis mine--M. E.).

This vision could have just come off of the canvas of a conceptual artist, a postmodernist master such as Eric Bulatov, for example. Contemporary Russian conceptualism emerged not from the imitation of Western postmodernism, but rather from Petersburg's rotten fog and Dostoevsky's "importunate reverie." For conceptualism, it is not enough to show that the "winter city," splendidly and proudly erected on the marsh, is a shadow and a phantom, concealing the authentic reality of the marsh itself: its densely congealed evaporation. Many contemporary Russian realists -- not "Socialist realists," but those of a severely critical vein, such as Solzhenitsyn -- limit themselves by precisely this task: to display the swamp upon which Russians all live, and prove that it inexorably draws all of them into its crevice, here bursting open natural disaster, there by social catastrophe. The conceptualists, on the other hand, do eccentric things: they not only show us the quagmire beneath the

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7Dostoevsky has several variations on the theme of this vision, which affected him deeply, in A Weak Heart(1848), in Petersburg Dreams in Verse and in Prose(1861), and in the sketches for The Diary of a Writer(1873).
evaporated city, but they also drive into it a sacred fragment of the city, the figure of the founder, upon whose forehead the monumental. State-creating thought is ever-frozen.

What justifies such conceptual liberty, such disrespectful humor? It is done: for beauty, I think! Such is the conceptual aesthetic: to demonstrate the complete reality of ideological signs in a world of spectral and annulled realities. There is an irresolvable paradox in the fact that a monument to the founder dwells in a swamp, which preceded the city and will survive it. Is this not the phenomenon and archetype of a Soviet civilization which has celebrated itself in the most grandiose projects and utopias in mankind's history? These plans and ideas which had emerged from the heads of their creators, however, returned directly into these heads, by then already cast in iron, bronze, or plaster, hardened into a heavy "thought on the forehead." And reality rushed past them, frenzied, like the Neva, insane, like Evgenii, the hero of Pushkin's, The Bronze Horseman. The raving of rationality, the orgy of continuous organizational fever, a little organ (organchik) in the head of the city-builder (to remember Ugrum-Burcheev in Saltykov-Shchedrin's History of a Town) — such is the self-perpetuating mechanism of conceptual creation.

It is not surprising then, that the specter wandering around Europe, as Marx and Engels characterized communism in the first lines of The Communist Manifesto, came to life and acquired a reality in Russia. This country proved to be especially susceptible to mistaking phantasms for real creatures.

After the Bolshevik revolution, the simulative nature of reality became even more pronounced. All social and private life was subjugated to ideology, which became the only real force of historical development. Those signs of a new reality of which the Soviets were so proud in the thirties and fifties, beginning with Stalin's massive hydroelectric plant on the Dnieper River and ending with Khrushchev's corn planting and Brezhnev's numerous autobiographies, were actually pure ideological simulations of reality. This artificial reality was intended to demonstrate the superiority of ideas over simple facts.

Communist subbotniks in the Soviet Union were examples of hyperevents which simulated "the feast of labor" in order to stimulate real labor. No labor was recognized in
the Soviet Union except for this artificial communist enthusiasm, which supposedly justified
Lenin's ideas about "free labor." (In this Soviet idiom both meanings are relevant: "free"
from exploitation and also "free" in terms of not being paid.) Simulation is not a lie because
the latter presupposes the existence of some external reality that may be distorted or verified.
In the case of Soviet society, reality was made to coincide with those ideas by which it was
described; it thus effectively became nothing other than the creation of these ideas. Even
Solzhenitsyn did not uncover any radically new realities because everybody in the Soviet
Union was perfectly aware of the existence of "the people's enemies" and "socially alien
elements" who were relegated to labor camps. Nobody doubted that life there was a far cry
from a day at the beach. Ideology did not lie, but simply recreated the world in its own
image and likeness. Therefore, the ideological image of this world could not be anything but
relevant and truthful. Ideology did not lie, it was the real world itself that tended to
disappear and to dissolve in ideological signs.

In comparison with a name which "ideally" signifies a certain quality of an object, the
object itself turns out to be on the decline, warping, and conceptual art plays upon this
devastation of concepts. The presence of the idea of a sausage confronts the absence of real
meat therein. The presence of a plan for manufacturing confronts the absence of production
itself. Cheese or sausage in Russia, far from being material facts, turned into Platonic ideas.
Dmitri Prigov, a leader of contemporary Russian conceptualism, wrote in his poem about the
American president Reagan:

Reagan doesn't want to feed us
Well, OK, it’s really his mistake
It’s only over there that they believe
You’ve got to eat to live

But we don’t need his bread
We’ll live on our idea... ⁹

The idea of bread for a long time was more nourishing in Russia than bread itself. A mystical shortage of certain material elements disguised within an effective presentation of their ideal counterparts: this is Russian enigma manifesting itself at all levels, from the everyday-existential to the socio-governmental. Even if the presence of bread allows one to define the "idea" of a given store as a "confectionery," there still is no sugar in it. In the economic system there are producers and consumers, but the intermediary elements between them, which form a market, are absent. That "minus-system" within which Russians have lived emerged as if from the canvas of a conceptualist artist, where the names and labels demonstrate their own emptiness, lack of meaning. Roads lead to villages which have disappeared; villages are located where there are no roads; construction sites do not become buildings; for house-builders there is no place to live. A civilization of this type can be defined as a system with a meaningful absence of essential elements -- "a society of deficit." Specters are more real here than reality which itself becomes spectral.

