

A MULTI-LECTIC ANATOMY OF *STIOB* AND *POSHLOST'*: CASE STUDIES IN THE OEUVRE OF TIMUR NOVIKOV

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Ivor A. Stodolsky. Address for correspondence: Aleksanteri Institute, P.O.Box 42 (Unioninkatu 33), FI-00014, Department of Modern Languages (Russian), University of Helsinki, Finland. ivo.stodolsky@gmail.com. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Paul Hirst (1947–2003) for his early encouragement of the theoretical work elaborated in this article, and to Marita Muukkonen for her happy exhortatory attention to its evolution. Acknowledgements are also due to an anonymous reviewer and the kind editors of this issue of Laboratorium. Although the conclusions drawn here are fully my own, and may indeed spark intellectual agonistics concerning Timur Novikov's legacy, my humble gratitude goes to the many generous Saint Petersburg artists, curators and friends who offered their time, insight and humour.

[O]ne of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics [...] kitsch cannot be defined from one vantage point.

(Călinescu 1977:232)

[W]hat Russians call poshlust is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand places) often escapes detection.

(Nabokov 1973:63–64)

Developing an original methodology fit to the arduous task, this article discusses the work of the artist Timur Novikov (1958–2002) and elements of a cultural history of his circle. This *Kulturträger* of the Leningrad–Saint Petersburg nonconformist cultural scene achieved national and international acclaim by employing a wide range of symbolic conceits: from fine nuances of irony, through deliberate kitsch, to strategies of gross misrepresentation. Such cultural practices, based on implied humour and Janus-faced intentions, most commonly involve disjunctions of form and content. They generate artworks that carry tacit ambivalences and raise questions as to the sincerity or insincerity of the author. For Novikov's multiple audiences these uncertainties were notoriously difficult to resolve. Indeed, precisely this may have been his intent.

To cope with this opacity—this tangle of assumed intentions, presumed interpretations, denials, hoaxes and spoofs—this article introduces a new method of

analysis. It is what will be called a 'multi-lectic anatomy' of cultural phenomena.¹ Its thrust is empirical, rather than art-theoretical or purely philosophical. It constructs models of structures, contending valuations and judgements which actual audiences perceive or arrive at when observing (or participating in) the cultural practices in question. The method will serve to illustrate how some of the most serious disagreements—ostensibly of taste—result from these judgements referring to *ontologically* different aspects of given cultural phenomena.² Such 'anatomical' dissection, and subsequent reconstruction of the interrelations between aspects of phenomena under discussion, enable a new clarity to be achieved in the appreciation of Novikov and his circle's strategies. Their paradoxical success with ideologically opposed factions in Russian society can consequently be resolved. The observed willingness of a wide range of audiences to be led astray by such deceptions, furthermore, suggests the broader historical significance of such ambivalent and politically 'dangerous' strategies.

The first section of this article provides a necessarily brief introduction to the new method. The second substantive section employs these tools to discuss two of Novikov's most infamous 'art actions' (as they are known in the world of contemporary art). The first action, dating from 1982, is a case study in the famed *stiob* practices of Novikov's circle. It provides an opportunity to reformulate, while expanding on, Alexei Yurchak's well-known discussion of *stiob* irony, and what he calls the 'performative shift' (Yurchak 2005:24ff and *passim*). These notions will be modelled using the method's new formal vocabulary. The second case study requires more extensive portrayal of the context. It concerns an art action orchestrated by Novikov in his late reactionary period. The action's multiple and contradictory reception by critics will be given detailed explanation using further elaborated tools of the 'anatomical' method. One of the least favourable interpretations of Novikov's (pseudo-)reactionary turn of the late 1990s described his humorous strategies as having become distorted into overwrought vulgarity, and believed Novikov's irony collapsed into cynicism and self-deceit. An adaptation of the Russian notion of *poshlost'* will be used to describe this particular perception of profound bad faith.³ In a special sense carefully defined by a diachronic application of the anatomical model, *poshlost'* will be understood as a failure, or possibly, a betrayal of art. This dark side of ironic or ambiguous forms of cultural expression reveals the danger of an elaborate but banal vacuum of values. It is symptomatic, one might argue, of a broader hollowing-out of historical and cultural forms in early twenty-first century Russia.

¹ Anatomy, from *ἀνατομή*, is a cutting up, a dissection (*ἀνά* up + *τέμν-, τομ-*, cut). It is the 'artificial separation of the different parts of [...] any organized body [...] in order to discover their position, structure, and economy' (Anatomy 2011).

² The anthropologist David Graeber similarly emphasises that the conceptualisation of the ontology of objects is fundamental to practices of socio-cultural valuation (Graeber 2001:51ff).

³ Nabokov, cited in the epigraph, mis-transliterates the Russian word as *poshlust*, thereby punning on its links to 'posh' and 'lust'.

SECTION 1. THE MULTI-LECTIC METHOD: AN ANATOMY OF JUDGEMENT

While introducing the new method of modelling in this first section, I would like to emphasise that it is the *structure* of judgements—the relations between various perceptions, representations, etc.—which is of primary importance here. At this stage, all particular judgements are merely illustrative, and they also may not always correspond with the tastes or judgements of the reader. The subtleties of actual (historical) judgements of cultural phenomena will be saved for the second, substantive section. Calling the structured schema a multi-*lectic* model implies nothing more than that it is used to describe multiple *readings* (judgements made by various audiences) of the cultural phenomena under analysis.

THE GENERIC MODEL

Let us begin with the basic, highly schematic diagram in *Illustration 1*. Presented visually, the generic model puts into one schema both the process of creation ('authorship' or 'production') and the analysis of reception ('reading' or 'consumption') of a cultural object.⁴

The Generic Model

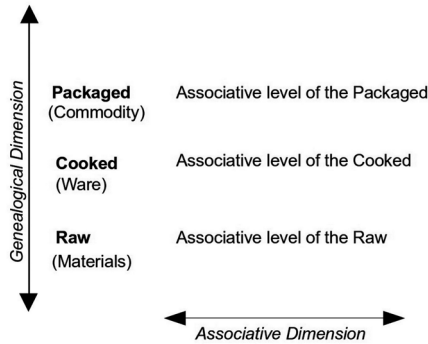


Illustration 1

The process of creation is represented by the vertical *genealogical* dimension. Any given cultural object is hence said to have a *genealogical trajectory*. This trajectory passes through three basic states. Firstly, the *Raw* state consists of the basic materials involved in its creation or manufacture. Secondly, the *Cooked* state represents the cultural object as a processed good or ware. The Cooked provides what is often in colloquial terms understood to be the 'content' of the cultural object. It is the thing that is ready for 'eating', as it were: its aspect which can be used in some

⁴ These need not be physical objects, but may include personae, ideas, etc. The notion of culture is here used in the generic anthropological sense.

way. Thirdly, there is the *Packaged* state which is the object in its exhibited, performed, marketed or distributed form. This may be a commodity found on the shop shelf, which needs to be unpacked to be used or 'eaten'—that is, in order to retrieve the Cooked. The Packaged may also be an instantiation or manifestation of abstract rules or ideas, but as a singular case or implementation of them, such as a performance of certain values or principles (in the case of an abstract or conceptual Cooked). It may even be something as intangible as an artist's reputation or image.

