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I dedicate *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses: A Companion* to my revered academic teacher Igor´ Pavlovich Smirnov, who first brought me into contact with Sorokin's—then still unpublished—works in the form of typewritten manuscripts. Without his inspiration and selfless support for my first independent academic steps I would never have evolved to the point of writing this book.

A Note on Transliteration, Translation, and Referencing

Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses: A Companion consistently uses the Library of Congress transliteration style for Russian and other languages with Cyrillic alphabets (Dostoevskii, not Dostoevsky; El´tsin, not Yeltsin); the only exception is spellings of names in quotes and book titles, which are given according to the original source. Where published translations from Russian or other languages are available, they are quoted, but accompanied with a reference to the original (for example, when quoting Sorokin's *The Queue* [*Ochered´*]: Eng. Sorokin 1988a; Russ. 1986b). Unless otherwise noted or implied in a reference to an English-language publication, all translations are my own.

Because of Sorokin's heightened sensitivity to diverse registers of language, quotes from his fictional texts, but also from his journalistic essays and his interviews, are provided in both English translation and the Russian original to help readers who want to base their own writing about Sorokin on this Companion. Sorokin scholarship from all accessible Slavic, Germanic, and Romance languages is quoted, except for crucial terms, in English translation only.

The references in brackets in the main text follow the name-year scheme, referring to the four-part bibliography at the end of the book, which starts with English publications of Sorokin's works, followed by the Russian originals, selected translations into other languages, and research and other literature. Where there is more than one publication by Sorokin or scholars per year, the entries are distinguished by adding letters to the years (for example, Sorokin 2004a, 2004b, and so on). The multilingual research bibliography, the most comprehensive in Sorokin scholarship so far, includes English translations in order to facilitate further research. Fostering further investigations is also the purpose for which the existing scholarship on Sorokin, which has

been drastically increasing since 2000, is amply referenced in this Companion's interpretations of example texts, allowing to situate them in the general tendencies that prevail in the study and canonization of Sorokin.

Chapters Three and Ten of this Companion include parts of an earlier article devoted to *The Norm* and *Day of the Oprichnik* (Uffelmann 2009). Chapter Nine contains a few paragraphs reworked from my paper on periodization of Sorokin's works (Uffelmann 2006), while chapter Twelve comprises ideas from an article on *Telluria* and Eurasianism (Uffelmann 2017). Chapter Eight uses fragments of a conference-volume contribution on *Blue Lard* (Uffelmann 2013b), while chapters Four and Eleven draw on German-language investigations of *Marina's Thirtieth Love* (Uffelmann 2003) and *The Blizzard* (Uffelmann 2012a).

DISCLAIMER

Vladimir Sorokin's works are (in)famous for plots containing violence, sex, and the consumption of disgusting materials. Although it would be a misunderstanding to take these scenes at face value—they should rather be interpreted as materializations of metaphors from Russian vulgar language (see chapter Three), laying bare the hidden violence in political or cultural practices (see chapter Five)—a researcher writing a *Companion to Sorokin* is left with no choice but to quote both Sorokin's reimaginations of political and cultural violence and indecency as well as the metaphors from Russian vulgar language that he materializes in his plots. There is, therefore, likely no way for the unprepared reader to avoid being momentarily taken aback by this linguistic register, but the interpreter refuses any responsibility for this side-effect of his analytical task.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Late Soviet Culture and Moscow's Artistic Underground

When the Soviet dictator Iosif Stalin died on March 5, 1953, tens of thousands of Soviet citizens cried in a fit of mass hysteria and lined up to see his coffin (cf. Sorokin 2008a, 258). This paradoxical reaction, however, subsequently gave way to a feeling of relief caused by the softening of terror and repression (Clark 2000, 210–1). Under Stalin's successors, the Stalinist totalitarian mobilization, which compelled every single citizen to eagerly follow ubiquitous ideological prescriptions (Firsov 2008, 46), was eased into authoritarian rule, which aimed mainly at the regime's self-preservation while conceding a considerable "privatization of Soviet society" (Shlapentokh 1989, 153). Whereas in the 1960s and 70s the ideology of Marxism-Leninism remained unquestionable, it sufficed if the citizens routinely performed the political rituals inherited from the Stalinist mobilized society (such as May parades) and reproduced standardized speech acts (like self-criticism at a work-brigade meeting) in public (Yurchak 2006, 25).