In Baudrillard 's definition of this phenomenon of the hyperreal, "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable [written by Borges] today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself."\textsuperscript{10}

Anyone who looks at a map of the former Soviet Union today will agree that such a huge country had to arise initially on the map before it could exist in reality. No one knows what this country meant in reality or if it truly existed. It is only on a map that the Soviet Union seemed a finite and governable territory. Maxim Gorky angrily recalls that Trotsky suggested the division of the whole country into regular squares, with capitalism permitted in alternate blocks. But this cartographic imagination is appropriate to any simulacrum that expands its borders beyond any tangible limits. Its physical existence is obscure: it can be perceived as real only on the map.

Today we can address this phrase "the desert of the real itself" directly to what remains of the Soviet Union. This country is originally poor not in commodities, comfort, hard currency, but in reality itself. All its shortcomings and deficiencies are only symbols of this fading reality; and symbols themselves comprise the only genuine reality that survives.

Going as far into the past as Potemkin's villages, one cannot but point to their most contemporary, post-Soviet modification: the so-called "presentations" (prezentatsii). This word was assimilated by Russian from English in 1990-1991 to signify the ceremony of the official opening of some public institution. In spite of the fact that Russia grows poorer from day to day and falls to pieces, these festive presentations are now fashionable everywhere. Now a stock-exchange or joint venture, now a political party or new magazine are presented (prezentiruiutsia) to a select audience. For seventy years all of these institutions of Western civilization were banned from Russia, and now she greedily absorbs them into her social vacuum. But these external forms are limited by the very fact of their presentation, they do not proceed from an organic growth in the soil. The overwhelming majority of these businesses and associations collapse within several weeks or months, leaving no memory of themselves other than their dazzling presentation. None of the cheerful participants at these lavish events, accompanied by long speeches, caviar, brandy, oysters, would be able to certify that the reason for the presentation would survive even until tomorrow; but the majority are fully satisfied by their inclusion in today's presentation and by the anticipation of more in coming days. The entire life of society becomes empty self-presentation. It is not parties or enterprises that are created but rather concepts of parties and enterprises. Incidentally, the most real thing, economics, is simulated more than all others. The only sphere where this process of simulation might be beneficial is culture, since by its nature it is inclined to "present," to create images.

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11 Dummy villages erected, according to foreigners, by the order of Prince Potemkin along the route he was to take with Catherine II after the annexation of the Crimea, 1783. This expression is used allusively of something done for show, an ostentatious display designed to disguise an unsatisfactory state of affairs, a pretence that all is well, etc. See Russian-English Dictionary of Winged Words, Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1988, p. 162.
If Potemkin's villages in the end of the 18th century still can be considered a deliberate deception, no one will be able to identify "presentations" in the end of the 20th century in terms of truth or lie. They are typical simulacra, which do not claim to be veritable and thus cannot be reproached for deceiving. Such is the tendency from "imitation" to "simulation" as revealed through major periods of Russian history. Even the Soviet regime was careful to maintain some presuppositions of truth behind its evidently simulative ideological activities, but now that the communists are no longer in power nobody is monitoring and the simulative nature of the civilization is laid bare. Another difference is that under communism the category of plan prevailed, whereas the post-communist society celebrates presentation, which means that it is the present, not the future, that is simulated most of all. "Presentation" in the post-Soviet period means a paradoxical lack of the presence, the most genuine and tangible part of reality, which finally dissolves in the world of candid simulacra.

To sum up: reality as such has gradually disappeared throughout Russian history. The entire reality of pagan Rus’ disappeared when Prince Vladimir ordered the introduction of Christianity and briskly baptized the whole nation. Similarly, the entire reality of Moscow Rus’ vanished when Peter the Great ordered his citizens "to become civilized" and shave their beards. The reality of "tsarist" Russia dissolved when Lenin and Bolsheviks transformed it into a launching pad for a communist experiment. Finally, all Soviet reality collapsed within several years of Gorbachev’s rule, yielding to a new, still unknown system of ideas. Probably, the ideas of the capitalist market and free enterprise now have the best chance in Russia, though, once again, they remain as pure conceptions against the background of a hungry and devastated society. Personally I believe that in the long run Yeltsin (or somebody else) will manage to create a market simulacrum for Russia. Realities were born in Russia out of the ruling elite’s minds, but once produced they were imposed with such force and determination that these ideological constructions became hyperrealities.