This last state is perhaps the least recognizable as a theoretical concept. Nevertheless, it represents an uncontroversial, indeed familiar aspect of our age—the glossy commodities whose content seems to be limited to exhibiting only their surface. Indeed, this aspect of cultural objects has become ubiquitous in advertisements, propaganda and the relentless emphasis on affect in public relations exercises. In some ways, the Packaged may seem similar to Baudrillard's notion of the *hyperreal* (Baudrillard 1983). The generic concept of the Packaged, however, includes any way in which a cultural phenomenon manifests itself, becomes present or is represented. It does not necessarily have negative connotations, nor does it imply the absence or impossibility of 'the real'. Indeed, by describing its genealogy, the method works against such (typically postmodernist) misconceptions. Nevertheless, the Packaged can be present without being accompanied by the Cooked and the Raw—in an advertisement, for example.

In this article, the three terms *Raw*, *Cooked* and *Package* provide a primary metaphor. They give rise to further analogical thinking. For example, although economic goods, their production chains and consumer cycles are far from the present focus, they provide valuable ways of conceptualising the dynamics of cultural phenomena. One can speak of the successive growth, structuring, construction and possible disintegration, sedimentation and ossification or recycling of the physical and semiotic economy of cultural phenomena. Indeed, as will be seen, the method's advantage lies in the ability to model ever more complex, recursive and reflexive forms of (re)productions. In this way, a new sort of picture of the genealogy of cultural phenomena emerges.⁵ In short, the method will not be used as an art-critical or metaphysical system, but for the study of (material) processes and their socio-cultural signification in an anthropological manner.

Turning to the analysis of reception (or 'consumption') of a cultural object, this is represented in the above diagram by the horizontal associative dimension. It is divided into three *associative levels*, each corresponding to one genealogical stage. As the name indicates, each of these comprises the associations the cultural object gives rise to at that particular stage of the genealogical trajectory, i.e. in relation to the Raw, Cooked and Packaged respectively. I will return to this shortly.

A few more general terms are needed for the basic construction of a model. Firstly, each practical instantiation of the model will be constructed in the light

⁵ The origin or formation (*Entstehung*) of the present use of the term 'genealogy' is clearly very different from that of Michel Foucault (1977). Likewise, the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss are not implied as part of the method's conceptual backdrop.

of a specific subject or agent which one can call the *reader*. Note that the notion of the reader is expandable and might refer to an individual, a theory, an institution or a social group. Similarly, we will speak of the *author* of any given cultural object (cf. Nabokov 1973, cited in the epigraph). In every particular (re)construction of a historically situated cultural object, each associative level of the model will contain a *reading*: the (re)construction of the judgements and perceptions of a particular historically situated *reader*. Since there are many actual and possible readers for one cultural object, in principle, a new model must be constructed for each reader. This is precisely what makes it a *multi-lectic* method.

It should be emphasised that the associative dimension is still semantically wholly undetermined in the generic model. This is for the simple reason that each associative level encompasses the vast range of artistic, physical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, mythical, etc. associations a reader (an individual or a group) may have for any object in any given situation. These may range from fleeting impressions and memories to full-fledged systems of analysis and research. In short, the associative levels represent the entire landscape of meaning. Hence it would be absurd to put forward one theory of meaning to encompass all the possible associations of all possible readers.

The construction of the model of an object does not aspire to this aim. The point is not to make substantial claims as to what a cultural object means in the abstract, but to model the real judgements actual readers have made or might make. Note, however, that inserting contextually rich, thick descriptions into these schematic models is neither possible nor desirable. As will shortly become evident, the diagrams, schematic as they are, should be seen as ways to structure our understanding, rather than this understanding itself.

JUDGEMENT: THE JUXTAPOSITION OF GENERIC MODELS

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously stated that there is no such thing as a private language. Two or more (potential) speakers are a precondition of the possibility of language and meaning as such (Wittgenstein 1953). In a similar way I will say that two or more different readings are a precondition of any given judgement. In the following, it will be shown how the *comparison* of two readings of a single cultural object can be constructed, emphasising the differential structure of judgement.⁶ Such an anatomy of judgement simply separates two differing readings of the same cultural object, and shows judgement as their juxtaposition and comparison in a third model.⁷

⁶ On the one hand, the multi-lectic approach may be distinguished from purely sociological methods which show how judgements of taste in society correlate with social position. The classic text here is of course Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). On the other hand, it is a defence against the simplistic epistemological relativism of a radical postmodernist sort, expressed in the attitude that there are an infinite number of equally legitimate possible readings of any given cultural object.

⁷ For the sake of brevity the three models will not always be illustrated visually, as the comparison between the two readings is often clear without the third model.

A briefly sketched example will serve to explain. In the below, the cultural object is a resin copy of Auguste Rodin’s *Thinker*, to which an old-fashioned art historian ascribes the judgement that it is ‘kitsch’:

A resin copy of Rodin’s Thinker Judged to be ‘kitsch’

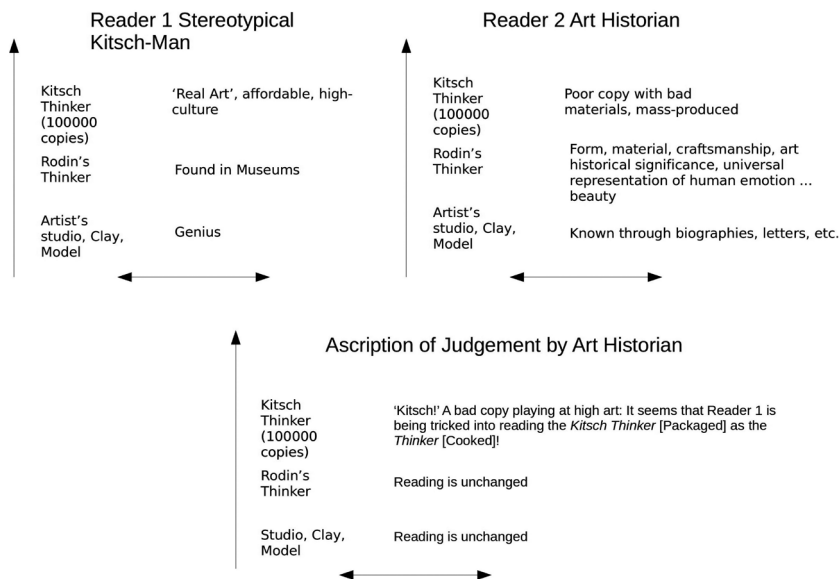


Illustration 2

Illustration 2 clearly indicates at which level the initial ascription of judgement takes place, viz. the Packaged level. It is not merely the sensibilities or values of the art historian which are different from those of the putative ‘kitsch-man’. The art historian’s ascription of kitsch pertains largely to the fact that he imagines someone (the kitsch-man) to be reading a very poor *copy* of what he considers to be a great work of art *as a work of art*. The art historian perceives what philosophers would call a category mistake: the copy (the Packaged) is being falsely given the value of the original (the Cooked).