In the Thaw period (1953–1964) and the stagnation (1964–1982) that followed, those who—unlike a tiny group of political dissidents—did not publicly protest against the Soviet order but displayed a "civil inattention" to politics, could expect to be left alone by the state (Klepikova 2018, 42) in the private sphere that they carved out (cf. Boym 1994, 94). While public expression of "dissident thinking" [*inakomyslie*] remained punishable, non-public "deviant thinking" [*raznomyslie*] was now tolerated (Firsov 2008). This implied the concession of semi-private settings—kitchen talks, apartment exhibitions (see Glanc 2017, 239–40), self-organized excursions "out of the city," informal cafés—to which the population's relative freedom of expression was confined (Ritter 2008, 142–54). The colloquial word "get-together" [*tusovka*]

described the various social practices of seclusion of an "informal public" (Zdravomyslova, Voronkov 2002, 57) and a "semi-private" sphere partly cut off from ideological officialdom. One such secluded semi-private site was the studio of painter and installation artist Il´ia Kabakov (cf. Jackson 2010, 108, 178). The second youngest among the performance artists, poets, and prose writers who gathered there was Vladimir Georgievich Sorokin.

Vladimir Sorokin was born in Bykovo, a small town close to the Soviet capital city of Moscow, into a family of intelligentsia on August 7, 1955; his father, Georgii Sorokin, was a professor of metallurgy. The parents supported the musical, literary, and visual-art interests of their son Volodia, who was taking painting courses at the Pushkin Museum (see Orens 2007, 703). His various artistic interests, including theatrical imitation, for example of the Secretary General of the Communist Party, Leonid Brezhnev, helped him to cope with his stuttering (Sorokin, V.B. 2004). Literature especially served for him as a "shield" ["щит"] behind which he could hide. Tellingly, his first attempt at writing at the age of thirteen was also camouflaged as a translation from English and not presented as his own achievement (Sorokin, Genis, Vail´ 1992, 139).

Information about the future writer's early years until roughly 1985 (see 24smi 2017) is scarce because the early (Soviet-time) Sorokin made a sharp distinction between his semi-public appearance as a writer and his private life. His writings were utterly un-autobiographical, or, as later described by critics, of an "impersonal" type (Skoropanova 2002, 211). When biographers expressed interest in the beginnings of his artistic impulses, he appeared rather amused by these psycho-biographical interpretations (see Chitnis 2005, 123) as illustrated in his contribution to an Austrian-German academic volume on *Psychopoetics* [*Psychopoetik*] (Hansen-Löve 1992), in which Sorokin playfully reduces the complex factors leading up to his artistic activity to a little incident in the family's flat: as a child he fell from a heater, landing with his neck on the heater's dowel (Sorokin 1992b, 566). Biographers who take this and other elements of Sorokin's distanced psychoanalytical auto-fiction (see Sorokin, Shapoval 1998, 18; cf. Stelleman 2016, 520), such as stammering because of a castration threat (Sorokin 1992b, 568; Sorokin, Laird 1999, 156), for biographical truth (Weststeijn 1995, 39; Kustanovich 2004, 302–3; Kasper 2007, 472) underestimate Sorokin's interest in standardized narrative scripts at the expense of any "unique biography" (Alaniz 2013, 214–5; cf. Sasse 2003, 222–3).

More convincing are Sorokin's descriptions of his early confrontations with violence in Soviet society: in a 1995 interview with Serafima Roll, Sorokin recalled witnessing violence in Crimea during his childhood

(Eng. Sorokin, Roll 1998, 79–80; Russ. 1996, 124), which the biographer Konstantin Kustanovich (2004, 303) again readily linked with the fictional rape of a ten-year-old girl by her father in Sorokin's novel *Marina's Thirtieth Love* [*Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny*].