It should be emphasized that conceptualism is tightly linked not only with the system of Soviet ideology, but also with the deep contradictions of the Russian religious identity as a
middle or intermediary point between the West and the East. Russia cleared a path in the middle of two great spiritual systems, one of which originates from empirical reality and explains all illusions as its handiwork, the other asserting that all reality is illusory, being interwoven within the many-colored veil of Maya,\textsuperscript{12} which should be cast off to reveal Absolute Nothingness. It was necessary to combine these two extremes, even if the result would be absurdity—the paradox of the Russian religious calling. In the West this calling is realized through the forms of cult and culture developed by Catholicism and Protestantism, in a positive feeling of the presence of God within the totality of earthly entities, such as society, state, family, production, art. It stands to reason that all subversive, oppositional movements, from Romanticism to Existentialism, were directed against this positivity, but they only underscore the fundamental fact of the positive religiosity of the West. The East, on the other hand, developed the religious intuition of Emptiness, having defined the meaning of human life as the rejection of any positivities and a drawing near to Nothingness, to its freedom and timelessness.\textsuperscript{13}

Russia still hasn't made a choice between these global systems or world-views, paradoxically combining both within "orthodoxy," with its alienation from worldly culture, and "communism," with its struggle against the "other world." Orthodoxy claimed to set aside all mundane activities and to aspire to the Heavenly Kingdom, but in practice it fused itself with Russian tsardom and became a synonym of political loyalty. On the other hand, materialism was affirmed as an ideal but destroyed in the utopian practice of "communist construction," which itself fell time and again into the idealism it so savagely negated in

\textsuperscript{12}A key term in the religious tradition of India, roughly denoting the world of sensuous phenomena, or cosmic illusion preventing one from attaining the perception of the Absolute.

\textsuperscript{13}Of course, this opposition of East and West rarely appears in a pure form, being supplemented by an internal opposition in the form of non-orthodox, "heretical" movements. But the tendency is of just this type. Albert Schweitzer concludes: "Both in Indian and European thought the affirmation and negation of the world and of life coexist side by side; however, in the Indian thought, the latter predominates, in European thought, the former." Vostok-Zapad (East-West. Investigations. Translations. Publications). Moscow: Nauka. 1988: 214.
theory. This closed system of self-negation is played out, self-consciously, in conceptualism, which discloses the mystery of Russia’s religious calling.

I will cite Ilya Kabakov, the leading artist and theoretician of contemporary Russian conceptualism, who has a vision of his native country as a huge reservoir of emptiness which swallows and dissolves all tangible constituents of reality. “Every person who lives here lives, whether consciously or not, on two planes: 1. on the plane of his relations with other people and nature, and 2. on the plane of his relations with the void. These two planes are in opposition, as I have already said. The first is the "constructive" side. The second consumes and destroys the first. On the level of daily life this split, this bifurcation, this fatal non-contiguity of the 1st and 2nd planes is experienced as a feeling of general destruction, uselessness, dislocation and hopelessness in everything; no matter what a person does, whether he is building or undertaking some other task, he senses in everything a feeling of impermanence, absurdity, and fragility. This life on two planes causes a particular neurosis and psychosis in every inhabitant of the void, without exception.”

Though Kabakov emphasizes the opposition between "constructive" and "destructive" impetuses in Russia, it is clear from his own description that they are basically one. Any object is deconstructed in the very process of its construction. In Russia, "nothingness" comes to light not in its primordial and pure "Eastern" emptiness, but as the self-erasure of a positive form which is borrowed frequently from the West. The futility of positivity itself, which should nonetheless remain a positivity so as to demonstrate its futility again and again, is the core of the Russian religious experience. Visibility conceals the absence of contents and displays its own illusiveness. Civilization is neither maintained nor annihilated, but abides as evidence of what civilization may be when there is none—a large-scale, very plausible and impressive simulacrum of civilization.

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15I don’t impart to these terms “simulacrum” and “simulation” any evaluative meaning. “Simulacrum” is neither better nor worse than what is being simulated. Its nature is different, that’s all.
The Potemkin villages appear in Russia not simply as a political trick, but as the metaphysical exposure of the fraudulence of any positive activity. It is an outward appearance of a type which does not conceal its deceptiveness, but also does not destroy it in a purposeful way, unlike Maya, which should be destroyed. Rather it is anxious to secure its preservation as an appearance, but in no way prepares to ground or fill it in. The stratum between "is" and "is not" is that edge along which the "enchanted pilgrimage" of the Russian spirit slides.

The intermediary location of this religious experience between East and West is of this type: semi-spectral constructions of the positive world, standing eternally in scaffolding through which the wind freely strolls. These semi-structions indicate by their entire appearance that they will never be finished, that they were begun not so as to come to completion, but to dwell in this blessed interval between "yes" and "no," existence and non-existence, in the reign of the "stopped moment." It is neither the emptiness of an already devastated place, such as a desert or a wasteland, nor the completeness of creative endeavors in a tower or spire, but precisely an eternal would-be and not-yet construction, a "building long in-progress" (dolgoostroi). The walls and ceilings are every bit as significant and cherished as the deficiencies and voids seen between them. This is not only a typical "half-ruined" Russian landscape but the duality of her people's character. "It is necessary to begin, but it is impossible to finish": such is the intermediate stance of the free Russian spirit, which is as alien to the Eastern contemplative practice of world-negation as it is to the energetic Western ethos of world-organization.

Of course, it is risky to put the disposition of a whole people into the narrow framework of a "national identity." Nevertheless, Russia demonstrates a stable inclination to generate positive, tangible forms in order to feed the continuous process of their annihilation. This same process, however, may be defined in a different way: as a need to secure materially the very traces of this annihilation so that emptiness should not simply hang in the air as nothingness, but rather should appear as the significant absence of certain elements indispensable to a civilization.