RECURSION, REFLEXIVITY AND CHANGE

Note that in the above model, the art historian’s judgement of the Cooked (Rodin’s *Thinker*) is not affected by the kitsch object. Both Raw and Cooked readings remain unchanged. For a non-specialist, however, the proliferation of thousands of resin *Kitsch Thinkers* might very well impinge on the way the original is seen.

The historical evolution of readings is of course a recursive and reflexive process: associative meanings are intuited, debated, established, refined, misunderstood, contradicted and often forgotten or mis-remembered. These types of changes may be reconstructed through the repeated modelling of phenomena over time—that is, through a diachronic application of the multi-lectic method.

Such reflexive change also occurs in the genealogy of cultural objects. A former Packaged can become a Cooked. A typical example would be that of a postmodern artist re-using several *Kitsch Thinkers* to create a new work of art—a process of recursive recycling common to much human creativity, but rediscovered and subjected to ontological investigations by twentieth-century art in particular. A fitting case is provided by Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964), in which packages of soap pads (Packaged commodities) were copied and exhibited as works of art (the Cooked).

By extrapolation, one can see that over several 'generations' of recursive or reflexive change, a cultural phenomenon and its readings can be fundamentally altered. What was once the Packaged might one day be read as the Raw, although this might take several generational cycles. This pre-empts inevitable criticism from postmodernist philosophers, to whose radical relativism the present method was first conceived of as a non-foundationalist alternative.⁸ If they claim that every Raw is 'always-already' (Derrida) a Packaged, then they are right, but likely for the wrong reasons. In what often amounts to an absolutist anti-foundationalism, they are ignoring the physical and cultural processes of historical time. This differentiates the multi-lectic method from certain post-structuralist theories, such as that of Jean Baudrillard. In announcing the disappearance of the 'real', or by considering only purely discursive forms, such theories dissolve the genealogical dimension altogether.

The ontological vicissitudes into which the method gives insight—one person's Raw is another's Cooked—naturally imply that different or even conflicting interpretations will arise concerning which genealogical stage one is talking about. Precisely this is one of the strengths of the multi-lectic method. It is not a metaphysical proposition. By modelling the semiotic and physical processes described, one is not making abstract or objective judgements about cultural phenomena. Instead, each instance of modelling reconstructs existing judgements made by actual people in contingent circumstances.

Given this brief exposition, one can already see that both the genealogy of the work and the genealogies of their readings may stand in multiple inter-relations, or indeed, non-relations. The multi-lectic method and nomenclature permit a certain systematic precision in identifying and distinguishing them in an anatomy of judgement.

SECTION 2. CASE STUDIES IN THE OEUVRE OF TIMUR NOVIKOV

The below case studies investigate the artist and cultural leader Timur Novikov, his work, his circle and audience. Novikov grew out of the nonconformist Leningrad underground, rising to fame and (what his followers considered) 'patriarchal' status in the trend-setting crowd of the Saint Petersburg artistic intelligentsia—the field

⁸ The method was first developed during my studies at the London Consortium (Stodolsky 1998). Some members of this innovative programme (including Birkbeck/University of London, Tate, the Architectural Association, the ICA and the BFI) were prominent representatives of a postmodernist orientation in cultural theory.

which internationally goes under the heading of 'contemporary art'. Novikov worked in countless genres including painting, textiles, theatre, film, video and fashion, as well as authoring a wide variety of artistic texts. Renowned as a 'maker of artists', he was the founder and leader of several art movements. In fact, his artistic actions, publicity stunts and statements have often been considered to be more important than any particular physical works by his followers and critics alike.⁹ As his public personae and artistic ideology played a highly significant, even predominant role in his work, the below case studies focus on this aspect of his oeuvre.

Novikov's two most significant artistic projects were the group called the 'New Artists' (*Novye khudozhniki*) which he initiated in early-1980s Leningrad, and the so-called 'New Academy of Fine Arts' (*Novaia akademiia iziashchnykh iskusstv*) which he founded in the early 1990s. These artistic groupings and the world outlook (*mirovozzrenie*) they embodied both achieved wide-spread recognition and influence in Saint Petersburg and Moscow; they also reached the international art world. Born of the pre-*perestroika* nonconformist art, punk and rock scene, his first circle entered the international circuit in the late 1980s, with exhibitions in major European and American museums and galleries. The second group involved a kitsch-classicist reinvention of Petersburg dandyism which he termed 'neoacademism' (*neoakademizm*). From the mid-1990s this group's focus shifted ever more toward a (pseudo-)reactionary position Novikov termed 'New Russian Classicism' (*Novyi russkii klassitsizm*).

In the course of his career Novikov gained considerable institutional power, and his posthumous legacy within Russia is still strong. His 50th birthday, for example, was commemorated with a retrospective at the State Hermitage Museum. Prominent guests were flown in from Moscow for the occasion, arriving on a jet freshly re-named 'Timur Novikov' in his honour (S7 Airlines 2008).

My research on Novikov and his circle is based on over five years of periodic anthropological field research for my forthcoming doctoral dissertation, as well as the extensive artistic and archival material gathered while curating the a multi-part exhibition, 'The Raw, The Cooked and The Packaged, The Archive of *Perestroika* Art' at Kiasma, the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Finnish National Gallery (Stodolsky and Muukkonen 2007).¹⁰ The two case studies discussed below are emblematic of the role Novikov played in the artistic culture of two respective periods: pre-*glasnost'* Leningrad and the post-Soviet late 1990s. They were arguably also early-warning signals of long-term developments in Russian society at large.