Having attended various schools in the Moscow region, Sorokin graduated from the Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas [then *Moskovskii institut neftianoi i gazovoi promyshlennosti imeni Gubkina*] as a mechanical engineer in 1977. During his studies he had a first inauspicious publication in the company magazine *For the Workers in the Petroleum Industry* [*Za kadry neftianikov*]. Sorokin also began designing amateur book illustrations. Both activities point to the fact that his decision to attend the Gubkin Institute was motivated rather by the intention to avoid serving in the Soviet Army than by a proper interest in engineering (24smi 2017). If we are to believe this to be his primary motivation, it is perhaps not so surprising that he decided to work in the broader context of literature after his graduation. He started out as an editor for the magazine *Shift* [*Smena*], from which he was fired for his non-membership in the Soviet youth organization *Komsomol.* Due to this moderate anti-Soviet attitude he found himself designing and illustrating books in the 1970s and 80s to make a living. For some time Sorokin continued with his own painting (with small exhibitions in Moscow in the late 1980s), but then gave that up in order to reembark on his literary journey (Sorokin, Shapoval 1998, 7) at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four (Sorokin, Khvors 2008; Sorokin, Tetzlaff 2009); he returned to painting only in November 2014 and showed that work when he participated in the 2015 Venice Biennale and held an exhibition in Berlin and Tallinn.

Sorokin appeared in Moscow's conceptualist circle in the mid-1970s (cf. Sorokin, Ahrest-Korotkova 2010) as a very cultured, good-looking, yet reluctant young man, accompanied by his pretty wife Irina, a teacher of music, whom he married in the year of his graduation in 1977. The charming family picture was complete when Irina gave birth to their twin daughters Anna and Mariia in 1980. Fellow conceptualists such as Iosif Bakshtein and Pavel Peppershtein later recalled the amazement caused by the fact that this reserved young man made his entrance in the circle with unprecedentedly brutal violations of the still officially binding Soviet aesthetic norms (Danilkin 2002).

After the First Congress of Soviet writers from 1934, officially published literature had to adhere to the imperatives of Socialist Realism, a newly forged doctrine which coordinated all the previous divergent aesthetics—from avant-garde to post-symbolism—and literary groups into one binding paradigm rigorously controlled by various Soviet state institutions for

censoring, editing, publishing, promoting, and teaching literature. Socialist Realism with its normative postulates—partiality, reflection, typicity, revolutionary romanticism, positive heroes, and folksiness (Günther 1984, 18–54), all together amounting to the imaginative production of a Socialist order and moral code as it *should* be (Eng. Siniavskii 1960, 76; Russ. Siniavskii 1967, 434; cf. Dobrenko 2011, 108–12)—turned into a ritual for dissimulating the actual deficits of Soviet society. Socialist-Realist novels performed the pedagogical phantasma of disciplining an insubordinate young individual into a self-sacrificing member of the collective under the guidance of an older mentor (see Clark 2000, 167–9). Confronting the positive young hero(es) with negative representatives of the old order, it created a dichotomy of pro- and anti-Soviet activities. In its rigid moralistic normativity, however, Socialist Realism only served to perpetuate an older tradition that posited Russian writers as a source of moral authority.

The enforced unification of Soviet literature reached its apex in the years before Stalin's death, the detrimental Zhdanov era (1948–1953; see Clark 2000, 191–4). The liberalization thereafter, culminating in Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 speech in which Stalin's successor reduced all the terrorizing features of Stalinism to Stalin's own "cult of personality" [*kul't lichnosti*], also issued a critique of what came to be known as the varnishing of reality [*lakirovka*] in Socialist Realism (cf. Günther 1984, 34–6). Khrushchev went as far as personally supporting the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's story about the hitherto tabooed Soviet work camps *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* [*Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*] in the November issue of the thick journal *Novyi mir* in 1962.