Indeed, even our cities and buildings, those that manage to arise from the heaps of garbage, from the muddy grave prepared for them in advance, appear to be dilapidated and
decrepit. Brand-new structures can scarcely survive: in a matter of days, they will be used up, broken, plastered with leaflets, and splashed with slop, so that they willy-nilly return to being under construction.

Ilya Kabakov distinguishes Russian conceptualism from its Western counterpart by pointing to emptiness as the ultimate signified of all signifiers. In the West, conceptualism substitutes "one thing for another"-- a real object for its verbal description. But in Russia the object that is supposed to be replaced is absent. "In contrast with the West, the principle of 'one thing instead of another' does not exist and is not in force, most of all because in this binomial the definitive, clear second element, this "another" does not exist. It is as if in our country it has been taken out of the equation, it is simply not there. /.../ What we get is a striking paradox, nonsense: things, ideas, facts inevitably with great exertion enter into direct contact with the unclear, the undefined, in essence with emptiness. This contiguity, closeness, touchingness, contact with nothing, emptiness makes up, we feel, the basic peculiarity of 'Russian conceptualism'. /.../ ...[I]t is like something that hangs in the air, a self-reliant thing, like a fantastic construction, connected to nothing, with its roots in nothing. /.../ So, then, we can say that our own local thinking, from the very beginning in fact, could have been called 'conceptualism'." 16

Almost all investigators of postmodernism cite America as a wonderland in which fantasies become more real than reality itself. In this sense, however, America is not alone. Russia, as distinct from Europe, also developed as a realized dream. It is curious that when Nikita Khrushchev came to the United States in 1959, one of the first things he wanted to see was Disneyland. My guess is that he wanted to learn whether Americans had succeeded in creating as perfect a simulation of reality as the Soviet model, in which Khrushchev himself and all his predecessors, both czars and general secretaries, were such skilled masters.

There are different modes for the production of reality. One is a Soviet-style ideocracy that flourished precisely on the basis of Marxism, which claimed to denounce all ideologies as mystification. Another is an American-style psychosynthesis which includes the comprehensive system of mass media and advertising that flourished precisely on the basis of pragmatism and psychoanalysis, both of which claimed to denounce all illusions of consciousness.

In this way, Soviet phenomena may be estimated as no less postmodern than American ones. It is true that the postmodernist self-awareness of Soviet reality emerged later than parallel philosophical developments in the West. Nevertheless, already in the mid-seventies, so-called conceptual art and literature became more and more popular in the Soviet Union, suggesting a comprehensive reconsideration of the entire phenomenon of Soviet civilization. As distinct from realistic literature of the Solzhenitsyn type, conceptualism does not attempt to denounce the lie of Soviet ideology (from false ideas to a genuine reality). As distinct from metaphysical poetry of the Brodsky type, it does not turn away from Soviet reality in search of higher and purer worlds (from false reality to genuine ideas). Conceptual painting and writing, as presented by Ilya Kabakov, Erick Bulatov, Dmitry Prigov, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Lev Rubinshtein, Vladimir Sorokin, convey ideas as the only true substance of the Soviet lifestyle. Paradoxically, false ideas comprise the essence of genuine reality.

What is Soviet conceptual art and why is it so named? First of all, one philosophical parallel, although remote chronologically, may be illuminating. As a school of medieval philosophy, contrary to realism, conceptualism (a moderate version of nominalism) assumed that concepts are self-sufficient entities which must be distinguished from external reality. Throughout the new Middle Ages of the 20th century, conceptualism took a similar critical stance, denouncing the basic realistic illusions of Soviet scholasticism, its identification of reality with ideas. From a conceptual point of view, concepts have their own realm of existence which differs substantially from the reality postulated by realist philosophy, or, in the Soviet case, by materialist ideology.

Now let me move directly to conceptualism in Russian literature and art. Traditionally, every work of art may be simplified to some general ethical or political concept. For example, Anna Karenina might be reduced to a moral such as: "She would never be
unfaithful to her husband: the unfortunate woman got exactly what she deserved." Of course, everyone is indignant at such simplifications of great works of literature, but in the Soviet era literature increasingly became nothing more than the illustration of such simple ideas. Hence one of Prigov's "concepts" presents the following psychological scheme which may be common for Anna Karenina and, let's say, for Fedor Gladkov's classical novel of socialist realism, Cement (1925) as well as a great number of other narratives.