⁹ Indeed, Novikov's critics commonly disparagingly compared his physical artworks to his grandiloquent statements. On the other hand Andrei Khlobystin, one of Novikov's most prominent 'ideologists' in his later period, invented the remarkable term 'P-Art', punning on the linkage between 'public relations' (PR) and 'art'. Although at first Khlobystin used the term to belittle art from Moscow (and especially 'Moscow Actionism'), he later came to claim that Novikov was the first and greatest of 'P-artists' (author's private interviews, 2005–2010).

¹⁰ The exhibition at Kiasma included approximately one hundred artworks, seven hours of film and moving images, as well as hundreds of documents in a dedicated 'Archival Room'. Many significant works by Novikov and members of his circle were part of the show.

THE CASE OF *STIOB*

The notion of *stiob*, in usage in nonconformist circles for decades, has recently received Western academic attention due to the work of Alexei Yurchak, who has integrated its explication into a broader theoretical framework (Yurchak 2005). He describes a ‘hyper-normalisation of form’ of official Soviet practices, juxtaposing this with their increasing lack of denotative semantic content in the late-Soviet period. Yurchak proposes the concept of a ‘performative shift’ to describe how certain formulaic acts (public eulogies for Communism, for instance—whether performed sincerely or not) often became ideologically vacuous means to totally different ends (Yurchak 2005, chapter 6). In lay terms, his diagnosis is of a mismatch of official form and non-official content.

In the late-Soviet culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s, *stiob* practices exaggerated this mismatch, propelling it into the realm of the absurd. Unlike the sharply ironic and politically-engaged attitude of the Thaw generation (*shestidesyatniki*), *stiob* was performed with mischievous humour and a façade of deadpan nonchalance. It was considered successful precisely when it duped the audience into believing something impossible or ridiculous. Ideally, the issue of the author’s sincerity was indefinitely unsettled and ambiguous. As Yurchak says, *stiob* ‘refuses the very dichotomy’ between seriousness and irony (2005:250).

What can retrospectively be called the founding work of the group of New Artists is an ideal-typical example of *stiob*.¹¹ Still deep in the period of stagnation (*zastoi*), the semi-legalised underground group TEII (*TEII—Tovarishchestvo Eksperimental’nogo Izobrazitel’nogo Iskusstva*) was permitted to organise its first official exhibition in Leningrad in 1982. Participating artists were allotted empty rectangular apertures in free-standing exhibition partitions within which to hang their paintings. When the installation was done, one of these openings remained empty (*Illustration 3*).



Illustration 3: Timur Novikov and Ivan Sotnikov look through the Null Object, Leningrad, 1982

¹¹ The group of New Artists was formed by the key participants shortly after the incidents described here. Its members came to include Timur Novikov, Ivan Sotnikov, Inal Savchenkov, Oleg Kotel’nikov, Evgenii Kozlov, Sergei ‘Afrika’ Bugaev, Vladislav Gutsevich, Andrei Krisanov, Georgii Gurianov and others including Viktor Tsoi.

Closer inspection, however, revealed a title tag bearing the inscription '0-Object' (*0-Ob"ekt*) and the names of the artists Timur Novikov and Ivan Sotnikov.¹² With its leader Sergei Koval'skii at its head, the TEII demanded its immediate removal. A scuffle ensued, followed by heated admonishments and warnings of dire consequences should they not comply. Clearly, the prank was seen as a threat to the exhibition as a whole. Novikov and Sotnikov, however, insisted on the legitimacy of their 'artwork', and took to expounding its art-theoretical significance.

The ensuing scandal turned into an absurd but genuinely dangerous game between Novikov and his friends, the TEII and their KGB watchdogs. Novikov and others left for Moscow—ostensibly to avoid arrest.¹³ With the help of a growing circle of initiates, a small movement advocating so-called *Null Culture* flourished, which justified and defended all *Null Objects*. Forming pseudo-bureaucratic committees, they issued mock-official statements in typically Soviet bureaucratese. A brilliant example of a *stiob* document of this kind was the 'Deed' (*akt*) of the 'Chief Commission for the Direction of Null Culture' (*Glavnaia komissiiia upravleniia Nol' Kultury*):

THE NULL OBJECT FULLY SATISFIES ALL NULL REQUIREMENTS
OF THE HIGH COMMISSION. APPROVED. EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED.

(*NOL'-OB" EKT VPOLNE UDOVLETVORIAET VSEM NOL' TREBOVANIIAM
VYSOKOI KOMISSII. MOZHNO. RAZRESHAETSIA VSE*)

(Andreeva and Kolovskaia 1996)

With support from prominent cultural figures such as the nonconformist poet Oleg Grigoriev, and following much wrangling and arguments with officialdom, a surprising thing happened. The authorities not only accepted the *Null Object* as a work of art but, incredibly, allotted it honorary mention as the best work in the exhibition (Andreeva and Kolovskaia 1996). Other than by direct repression, it seems, officialdom saw no way of fighting *stiob* humour. Certainly no self-respecting unofficial group such as the TEII—who were, after all, the curators—could admit to missing the joke without losing all nonconformist credibility.

MODELLING *STIOB*

The multi-lectic method was originally conceived to model the gamut of recursive copies and reflexive cultural phenomena generated by mass society. This element of copying is essential to *stiob* as well. The genealogy of the *Null Object* can be illustrated as follows:

¹² The interest in '0', 'null', 'noll' or even 'nøll' had been prevalent for some time in this circle (author's conversations with Oleg Kotel'nikov, March 2011). For differing accounts of the incidents surrounding this exhibition at the Kirov House of Culture (DK Kirova), see Andreeva & Kolovskaia (1996:67ff) and for example Koval'skii (2007), which claims that the idea of leaving one aperture open had been bandied around as a joke by various artists during the installation.

¹³ Author's interview with Ivan Sotnikov, November 2007.

Modelling the genealogy of the Null Object

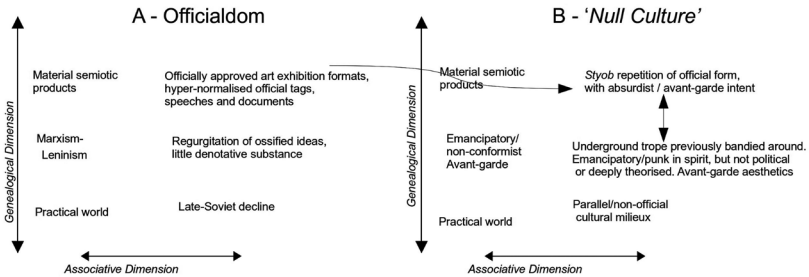


Illustration 4

Illustration 4 juxtaposes two spheres of late-Soviet life in a schematic way. The 'Deed' cited above provides a good material example of *Null Culture*, whose Packaged in (B) reproduces the hyper-normalised form (Packaged) of official culture in (A). Note that the Packaged in (A)—a typical Soviet bureaucratic letter, in the case of the 'Deed'—is already a mass-reproduced 'hyper-normalised' form. By copying this form once more, one can see how *stiyob* is a conscious 'overidentification' with its original (A), as Yurchak puts it. The 'Deed' is such an over-zealous copy of hyper-normalised officialdom. This horizontal shift, together with the second aspect of the parodic Packaged's genealogy (the vertical arrows), shows exactly what Yurchak loosely calls the process of 'decontextualisation' (Yurchak 2005:250-252). In our precise terminology, we can say that the genealogy and associative context of (B) are wholly different from the template provided for them by (A).