Having been himself socialized into the Stalinist bureaucracy with its traditionalist (realist and moralistic) aesthetics, however, Khrushchev reacted with anger to an exhibition of avant-garde paintings in the Manezh in the center of Moscow on December 1 of the same year. The public appearance of the avant-garde remained banned. After Khrushchev was toppled from his post of Secretary General in 1964, Socialist Realism was reinstalled as an aesthetic norm with the political goal of bridging the blatant gap between the revolutionary ideals of communism and the reality of state socialism. Brezhnev shared Khrushchev's lack of understanding for avant-garde art. In 1974 the devastation of the so-called Bulldozer exhibition caused fear among unofficial artists (cf. Jackson 2010, 54) and forced one of the organizers, Oskar Rabin, into emigration. In 1978 the editors of an uncensored almanac of avant-garde literature, *Metropol* [*Metropol'*], were prosecuted.

The hostile aesthetic climate of the late Soviet Union accelerated the retreat of non-conformist artists into the periphery, either on a permanent basis as with Rabin's Lianozovo group based in wooden barracks roughly 100 kilometers from the city center of Moscow, or on particular occasions, as in the case of the performance group *Collective Actions* [*Kollektivnye deistviia*] around Andrei Monastyrskii, who from 1976 on organized excursions "out of town" [*za gorod*] to conduct their performances.

The forced marginalization of unofficial art contributed to the group consciousness of the Moscow Conceptualists as well (Tupitsyn 1998, 50). For their unofficial art, there was no alternative to conspiracy and going underground. The semi-private spaces of retreat used by the Moscow Conceptual Group were not as marginal as those of the Lianozovo-group, however. In contrast to their predecessors, the conceptualists regularly met in the members' flats in downtown Moscow, which were usually very small, so people were seated very close to each other. This produced a cozy atmosphere, as fondly reflected upon by Kabakov, for example, in his *Kitchen Series* [*Kukhonnaia seriia*] (1982). With the relocation to studios at Festival´naia Street in 1975 the regular gatherings transformed into a form of constant living and working together. The artists appropriated the communal way of living that led Viktor Tupitsyn to the formulation of "'contractual' communality" (Tupitsyn 1998, 54).

The communal reality of the underground allowed its members to concentrate their intellectual and emotional energy within a narrow sphere. Comparable to literary cafés such as *Derzanie* or *Saigon* (Zdravomyslova 2003) that popped up in the 1960s and 70s, this circle functioned as one of the varieties of "internal emigration" that constituted late Soviet everyday life (Yurchak 2006, 132). It was not a dissident circle that aimed at reaching out to a broader public with anti-Soviet political ideas, but an a-political community of people interested in "private art" (see Degot' 1991, 17; Eşanu 2013, 58–60). The artistic underground was one of the milieus which "created a kind of 'deterritorialized' reality that did not fit the binary categories of either support or opposition to the state" (Yurchak 2006, 34). This third space beyond the markers of pro- and anti-Soviet was their way of "being inside and outside at the same time," as Alexei Yurchak pointed out in his seminal monograph from 2006 about the last Soviet generation (Yurchak 2006, 132).

The group that gathered in the Festival´naia studios and in private apartments on a regular basis consisted of painters such as Erik Bulatov (b. 1933), Viktor Pivovarov (b. 1937), and Il´ia Kabakov (b. 1933), performance