And married a general. He, returning from his foreign travels, meets her, now mature and wise, and his cold heart grows warm, but her heart is now like a piece of marble. He races around and around, throws himself into an ice-filled bathtub, but too late! too late! his heart is all surrounded by hellfire, all! and it burns the ice and his own flesh to ashes! if only he had the power to ignite her cold heart! DEATH! DEATH! All that remains to him is DEATH!17

The narrative is reduced to the most simplified scheme and becomes the concept of narrative, the demonstration of an ideological code or a dictionary of literary motifs. Conceptualists readily elaborated on general themes such as "the communist conquers his inner hesitations and boldly leads his comrades to increased labor productivity." Because no self-respecting Soviet writer would limit himself or herself to such a truism, he or she would try his best to describe this communist and his comrades as real people, with many plausible details, including their foibles and personal weaknesses. Nevertheless, this character essentially remains only a vehicle for some preliminary idea or ideological tenet. Conceptualists grasped and unmasked the artificial nature of not only Soviet literature, but also of Soviet reality. Their works cannot be reduced to concepts because they are willfully deduced from them. The intention of an artistic work is advanced before the work and instead of it. Conceptualists do not try to provide plausible illustrations of some idea, but convey this idea in a deliberately schematic manner, using the most ordinary and simplistic language. They create excellent works of poor art which purposely and often masterfully imitate the typical Soviet range of ideas. Classical Russian literature, with its stress on ideological, moral, and psychological matters, also provides an inexhaustible source for conceptual games. This

artistic poverty is a distinguishing feature of conceptualism as a deliberate presentation of ideas denuded of a material referent.

In this way, conceptualists proved to be the first Russian postmodernists, who stopped opposing reality and ideas: whether it be the opposition of true reality to misleading ideas, as in Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov and Grossman, or high ideas to low reality, as the metaphysical and mythological writers did. Conceptualists overcame both realistic traditions and romantic aspirations: they understood that in their country, there is no reality other than ideas and thus pastiche and parody became their main artistic forms.

In their literary works, they often omitted all punctuation marks, but if they had observed grammatical rules, their favorite form of punctuation would have been quotation marks. They refrained from proclaiming anything on their own behalf, but pretended to repeat what had already been said: by Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Mayakovsky, or by the neighbors in their communal apartment. Postmodernism is the world of quotations, but it is also a typically Soviet world, where all statements are pronounced on behalf of the favorite leaders or the arch-enemies, never as a form of self-expression. People are supposed to think in impersonal, general ways as if articulating somebody else’s thoughts. Even in one’s own head, thoughts emerge as in quotations.

Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov writes: "The heroes of my poems have become the different linguistic layers (quotidian, state, high cultural, low cultural, religious and philosophical), representing within the limits of the poetic texts corresponding mentalities and ideologies which reveal in this space mutual ambitions and pretensions. /.../ In our times postmodernist consciousness is superseded by a strictly conceptual virtual distance of the author from the text (when inside the text there is no language for resolving the author’s

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18It is curious that Prigov managed to transform his own name into a literary concept. The usage of a patronymic in Russian is required in official situations or in addressing elder people, but Prigov always introduced himself to his young peers as "Aleksandrovich" and addressed them in the same "official" manner. What would sound natural in the mouth of an official or a polite academician, acquired an additional "parodic" intonation in relation to such an "underground" figure as Prigov was. Prigov’s self-representation as "Aleksandrovich" is an example of how the everyday communication can be conceptualized and transferred to the level of metalinguage.
personal pretensions, ambitions, or his personal ideology, but he, the author, detaches himself and is formed on the metatextual level. ... The result is some kind of quasi-lyrical poem written by me under a feminine name, when I am of course not concerned with mystification but only show the sign of the lyrical poem's position, which is mainly associated with feminine poetry."

Certainly, when Prigov composes verses on behalf of a woman, the femininity also becomes a concept. The most representative genre of this epoch is not the novel or poetry, but the metatextual discourse which describes the cultural codes—the encyclopedia or the textbook, in which an author remains anonymous in the midst of generally accepted opinions or modes of expression. The flow of time stops and the categories of space become much more important. The cessation of time is a common feature of both Soviet and postmodernist reality in so far as they become self-sufficient systems incorporating the exemplary, classical fragments of previous cultures and eras. Soviet culture was not thought to be a transitory phenomenon, but the treasury of all human achievement, where Shakespeare, Marx, Tolstoy, Gorky and Mayakovsky are all valuable participants at a feast of great humanistic ideas. The encyclopedia, or textbook, as a collection of quotations or of unquoted but highly authoritative and mandatory judgements, is the most lawful and comprehensive form of such "collaborative" thinking, and it flourished in Stalin's time.

The erasure of metanarratives is another important feature of postmodernism that is worthy of explanation. In the Soviet case, we're dealing with an indisputably Marxist metanarrative. There is a common, though fallacious, belief that only under and after perestroika, have Marxist teachings begun to dissolve into a variety of ideological positions. In truth, this dissolution began at the very moment when Marxism was brought to Russia and further progressed when it turned into Marxism-Leninism and Soviet Marxism.

19Dmitri Prigov. What more is there to say? In: Third Wave. The New Russian Poetry, p.102. A similar assumption we find in the youngest of this generation of conceptualists, Pavel Peppershtein (born 1966): "The problem of self-expression through poetry never particularly concerned me; I was more interested in exposing certain "poses" of culture and the methods of its self-reading." Ibid., p. 192.
Perhaps more than other metanarratives, Marxism relies on reality and materiality as the determinants of all ideological phenomena. When this teaching came to a culture in which reality had always been a function of a powerful State imagination, a strange combination emerged: materialism as a form and tool of ideology. Paradoxically, Marxism was a catalyst for this Russia's transformation into one great Disneyland, though one more terrifying than amusing. Before the Bolshevik revolution, material life was not wholly simulated and a place remained for genuine economic enterprise. But once Russian ideology assimilated materialism, all material life became a product of ideology.