Yurchak's two terms *overidentification* and *decontextualisation* point back to their original 'identity' and 'context', that is, Soviet officialdom. Going beyond this, the method shows that the *stiyob* Packaged also relates to a totally different genealogical trajectory within the nonconformist field (B). The implicit nonconformist Cooked, the potentially deeper values of the nonconformists, however, are not openly expressed in *stiyob*. *Stiyob* simply confronts a Packaged with a Packaged. It is precisely this strategy which avoids any form of 'well-defined agendas or messages' (Yurchak 2005:251). Such agendas were typical of the official Cooked, that is, Soviet ideology, but also dissident opposition to it. Especially in Novikov's circle, *anti-Soviet* talk was despised as much, if not more than Soviet talk. Overt dissidents were mocked for their 'dull' obsession with 'dull' Soviet ideological content. For analogous reasons, Sergei Oushakine speaks of the 'terrifying mimicry' of officialdom in *samizdat* (Oushakine 2001). By referring *only* to the official Packaged, *stiyob* attempts to avoid what it considers to be the toxic debates about ideology altogether.

In relation to this point, Yurchak makes an issue of *stiyob's* 'lack of interest' in authoritative discourse, emphasising the element of nonchalance. However, it seems

clear that this blasé attitude was in fact stylised.¹⁴ The *stylisation* of nonchalance, furthermore, is quite clearly the Packaged manifestation of an *intentionally apolitical* Cooked. One can go further and argue that, within the Leningrad nonconformist field at this time, an *a-ideological* attitude was the *logic of distinction* (Bourdieu) of Novikov's generation (see Stodolsky 2011). A self-conscious stylised attitude such as *stiob*, therefore, is demonstrably culture-political in both affect and effect.

Stiob 'served as a model of the "performative shift"', as Yurchak notes, and indeed, affecting *stiob* was a way of demonstrating the gap between the Cooked and the Packaged, making this shift obvious. Its absurd effect, on the other hand, 'unhinged' authoritative Soviet discourse, estranging it, and opened the possibility of a whole set of very different values. Yurchak characterizes these 'organically different' (2008:714) values as situated in a 'deterritorialized' (a Deleuzian term) discursive space within Soviet spatial reality. They were 'vne' Soviet society—inside and outside at the same time (Yurchak 2005:251). This is exactly the position of the nonconformist Cooked, as we can see from the above.

Aside from the fitting metaphor of the 'organically' different nonconformist 'Cooked', what the new terminology contributes is a precise relational structure.¹⁵ It shows, firstly, the way in which the undefined nonconformist Cooked values made the Packaged possible; but also, inversely, that this parodic Packaged (*stiob*) avoids a dialogue by relating to official discourse only on the level of the Packaged. It shows the absence of 'dialogic relations', as Mikhail Bakhtin would say, of the structurally *parallel* Cooked levels. This is metaphorically apt, considering how the Leningrad underground at times shunned the terms '*nonofficial*' or even '*nonconformist*' as self-designations, preferring the notion of a 'parallel' or 'second' culture (Savitskii 2002).

The model also points to the question as to what made up the 'Soviet spatial reality' (as Yurchak calls the Raw) of this 'deterritorialized' space (the Cooked). Although he does not address this issue, Yurchak's informants seem to be predominantly from a certain well-educated intelligentsia milieu with access to Leningrad's elite institutions. In part, Novikov's circle came from a similar background in the metropolitan creative intelligentsia. One might show, however, that many members of the 'parallel culture' had backgrounds in peripheral milieux. Furthermore, although by no means totally independent from Soviet institutional life, its activities took place in social spaces (Raw) kept separate from these bureaucracies. As any attempt at defining 'social class' under Communism must be strongly related to access to these institutions, this is certainly significant.¹⁶

Turning from genealogy to the (re)construction of judgements, the next step is to build a model of the official and nonconformist response to the *Null Object*. (Other positions could be investigated such as that of oppositional dissidents, but the scope

¹⁴ Joseph Brodsky's (purported) ignorance of Soviet realia is one legendary case of lackadaisical nonchalance that Yurchak cites. Still, he leaves open the question as to whether it was feigned (Yurchak 2005:127).

¹⁵ In deriving his term *vne* from Bakhtin's *vnyekhodimost'* Yurchak points to a 'tripartite relationship' of author, hero and text. However, this notion seems not to have been developed much further, at least in that book (Yurchak 2005:134).

¹⁶ Social/political capital outweighed other forms of capital, in Bourdieu's terminology. See, for example, Eyal et al. 1998:7.

must be limited. Likewise, here the analysis is restricted to ideal-typical models.) Although a reconstruction of each judgement takes three smaller diagrams (see *Illustration 2*), I have already sketched the first two in *Illustration 4*. In *Illustration 5*, the respective third stage of the two alternative judgements is reconstructed:

Modelling judgements of Null Culture (and the effects of these judgements)

The moment of realisation of mis-recognition. The combination of the models in Illustration 4 as read by

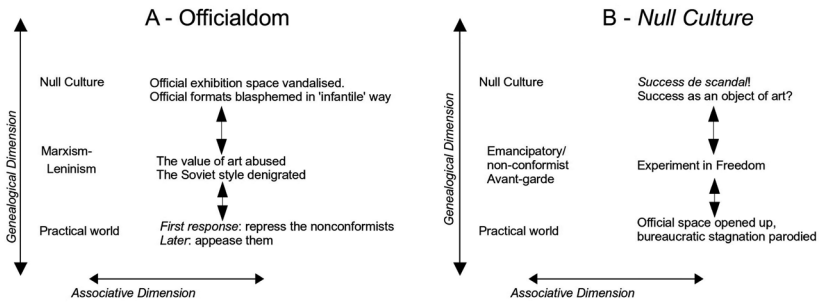


Illustration 5

As mentioned earlier, *stiob's* 'unhinging' effect derives mainly from a momentary mis-recognition of sincerity. The bureaucrats who received the 'Deed' above—typed, signed and stamped like an official document—may have experienced a 'double-take' before recognizing it as a spoof. Likewise, an unwitting visitor of the exhibition in DK Kirova might have suspected a gross oversight by the curators. On seeing the official name-tag on the *Null Object*, however, they may have viewed it as a hoax. Learning that it was the winning entry in the exhibition, finally, may have given rise to a degree of confusion.