artists-cum-writers such as Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov (1940–2007) and Andrei Monastyrskii (b. 1949), theoreticians such as Boris Groys (b. 1947), and writers such as Lev Rubinshtein (b. 1947), Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955), and Pivovarov's son Pavel Peppershtein (b. 1966). Rather than distinguishing among themselves as belonging to this or that generation, which was uncommon in the Moscow Conceptualist circle (Sorokin, Shapoval 1998, 7–8), they differentiated a core group from the closer associations with affiliated members not concerned with conceptual art themselves, such as the philosopher Mikhail Ryklin (b. 1948; see Groys 1997, 413), about forty people in all (Sorokin, Shapoval 1998, 14). Yet, all were perceived as part of "one's own circle" [*svoi krug*]. The group displayed strong intellectual intimacy with their own internal mechanisms of self-canonization and a recognizable (pseudo-)terminology (Kabakov, in: Groys, Kabakov 1993, 26; cf. Barabanov 2011, 66–9) as collected in their "glossary" by Andrei Monastyrskii (1999, abridged English translation in Eşanu 2013, 295–327), which betrays an undeniable fun factor; for example, Monastyrskii lists Sorokin as co-author of the concept "Rotten Pinocchios" [*Gnilye Buratino*] (Monastyrskii 1999, 35).

When the members of the Moscow conceptualist circle were not communicating exclusively among themselves in closed and—in the case of literature—oral presentations in kitchens and studios (Glanc 2017, 242), limiting themselves to producing texts "for the drawer," they turned to unofficial means of publication, called self-publishing [*samizdat*]. Samizdat mostly relied on a typewriter, on which one could type a text, producing several copies at once with the help of carbon paper, or a mimeograph (Glanc 2017, 242–4). The idea was that no censor would ever come across something that was produced this way, giving rise to an alternative, uncensored [*nepodtsenzurnaia*] Soviet literature.

Hand-typed uncensored manuscripts were exactly the form in which fellow conceptualists would first read Sorokin's short stories. On rarer occasions his texts made it into samizdat journals abroad as was the case with the short stories "The Tobacco Pouch" ["Kiset"], "The Road Accident" ["Dorozhnoe proisshestvie"], and "The Ditch" ["Zemlianka"], published in Prague in *Mitin zhurnal* (Sorokin 1986b; 1986c; 1987a; 1987b). A year earlier six stories appeared in the so-called *tamizdat* (publication "there," that is, in the West), in the Paris-based "unofficial Russian art revue" *A–Ya* (Sorokin 1985a). The biggest achievement in terms of gaining recognition was the publication of Sorokin's first book, *The Queue* [*Ochered'*], released by the émigré publishing house Sintaksis in Paris in 1985 (Sorokin 1985b). For his *tamizdat*

publications Sorokin was questioned by the Soviet Intelligence Service, the KGB, but due to the organization's declining professionalism this experience of personal repression proved not too traumatic (Sorokin, Shapoval 1998, 8). Given the continuous threat of the KGB confiscating manuscripts and samizdat editions, underground writers would seek out a "fridge" [*kholodil´nik*], a person who would save their manuscripts while remaining either unsuspected of collaborating with underground artists, or otherwise out of the reach of the KGB. In the case of Sorokin the émigré scholar Igor´ P. Smirnov's flats in Munich fulfilled this function. I personally vividly recall my first contact with Sorokin's texts at the University of Konstanz in 1993 via photocopies of typewritten manuscripts of Sorokin's early works stemming from the "Smirnov fridge."

This illustrates the fact that the group of Moscow Conceptualists was surrounded by émigré scholars such as Igor´ Smirnov and Mikhail Epstein (Atlanta, GA), Western Slavists (Sabine Hänsgen, Georg Witte), and a few interested Western diplomats. These were also the target audience of *ëps* or Erofeev-Prigov-Sorokin, a trio which started in Viktor Erofeev's (b. 1947) private apartment in 1982 (Erofeev, Prigov, Sorokin 2002, 9) and continued with the three reading their texts to hand-picked listeners in other informal public locations. The troika stylized itself as the "first circle of the underground" ["первый круг подполья"] (Erofeev, Prigov, Sorokin 2002, 10), and was hence founded on a kind of initiation for interested outsiders. Their reading performances were subsequently extended and outsiders like American diplomats and KGB officers managed to mix with the audience. Given the way in which Erofeev, in his introduction to the anthology *ëps* (the acronym made from the initials of the three second names sounds vulgar to the Russian ear) of 2002 exhibits his pride in the fact that the group seemed to draw in female students (Erofeev, Prigov, Sorokin 2002, 20–2), the gradual opening-up of the group for an urban, intellectual, alternative public was clearly intentional.