Marxist dogma also underwent a paradoxical transformation. On the one hand, Marxism became the only theoretical viewpoint that was officially allowed by the Soviet regime. For this very reason, it ironically grew to include every possible form of discourse. Internationalists and patriots, liberals and conservatives, existentialists and structuralists, technocrats and ecologists all pretended to be genuine Marxists, pragmatically adapting the "proven teachings" to changing circumstances. In the West, Marxism preserved its identity as a metanarrative, giving its own specific interpretation of all historical phenomena because it was freely challenged by other metanarratives (such as Christianity and Freudianism). In the Soviet Union, however, Marxism became what postmodernists call pastiche, an eclectic mixture of every possible interpretation and outlook. As an all-encompassing doctrine, penetrating physics and theater, military affairs and children's play, Soviet Marxism was the ultimate achievement of postmodernism.

As for the rapprochement and integration of popular and elitist cultures, this movement also was stimulated by a Soviet cultural politics of general literacy and ideological persecutions. On the one hand, the masses were persistently and vigorously raised to perceive the value of their high classical heritage while the most base forms of mass entertainment were banned, such as pulp fiction, comics, cabaret strip teases, and so on. On the other hand, elitist trajectories in the arts and philosophy such as avant-gardism, modernism, surrealism and Freudianism were also strictly banned.

These attempts to homogenize Soviet society created a new culture of mediocrity, which was equally far from both the ups and the downs of a strongly stratified Western
rich culture. In the Soviet Union, this middling level had been established even earlier than in the West, and levelling provided ground for a future postmodern development.

5.

It is easy to anticipate a counter-argument: how can one refer to Soviet postmodernism without clearly defining Soviet modernism? Western postmodernism came after modernism, so where is the corresponding progression in Soviet culture?

It is obvious, however, that Russian culture of the pre-revolutionary period was predominantly modernist as indicated by such trends as symbolism and futurism. As expressions of a highly utopian vision, the Bolshevik movement and October revolution also can be seen as modernist phenomena. Also, the rigidly consistent style of modernist aesthetics was dominant in the twenties, as Mayakovsky’s and Pilnyak’s works demonstrate.

In this sense, socialist realism may be regarded as an essentially postmodernist trend destined to balance all opposites and to create a new space for the interaction of all possible stylistic devices including Romantic, Realist, and Classicist models. Andrei Siniavsky was one of the first theoreticians to be struck by this unbelievable and eclectic combination of varied modes of writing in "socialist realism," where, in his view, the first term of this expression contradicts the other. "It seems that the very term 'socialist realism' contains an insoluble contradiction. A socialist, i.e., a purposeful, a religious, art cannot be produced with the literary method of the nineteenth century called realism. And a really faithful representation of life cannot be achieved in a language based on teleological concepts." 20

"They [socialist realists] lie, they maneuver, and they try to combine the uncombinable: the positive hero (who logically tends toward the pattern, the allegory) and the psychological analysis of character; elevated style and declamation and prosaic descriptions of ordinary life; a high ideal with truthful representation of life. The result is a loathsome literary salad. /.../ This is neither classicism nor realism. It is a half-classicist half-art, which is none too

Socialist realism is not a specific artistic direction in a traditional or modernist sense; it can be adequately approached only as a postmodernist phenomenon, as an eclectic mixture of all previous classical styles, as an encyclopedia of literary cliches. We should trust social realism's own self-definition as a unity of a method attained through a diversity of styles. "...Socialist realism is regarded as a new type of artistic consciousness which is not limited by the framework of one or even of several modes of representation..." Socialist realism simulates more or less successfully all literary styles beginning from ancient epic songs and ending with Tolstoy's refined psychologism and the futuristic poetics of the placard and slogan.

The epoch of the thirties through fifties in the Soviet Union was clearly postmodernist, even though the prevailing term at the time was "antimodernism." The furious struggle against "rotten bourgeois modernism" became the hallmark of Stalinist aesthetics. What was antimodernism in relation to the West was postmodernism in relation to the native, pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary modernist culture.

We can generalize on at least the following postmodernist features of socialist realism:

1. The creation of hyperreality which is neither truthful nor false but is comprised of ideas which become reality for millions of people.

2. The struggle against modernism as an "obsolete" mode of aesthetic individualism and linguistic purism.

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21Ibid., p. 90-91. For Siniavsky himself, the self-contradiction of socialist realism was something to be resolved by moving in the direction of conscious and deliberate classicism. On the one hand, Siniavsky still believed at that time (the late 1950's) in the fruitfulness of a "pure" artistic direction and identified himself as a modernist and as a representative of phantasmagoric art. On the other hand, while insisting on the self-conscious development of Soviet classicism and proposing that Stalin's death would be surrounded with religious miracles and that his relics would cure men possessed by demons (p. 92), Siniavsky was the first critic to anticipate Soviet conceptualism, i.e., the second stage of postmodernism.

3. The erasure of specific Marxist discourse which gradually becomes a pastiche of many ideologies and philosophies, including materialism and idealism.

4. The erasure of specific artistic style and ascension to a new "meta-discursive" level of socialist realism which combines classicist, romantic, realist and futurist models.