What is remarkable about this last aspect is that the *Null Object* actually constituted an artwork. Aside from the scandal of the 'disloyal' but accurate use of official form, the *Null Object* accrued a host of art-historical interpretations. Around this period, Novikov's circle made much of the notion of 'everythingness' (*vsechestvo*) first conceived by the classical avant-garde artists Mikhail Larionov and Ilya Zdanevich.¹⁷ Novikov's circle's (mock) theories claimed the *Null Object* to be an innovation in the use of perspective (one could look through it from two sides), praised its communicative aspects (the artists engaged in mystical séances with it from Moscow) and declared its universalist character: all openings/orifices

¹⁷ This was revived by Boris Koshelokhov, the founder of the 'Chronicle' (*Letopis'*) group which Novikov had been a part of since the late 1970s. Ekaterina Degot describes Zdanevich's *vsechestvo* as *Dada avant la lettre* (Degot 2000). The ontological inversion of the *Null Object* of course bears resemblance to Marcel Duchamp's 'ready-mades', such as the pissoir he famously placed in an art gallery, giving it the title *Fountain*.

(*otverstiia*), they propounded, wherever they might be found, were now *Null Objects* (Golyenko-Vol'fson 2002).

There is no way that humour cannot creep in again. There is no finality, and judgement keeps oscillating in rather unpredictable swings between the official judgement (which is wide open to ridicule for its block-headed sincerity) and the nonconformist judgement (which both laughs at the officialdom and leaves the option of artistic sincerity to itself). This ambiguous possibility of the prank being much more than a prank is exactly what makes this brilliant *stiob*.

A poignant epilogue to the scandal of 1982 was related to this author by Ekaterina Andreeva, a writer and curator at the Russian Museum—which holds many of the key works of the New Artists. Andrei Erofeev, the head of the contemporary art department of the Tsaritsyno Museum at the time, came to Andreeva in 1989 looking to acquire the *Null Object*. She took Erofeev to see Villi Feoktistov, once a leading 'ideologist' of *Null Culture*, who now worked as Andreeva's colleague in the department of exhibitions. Feoktistov opened his desk, took out an empty paper-frame for a photographic slide and gave it to Erofeev. He explained that this was the active (working) model of the *Null Object*—but if their visitor didn't like it, he could use any other object with an empty hole in its middle.¹⁸

THE CASE OF *POSHLOST'*

The multi-lectic method was first used in the analysis of *kitsch* and its more subtle but pernicious cousin *poshlost'*. Similar to what Matei Călinescu says of *kitsch* in this article's epigraph, the notion of *poshlost'* is notoriously difficult to pin down. It has a spread of connotations, ranging from 'vulgar' to 'cheap' or 'banal', although its usage has varied historically.¹⁹ As Vladimir Nabokov most vividly elaborated, these near-equivalents of *kitsch* do not capture the high level of sophistication involved in the detection of *poshlost'* in its most noxious forms.²⁰ This is key to my usage of the word below.

To say that something is *poshlost'* in this sense is a grave accusation. The depth of the issue can be seen in the case of Varlam Shalamov and his decision to sever ties with Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Of paramount value to Shalamov, as Svetlana Boym argues in her discussion of his *Kolyma Tales*, was a meticulous and sober account of the experience of the horror of the Gulag (Boym 2008:346-347). Shalamov was originally on good terms with Solzhenitsyn, yet he came to see the author of *The Gulag Archipelago* as a

¹⁸ Private correspondence with Ekaterina Andreeva, 2010.

¹⁹ Svetlana Boym, for example, defines it as 'a word that encompasses banality, lack of spirituality and sexual obscenity' (Boym 1994:3).

²⁰ Vladimir Nabokov describes *poshlost'* in the following way: 'The Russian language is able to express by means of one pitiless word the idea of a certain widespread defect for which the other ... languages I happen to know possess no special term ... English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of poshlust are for instance: 'cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin', in bad taste, ... inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack' and others under 'cheapness.' All these however suggest merely certain false values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required. ... [W]hat Russians call poshlust is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand places) often escapes detection' (Nabokov 1973:63-64).

'polisher of reality'. Shalamov wrote that the 'impurity of tone that is not so much an aesthetic as an ethical issue' made Solzhenitsyn's prose an '*oposhlenie*' (a '*poshlost*'-ification') of the reality of camp life (ibid.:346). For Shalamov, this was a grievous and inexcusable offence. While kitsch represents what is often merely a saccharine reproduction of an original and its *effects* (Greenberg 1961:3ff.), *poshlost*' appropriates the highest *values* and, masquerading in bad faith, drags these very values into the mire (Stodolsky 1998).

Another more light-hearted example shows how this falsification takes place at an 'ontological' level. The following anecdote from Maxim Gorky's memoirs describes a perfect case of *poshlost*':

Once a plump, healthy, handsome, well-dressed lady came to [Chekhov] and began to speak *à la Chekhov*: 'Life is so boring, Anton Pavlovich. Everything is so grey: people, the sea, even the flowers seem to me grey. . . . And I have no desires . . . my soul is in pain . . . it is like a disease.'

'It is a disease,' said Anton Pavlovich with conviction, 'it is a disease; in Latin it is called *morbus fraudulentus*.' Fortunately, the lady did not seem to know Latin, or, perhaps, she pretended not to know it.²¹

As a doctor, Chekhov's diagnosis of *morbus fraudulentus* was very precise. Firstly, he saw the lady's performed persona as a sham: a Packaged with a *fraudulent* genealogy. Clearly she was imitating a Chekhovian fictional character from the 'dying breed of the old aristocracy', while herself in the flower of life (Cooked genealogical level) and likely also bourgeois (Raw level). Chekhov also asserts that this lady had a disease (Latin *morbus*). *Deceptivitus chronicus*, he might have called it. Deception is precisely what makes her speech fraudulent, as opposed to an act of 'honest forgery' which, to be sure, is the job of any professional actor. In extremis, *poshlost*' culminates in *self*-deception. Below is an anatomy of this case:

Modelling judgements of the persona of Chekhov's 'Lady'

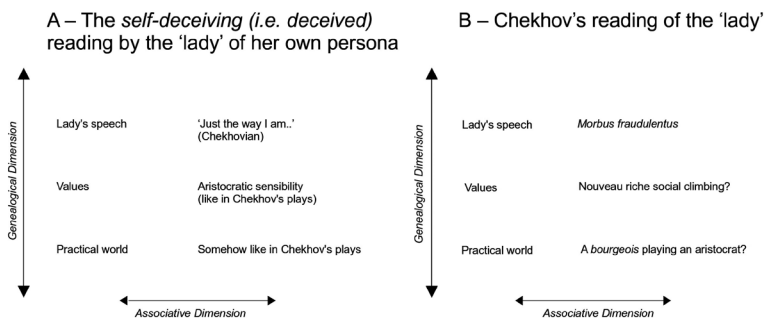


Illustration 6

²¹ Quoted in Black 1983:116.