Even if within the Moscow Conceptualist group a distinction on the basis of age or even generations was uncommon, the artistic practice and underlying understanding of conceptualism underwent a clear development. The group understood itself as treading in the footsteps of international artists linked to Western Concept Art like the Fluxus group (Kabakov, in: Groys, Kabakov 1993, 26) or Joseph Kossuth, whom Sorokin indirectly quoted in 1992: "in conceptualism not the object is relevant, but the relationship to the object. Conceptualism is a distanced relationship both toward the work of art, and to culture in general" ["в концептуализме актуальна не вещь, а отношение к этой вещи. Концептуализм—это дистанционное отношение

и к произведению, и к культуре в целом"] (Sorokin, Rasskazova 1992, 120). In what appears as the manifesto of "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism" ["Moskovskii romanticheskii kontseptualizm"], published bilingually in *A–Ya* in 1979, the group's theoretician, Boris Groys, also drew on American Concept Art (Groys 1979, 4), but strove for a distinction by adding the epithet "Romantic" which was skipped later (Groys 2010, 4–8; Smith 2012, 62). Against the backdrop of this half-exclusion and half-inclusion of the Russian variety into the international context (Hillings 2011, 264) Groys defines conceptualism as a meta-reflection on the conditions under and the way in which art is produced and received:

> […] it may be interpreted more broadly, by referring to any attempt to withdraw from considering art works as material objects intended for contemplation and aesthetic evaluation. Instead, it should incourage [sic] solicitation and formation of the conditions that determine the viewer's perception of the work of art, the process of its inception by the artist, its relation to factors in the environment, and its temporal status. (Eng. and Russ. Groys 1979, 3, trans. Keith Hammond)

Groys's first Russian example is Lev Rubinshtein's file cards. Lev Rubinshtein took the genre inspiration from his work as a librarian: over many years he wrote his series on file cards, reflecting the way bureaucratic texts are built and drawing attention to the external conditions of text production rather than to their content. A significant example is Rubinshtein's *The Next Program* [*Ocherednaia programma*] (1975):

Number one	Номер первый,
which speaks for itself;	говорящий сам за себя;
Number two	Номер второй,
which outlines the basic terms;	намечающий основные понятия;
Number three	Номер третий,
which continues outlining the basic terms;	продолжающий намечать основные понятия;
Number four	Номер четвертый,
which continues outlining the basic terms;	продолжающий намечать основные понятия;
Number five	Номер пятый,

where the outlining of the basic terms is continued;	где продолжают намечаться основные понятия;
Number six which finally starts using some of the basic terms;	Номер шестой, уже оперирующий некоторыми из основных понятий;
Number seven marked by the sudden recognition bias [...] (trans. Valentina Fëdorova, unpublished)	Номер седьмой, отмеченный внезапный[м] эффектом узнавания […] (Rubinshtein 1995, 7)

Devoid of any local Russian, let alone Soviet ideological context, Rubinshtein's series reflects on the way in which a text is construed. This kind of literature acquires literariness from its reflection on textuality.

Having come initially more from visual art than from literature, Sorokin saw himself as influenced by the painter Erik Bulatov (Glanc 1995, 9; Orens 2007, 702–3). In Bulatov we find a semiotic reflection on language as a means of constructing meaning. His painting "Seva's Blueness" ["Sevina sineva"] (reproduced in Tamruchi 1995, 41) from 1979 arranges the Cyrillic letters for "blueness" and the similar sounding possessive adjective "Seva's," in two opposed cones (one bottom-up in dark blue, one top-down in white) against the backdrop of a blue sky with white clouds. Like René Magritte's painted pipe which is declared not to be a pipe at all (1929), Bulatov's painting problematizes the interrelation between words and pictures representing something beyond themselves, in Bulatov's case the color blue and a clouded sky covered partially not only by clouds, but also by the letters in the foreground. Like with Rubinshtein's postcards, apart from the Cyrillic letters, nothing points to any Russian, let alone Soviet contexts, but to the sky seen from any point on the earth and the relationship of signifiers and signified in general.