5. The rejection of "subjectivist" and "naive" strategies of discourse and the transition to "quotation marks" as the new mode of hyper-authorship and hyper-personality.

6. The erasure of the opposition between elitist and mass culture.

7. The attempt to construct a post-historical space where all great discourses of the past, those of Homer and Shakespeare, of Pushkin and Tolstoi, find their ultimate resolution.

Certainly, socialist realism still lacks the playful dimension and ironic self-consciousness so typical of mature postmodernism. But socialist realism is only the first stage in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Socialist realism is postmodernism with a modernist face—which wears an expression of absolute seriousness. In other words, Russian postmodernism cannot be fully identified with socialist realism, but also cannot be divorced from it.

In the sixties and seventies, another wave of modernism came into Soviet literature: futurist, surrealist, abstractionist and expressionist trends were revived in literature, painting, and music. The twenties became the nostalgic model for the sixties as presented in the literature by Andrei Voznesensky and Vasily Aksyonov.

It is all the more significant that later, in the seventies and eighties, another wave of postmodernism arose to oppose this sixties "neo-modernist" generation. For such postmodernists as Ilya Kabakov, Boris Grois, or Dmitri Prigov there are no figures more adversarial than Malevich, Khlebnikov, and other modernists of the beginning of the century, not to mention the latter's successors in the sixties such as Andrei Voznesensky. Consequently, this explicitly postmodern generation feels a sort of nostalgia precisely for the typical Soviet lifestyle and the art of social realism which provides them with congenial ideological material for their conceptual works. Socialist realism is close to conceptualism in its antimodernist stance: both forms share highly conventional semiotic devices, sets of cliches and idioms that are devoid of any personal emphasis and intentional self-expression. That is why the famous postmodernist artists Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid (who emigrated to the
U.S. in mid-1970s) have called their method "sots-art": it is entirely oriented on socialist realism and reproduces its models in the exaggerated "mystic" and simultaneously ironic manner that was envisioned by Siniavsky in his essay on socialist realism. For example, Stalin in these sots-artist paintings is surrounded by Muses or monsters.

Those components of the postmodernist paradigm, which in the West were introduced simultaneously, took much longer to mature in Soviet culture. The erasure of the semantic difference between idea and reality, between the signifying and the signified, had been achieved by the first Soviet postmodernism (socialist realism); while the syntactic interplay of these signs was aesthetically adopted only by the second postmodernism (conceptualism). Although it would seem that these two processes must coincide, it took several decades for Soviet culture to pass from one stage to another.

The point is that Western culture has great respect for a reality that is beyond signs. But as soon as signs proved to be self-sufficient, they immediately acquired a playful dimension. The Russian cultural tradition is much more inclined to view signs as an independent reality deserving of the greatest esteem. Therefore it was extremely difficult to accept that these signs which substitute for reality might become objects of irony and aesthetic play.

Western postmodernism includes two aspects: what might be called the substance of postmodernism, and the interpretation of this substance in postmodernist terms. In the Soviet Union, these two aspects developed separately. The period from the thirties to the fifties witnessed the emergence of postmodernism as a specific substance, including the ideological and semiotic dissolution of reality, the merging of elitist and mass culture into mediocrity, and the elimination of modernist stylistic purity and refinement. Only in the late fifties, in the works of such poets as Kholin, Kropivnitsky, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Vilen Barsky, and then in the seventies, in the works of Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov, Dmitri Prigov, and Lev Rubinshtein, was the "substantial" postmodernism of Soviet culture interpreted in postmodernist terms. Signs of heroic labor, collectivism, the striving for a communist future, and so on, which previously were perceived seriously as signified reality, now were perceived to be valid or real only at the level of the sign, making them susceptible to all sorts of linguistic
games. Soviet postmodernism finally discovered the second aspect and bloomed into a full
cultural phenomenon comparable with its Western counterpart.

Certainly, such postmodernist phenomena as Borges's stories, Nabokov's and
Umberto Eco's novels or Derrida's models of deconstruction have had a considerable
influence on some contemporary schools of Soviet writing, including conceptualism or
metarealism. What is much more striking, however, is that the earlier Soviet post- or anti-
modernism also finds parallels on the contemporary American literary scene. For example,
Tom Wolfe's recent manifesto "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast"\textsuperscript{23} gained much attention
with its attacks on modernism and its call for a social novel which would combine fiction and
reporting. Wolfe unconsciously duplicates the very patterns that Stalin's ideologists used in
their relentless political tirades against Russian pre-revolutionary and Western bourgeois
modernism.

While he criticizes the modernist and minimalist schools of writing, Wolfe recognizes
the literary accomplishment of their members: "Many of these writers were brilliant. They
were virtuosos."\textsuperscript{24} Are these qualities not enough for a writer to accomplish his literary
destiny? Not at all, since Wolfe discloses the glaring disparity between the artists' talents
and the mistaken directions of their creative endeavors. "But what was the lonely island they
had moved to?" It is curious that the targets of Wolfe's manifesto and Soviet canonic
aesthetics coincide: he condemns "avant-garde positions beyond realism..., Absurdist novels,
Magical Realist novels," and so forth.\textsuperscript{25} It was in this very manner that Stalin's chief
ideologist, Andrei Zhdanov, justified his attack against two of the few remaining independent
writers in the Soviet Union, Akhmatova and Zoshchenko. "These works can only sow the
sadness, depression, pessimism, and attempts to escape the important issues of social life.