In the model constructed in *Illustration 6* one can see the lady labouring under the illusion of *being something she was not*—an ‘ontological’ misconception. The cure, had she understood Latin, would have been to re-build her *self*, as it were, ‘from the Raw up’.

It is uncanny to think that a *conscious* and *successful* deception is what would have made this lady an *actress* in the eyes of Chekhov. The difference in judgement of her intentions and talent open up a deep abyss. On the one hand is art and, on the other moral-aesthetic failure. Art and *poshlost'* are fratricidal twins.

BURNING ART WITH SAVONAROLA: REACTIONARY STIOB, CYNICAL REASON AND POSHLOST'

On 23 May 1998, Timur Novikov led his followers to an abandoned military fort on the Gulf of Finland to burn the ‘profane’ works of their ‘modernist’ youth. Just like Girolamo Savonarola’s famed *Bonfire of the Vanities* of the late 1490s which it modelled itself on, what one may call Novikov’s *Bonfire of Modernism* was propagandised as a gesture of ‘repentance’ and ‘moral purification’. Novikov’s self-styled New Academy of Fine Arts symbolically burned what they described as ‘modernist perversions’, ‘pornography’ and ‘filth’ (Khlobystin 1998, *passim*). The sincerity of these gestures was questionable, however. Firstly, this was the very same circle of orgiastic aesthetes which had played a key role in introducing these very ‘perversions’ to Russia: punk, Pop Art, transvestite fashion, the drug culture and body-aesthetics of techno and rave, pornographic video art, etc., etc.²² Furthermore, to the irrepressible grins and chuckles of the participating artists, many of the works were in fact salvaged by their authors or friends before they could be consumed by the flames (*Illustration 7*).



Illustration 7: Novikov and Khlobystin (right) at the ‘Bonfire of Modernism’ (Zverolov 2007)

²² See, for example, Lur’e 2008 and Khaas 2006.

Novikov had undergone a striking reorientation of art and ideology at the turn of the 1990s. Having achieved early renown as a punk and New Wave nonconformist, and international success in the late 1980s, the early post-Soviet years saw him cultivate a highly ironic 'anti-modernist' position. This dandy-classicist stance was known as 'neoacademism' (*neoakademizm*). Novikov's stylised adoration of 'positive' classicist forms and tropes, was set off against an ironic aversion to what he deemed the destructive forms of 'modernism and postmodernism' (Novikov's use of these terms was vague in the extreme; the latter epithet was frequently attributed to his own art).²³

As the 1990s wore on, however, the aesthete's mock-conservatism and gay delight in 'beauty' and 'light' became less puerile in tone. Its camp hyper-stylisation became weaker, and as the New Academy gained establishment respectability, the group began to take their own new anti-modernist ideology semi-seriously.²⁴ Adopting a tone perhaps most suitable to the proclamation of a new 'Russian Idea', Novikov unveiled a manifesto for a 'New Russian Classicism' (*Novyi russkii klassitsizm*, Novikov 1998). In effect, by the end of the decade, Novikov's position had mutated into an arch-reactionary stance, albeit maintained with a crypto-ironic tongue in cheek. At the time of the *Bonfire of Modernism* in 1998, Timur Petrovich—as his acolytes now liked to call their guru—had recently escaped death from complications of a long-term illness, which further strengthened his conservatism. Blinded, with a long beard, carrying a staff and guided by a page, he was elevated to prophet-like stature.²⁵

The *Bonfire* was the brainchild of Novikov together with Andrei Khlobystin, whose satirical newspaper *Khudozhestvennaia Volia* (a translation from the German *Kunstwollen*, or 'Will to Art') subsequently documented the art-action on its pages. It was provocatively timed to coincide with the five-hundredth anniversary of the burning at the stake of Savonarola, well-known to educated Russians as a medieval moral fanatic and anti-Renaissance zealot. The PR effect of the *Bonfire of Modernism* was indisputably one of its most important aspects.²⁶ The negative reactions of Umberto Eco, who was visiting Saint Petersburg, were explicitly sought out (Klimova 1998:1). Novikov accompanied the entire proceedings with repeated *denials* of any humorous intent, while at the same time subtly encouraging the specially invited press corps to savour a certain delicious

²³ For more on this neo-classical and conservative current in postmodernism see Charles Jencks (1987) and Fredric Jameson (1991:58).

²⁴ For more on camp and politics see Susan Sontag 1964 and Stodolsky 1998.

²⁵ Novikov had HIV/AIDS, although this was never discussed in public, even after his death (Stodolsky 2006). For more on the traditional theme of the Russian artist-as-prophet, see Stodolsky 2009.

²⁶ Novikov stated in an interview with Zlobina-Kutiavina (2000): 'For us, the most important thing is to attract the attention of society to this question [i.e. 'saving classical culture']. And we achieved that: all the journals wrote about us, including the journals which we burned.' (*Glavnoe dlia nas - privlech' vnimanie obshchestvennosti k etomu voprosu [t.e. 'spasenie klassicheskoi kul'tury']*). *I my dobilis' etogo: o nas pisali vse zhurnaly - v tom chisle i te, kotorye my szhigali.*)

ambiguity. Many perceived the action to imply some form of *stiob*, satire or postmodern irony.

What we have here is a performance which, like *stiob*, both strongly identifies with a cultural object (Savonarola's precedent) and in some way plays on its misrepresentation. Its genealogy is modelled in *Illustration 8*.