In other works, where Bulatov deals with Soviet slogans, he questions the Soviet order without confronting it in a dissident, anti-Soviet way. This is less the case with the abstract, meta-semiotic conceptualism as illustrated above, and more evident in the second-variety approach, which explores less the conditions of art and reception in general, but rather particular modes of cultural production such as Socialist Realism. I propose to call the latter the "intertextual" and "sots-art" tendency in Moscow Conceptualism.

The history of the "intertextual" period of Moscow Conceptualism begins in the early 1970s with a kind of "social turn" that Kabakov locates in Bulatov's work of 1972 (Kabakov 1999, 79), thus ending his own early ("metaphysical," "abstract") strivings for "whiteness" and "emptiness" (cf. Kabakov 1999, 72; Eşanu 2013, 74–7). An example from the trend born out of the "social turn" is Erik Bulatov's *Unanimous* [*Edinoglasno*] (1987; reproduced in Kholmogorova 1994, 36), a canvas painting in the traditional style of Socialist Realism, depicting the members of the Supreme Soviet whose only role in the fictitious Soviet democracy was to applaud—unanimously—the decisions of the inner circle of power, the Central Committee. Although this political reference seems to have a polemical vector, Bulatov's work lacks any overt mockery, and the device of faithfully emulating the style of realist canvas painting and Soviet slogans becomes obvious. It is only the exaggerated combination of both genres which subverts the apparent affirmation of the dominating ideology and the compulsory style of its representation.

The same strange combination of affirmation and exaggerated obedience is evident in Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov's famous poem "When here stands watch Miliciaman" ["Kogda zdes´ na postu stoit Militsaner …"] (1978).

When here stands watch Miliciaman	Когда здесь на посту стоит Милицанер
He can see far and wide to Vnukovo	Ему до Внуково простор весь открывается
To West and East looks Miliciaman	На Запад и Восток глядит Милицанер
And emptiness opens beyond them	И пустота за ними открывается
The center where Miliciaman stands—	И центр, где стоит Милицанер —
The view of him opens from anywhere	Взгляд на него отвсюду открывается
From anywhere one can see Militiaman	Отвсюду виден Милиционер
From East one can see Militiaman	С Востока виден Милиционер
From South one can see Militiaman	И с Юга виден Милиционер
From sea one can see Militiaman	И с моря виден Милиционер
From sky one can see Militiaman	И с неба виден Милиционер
From underground…	И с-под земли...
Nor does he keep out of sight	Да он и не скрывается
(trans. Valentina Fëdorova, unpublished)	(Prigov 2003, 43)

This text addresses the totalitarian project of total control over the society, alluding to the heroic Soviet myth of the Cheka, the political police. Despite the rhetoric of repetition and the centering of the whole world around one policeman (in the Soviet context: a militiaman), this poem would be misunderstood if read as mockery pure and simple. As an aesthetic category, the Soviet myth of the *militsaner*— exactly in vulgarized pronunciation as reproduced in Prigov's orthography— continues to function as a legend which is re-performed in the poem.

The vector of potential political criticism is even less pronounced in Kabakov's albums and paintings reflecting the reality of Soviet housing departments. These administrative units served as transmitters of social control and fulfilled an additional function as a field for the dilettantish artistic activity of the inhabitants. An illustrative example is a meticulously handwritten plan for emptying the dust bin in a communal flat, *Schedule for Emptying the Wastebin* [*Raspisanie vynosa pomoinogo vedra*] (1980, reproduced in Tamruchi 1995, 7), which was prepared with naïve care (in Kabakov's meta-naïve reproduction).