\textsuperscript{23}Tom Wolfe. Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast. A literary manifesto for the new social

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 50.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p. 49.
deviate from the wide path of social life and activity into a narrow world of personal experience… wretched private feelings and digging within their petty persons."26

One can easily amplify this severe accusation with words of Tom Wolfe addressed to contemporary neo-romanticists, or "neo-fabulists": "...The action, if any, took place at no specific location... The characters had no background. They came from nowhere. They didn't use realistic speech. Nothing they said, did, or possessed indicated any class or ethnic origin."27

Wolfe has probably never heard of Zhdanov's infamous 1946 report debasing Akhmatova and Zoshchenko, let alone read it. Nevertheless, Wolfe's main points and even his choice of metaphors are the same as Zhdanov's: they both compare writing to engineering, for example. Wolfe also proposes that writers form brigades to pool their talents for an investigation of the amazing social reality in the United States, as it was in the Soviet Union of 1930's.28

I do not go so far as to suggest that the aesthetic code of Stalinism directly influenced such a postmodernist writer as Tom Wolfe. Yet the terms of postmodernist debate apply equally well in such radically different conditions as the U.S.S.R. in the late forties and the U.S. in the late eighties. The fact that Soviet and Western contemporary cultures mirror each other's past requires a new theoretical framework for interpreting these overlapping dependencies. The striving for a postmodernist world view inevitably brings about an opposition with the abstractness and individualism of modernist writing; it also causes a turn towards common and stereotyped forms of language as imposed by the dominant social order.


27Tom Wolfe, op. cit., p. 49.

In a broader sense, postmodernism can be seen as a type of culture which developed in both the West and the Soviet Union, although by different methods. The Western version of postmodernism came chronologically later, though it was much more theoretically self-conscious. To isolate and identify a Western-style postmodernism in twentieth century Russian culture proved to be a difficult problem because the formation of specifically Russian postmodernism had been divided into two periods.

The development of Russian modernism was artificially stopped in the thirties, while in the West it developed smoothly up to the sixties. This accounts for the existence of a single postmodernism in the West, and for the two separate postmodernisms that arose in Soviet culture, first in the thirties and then in the seventies. Thus we are obliged to compare not only Russian postmodernism with its Western counterpart, but also to examine the two Russian postmodernisms: socialist realism and conceptualism. Perhaps, the split between them caused both to be so ideologically charged, though with opposing valences. The first postmodernism is explicitly heroic, the second explicitly ironic. Nevertheless, if we identify them as two aspects and two periods of one historical phenomenon, these opposite tenets easily neutralize each other, comprising an entirely "blank pastiche," to use Frederick Jameson’s definition of postmodernism. The tendency to perceive socialist realism and conceptualism as mutually stimulating aspects of the same cultural paradigm probably will get further support in the course of future reinterpretations of Soviet history in terms of its integrity. Two Russian postmodernisms complement each other and present a more complicated and self-contradictory phenomenon than Western postmodernism which is concentrated in a single period of history.

Thus in a broader perspective, postmodernism can be seen as a type of culture which was developed in both the West and the Soviet Union, although by different methods. The Western version of postmodernism came chronologically later, though it was much more theoretically self-conscious and politically self-determined. In the Soviet Union, this stage of self-awareness has been attained only in the last years of glasnost, but I would stress that glasnost simultaneously unleashed other "pre-postmodernist" tendencies which were experienced much earlier by the West. The revival of high modernist writing, the flourishing of pop entertainment, and the new role of metanarratives such as religious idealism and
Freudianism all return Soviet culture to those stages of development that it had previously bypassed. Paradoxically, Western postmodernism seems to be much more reminiscent of some Soviet issues and themes from the thirties and fifties than of the contemporary Soviet Union. For example, Tom Wolfe’s manifesto cited earlier. A striking interchange emerges between Wolfe and Zhdanov across the continents and decades. "To be an engineer of human souls means to stand with both feet on the soil of real life. And this, in its turn, means a break with romanticism of the old type, with that romanticism which represented non-existent life and non-existent characters, and led the reader far away from the contradictions and the pressures of life to the world of the impossible, to the utopian world."29 Similarly, starting in the late fifties, one of the most marked features of Western postmodernism was the elimination of the opposition between mass and elitist cultures in such movements as pop art, "camp," eclectic architecture, and so on.

While it seems clear that the Soviet state-run economy has already surrendered to Western capitalism, Soviet cultural "capitulation" remains much more debatable. I would rather defend the old theory of mutual (although not necessarily symmetrical) convergence than argue that the Soviet Union one-sidedly capitulated to Western influence.

In one of my articles I proposed that contemporary Soviet culture is becoming increasingly postmodernist in accordance with earlier Western development. Now I will venture so far as to argue that it is actually Western postmodernism that follows the path already detected by Russian culture, especially in the Soviet era. My point is that Soviet culture assimilates Western postmodernism no more than Western postmodernism unconsciously assimilated some essential features of Russian civilization.