Something similar can be said about Vladimir Sorokin's first "mature" short story (cf. Sokolov 2005, 137), "The Swim" ["Zaplyv"], which was received with reservation by other Soviet prose writers, but highly appreciated by his fellow conceptualists (Uznayvse 2018) and served as a kind of calling card for his entry into the circle (Sorokin, Ahrest-Korotkova 2010). It was reworked between 1979 and 1988 (Sorokin 2008c, 23; cf. Zolotonosov 2008), before being included in the novel *Blue Lard* [*Goluboe salo*] in 1991 (Sorokin 1999, 137–44), the collection *Morning of a Sniper* [*Utro snaipera*] in 2002 (Sorokin 2002c, 7–16), and the eponymous 2008 collection *The Swim* [*Zaplyv*] (Sorokin 2008c, 13–23). Brian James Baer included his English translation in his anthology of Russian short stories from 2017 (Sorokin 2017a). The story is situated on the border between visual art and literature. It reminds the reader of early silent film in which textual information is given in the form of letters—especially monumental films from the totalitarian periods of Soviet and German history.

"The Swim" is about a brigade of military swimmers who, while holding torches in their right hands, form quotations, performing a ritualistic genre called "motivational swims" [*agitatsionnye zaplyvy*] (Eng. Sorokin 2017a, 180, trans. Brian James Baer; Russ. Sorokin 2002c, 8). The protagonist Ivan is part of quote number 26, which goes as follows:

> ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES IN MODERN SPECIAL PURPOSE BOROUGH CONSTRUCTION WAS, IS AND WILL BE THE ISSUE OF THE TIMELY INTENSIFICATION OF CONTRAST.

> ОДНИМ ИЗ ВАЖНЕЙШИХ ВОПРОСОВ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ЦЕЛЕВОГО СТРОИТЕЛЬСТВА БОРО ЯВЛЯЛСЯ, ЯВЛЯЕТСЯ И БУДЕТ ЯВЛЯТЬСЯ ВОПРОС СВОЕВРЕМЕННОГО УСИЛЕНИЯ КОНТРАСТА. (Eng. Sorokin 2017a, 180; Russ. Sorokin 2002c, 8)

This is clearly an ideological slogan, referring to communist slogans on posters during parades, but with the enigmatic central signifier "BOROUGH" ["БОРО"] instead of "communism." Ivan's inner monologue first reflects the pride of the swimmer who does not question the ideological content, but feels privileged by his task of performing the comma between "WAS" and "IS" and by having been awarded the "State Swimming Medal" ["медаль «Государственный пловец»"] (Eng. Sorokin 2017a, 182; Russ. Sorokin 2002c, 9). Ivan does not complain about the military discipline imposed on the swimmers, but silently performs his part in the squadron:

> Ivan knew exactly where his place was—six meters from the left-most head; and he was swimming at a calm, measured pace, controlling his breath. He mustn't stray either to the left or to the right […]
>
> Иван точно знал своё место – шесть метров от левой крайней головы [—]и плыл со спокойной размеренностью, сдерживая дыхание. Нельзя отклоняться ни влево, ни вправо […] (Eng. Sorokin 2017a, 184; Russ. Sorokin 2002c, 10)

However, holding up his torch for five hours for the 1018th time (Eng. Sorokin 2017a, 188; Russ. Sorokin 2002c, 11–2), all the while only with his right hand, has physiological repercussions. Ivan's right arm becomes deformed, twice as heavily muscled as the left arm, and each of the 1018 times brings a continuous tremor, increasing pain, and eventually temporary paralysis of the entire arm. The mass ovations from the bridges above help him suppress the pain, and when he squeezes the torch, it eases the pain for a second. During his 1018th swim, however, this causes the petroleum to trickle down on him, and he dies, burning to death. The ovations from above do not stop with the disappearance of Ivan (the comma) but increase when whole letters formed by other swimmers, who obviously also burn to death, disappear, leaving only semi-vulgar parts of words such as "ETSIA" ["ЕТСЯ"] (Eng. Sorokin 2017a, 194; Russ. Sorokin 2002c, 15).

The self-sacrifice of the parade swimmers for the sake of performing (enigmatic) ideological messages is ignored or even welcomed by the