Modelling the genealogy of the Bonfire of Modernism

(Comparison with the historical context of the referenced 'original')

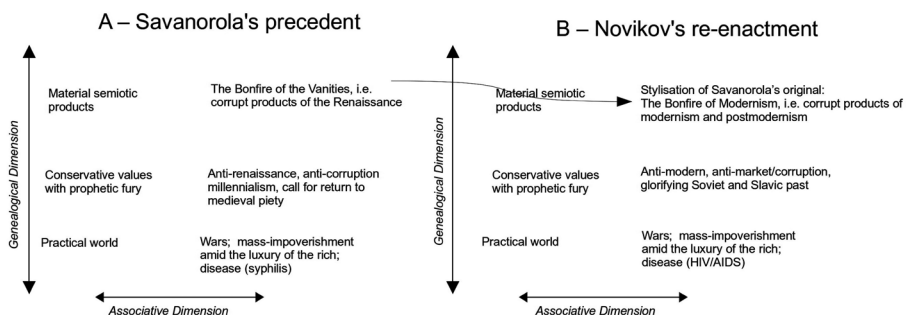


Illustration 8

As we saw in *Illustration 4*, *stiob* goes *against* the grain of what it parodies on all levels except the Packaged, which it copies over-zealously, creating semiotic tension and hence a subversive form of irony. Looking carefully at the above diagram, we see that here the imitation in (B) goes *with* the grain of the original in (A) on *all* associative levels. Where does the *Bonfire's* supposed irony spring from?

IRONIC READINGS

Irony did not spring from a *post factum* recognition of a hoax, as in *stiob*. The artists publicly demanded to be seen as reactionaries all along. Instead, the artists played on their long-established reputation for ironic ambiguities, and the audience's *expectations* and desire to see the *Bonfire* as a postmodernist spoof. Let us attempt to illustrate this state of affairs as follows:

Modelling initial judgements of the Bonfire of Modernism

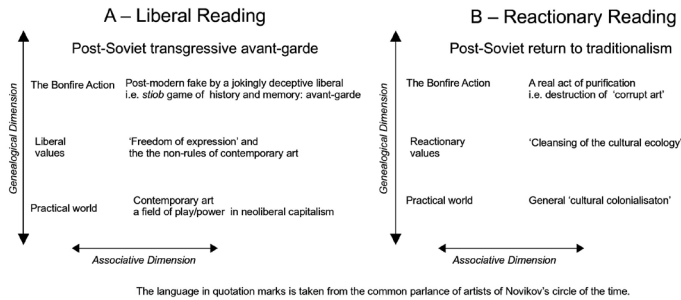


Illustration 9

What can be seen vividly from *Illustration 9* is that, on the liberal understanding in (A) Novikov's action was a satire based on a liberal conception of the prevalent social conditions. Indeed, it was the very 'political incorrectness' of his approach that titillated liberal sensitivities. Novikov's clamour for a 'Renaissance of classical culture' and 'order'—while dancing all night to industrial techno and rave—had always been seen as a tease, and was taken with a large pinch of salt. In the case of the *Bonfire*, however, it was difficult to see even a glimmer of residual liberal ironic impulse. Members of Eduard Limonov's red-brown National Bolshevik Party (NBP) were also present with their Nazi-Soviet flags. Burning artworks in the company of (mock-)fascist insignia is not particularly beautiful, nor expressive of freedom, let alone tolerance. Grasping at straws, liberal friends hoped Novikov still intended some form of irony, without being sure how it was to be explained.²⁷

Stirring up 'delicious' controversy had always been one of Novikov's most successful strategies, beginning with the *Null Object*. As a dandy-decadent in the early 1990s, brandishing the image of Wilde and his motto of 'art for art's sake', he whimsically eulogised the Nazi art of Leni Riefenstahl and Albert Speer as simply 'beautiful' (Novikov 1998:53-70). With another master of *stioib*, the composer Sergei Kuryokhin, he blithely supported the candidature of Alexander Dugin for the extremist NBP in the Duma elections of 1995. This droll enthusiasm for the political fringe in the 1990s alienated some old nonconformist followers, but also attracted others. 'Dangerous' *stioib* humour, avant-garde art and the post-imperial reaction to Russia's decline under Yeltsin melded into a new anti-establishment 'underground' position.

Toward the end of the decade, however, this compound of semi-ironic nostalgia for imperial glory had grown more ominous. Novikov called for a 'new seriousness' (*novaiia sereznost'*, Korzukhin 2010) and the need to confront the horrors of 'cultural

²⁷ 'Or is this in fact deeply-encoded postmodernist *stioib*, the rejection of which is so fiercely pronounced? One would like to think so, just for the love of Timur. Otherwise, you just don't know what to think...' (Zlobina-Kutiavina 2000).

colonisation' in order to 'cleanse' the 'cultural ecology'. Even close friends were unable to get a straight answer from Novikov about his attraction to fascism. His defence was disarming: as a homosexual and cultural deviant, he protested, he would be the first to be put in prison should fascists come to power.²⁸ Unfortunately, claiming to be a possible future victim of one's own ideology does not excuse or legitimise it.

Yet why should we assume that Novikov had a coherent vision of his artistic-ethical stance at all? His multiple ideological personae, aside from everything else, can be seen as purely instrumental strategies for achieving power within in the widest possible field. A case in point is his failure to achieve superstar status internationally in the mid-1990s, which at least in part led him to turn his back on the Western post-modern/modern mainstream and re-delimit his primary arena of activities to the national context (Stodolsky 2011). As I have argued elsewhere, Novikov's strategies—in a classical avant-garde manner—regularly went against the current, but were designed to manoeuvre him into a position in which he could lay the ground rules of the future mainstream (*ibid.*). It was no accident that 'love thy audience' (*Liubov' k zriteliu*) was one of his favourite mottos (Novikov 2000): it was scandal, shock and PR tactics which had brought him to fame. Coherence—ideological or artistic—is not a strong feature of strategies designed to achieve artistic celebrity and power.

For the sake of argument, nevertheless, as Novikov was clearly preoccupied with aesthetic-moral issues, let us assume that he did attempt a coherent position. With politics clearly deemed a *legitimate* battlefield in the late 1990s, appeals to 'art for art's sake' in defence of totalitarian aesthetics no longer provided a viable line of escape. Instead, what was left was what one might call 'politics for art's sake'. Clearly this was no longer what Alexei Yurchak and Svetlana Boym (presumably borrowing from the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk) agree to call the 'cynical reason' of late socialism: the complacent, snide and ideologically empty side of *stiob*: a shallow humour that has 'ceased to struggle'.²⁹ For Novikov had turned highly political, and his public position shifted ever further towards the highly conservative reading in (B) in *Illustration 9*. In short, this was a reactionary politics. Indeed, Andrei Khlobystin, who was also the academic secretary of the New Academy and the standard-bearer of the school following Novikov's death, gladly uses the term 'reactionary' when speaking of its leader. Nevertheless, there is a sort of curl of the lip, and a twinkle in the eye when the inner circle uses the term. Clearly it is the cursed question of irony again.

At least until his death, irony remained the mainstay of Novikov's apologists, liberal and reactionary alike.³⁰ What then would a (mock) reactionary understanding of irony look like? The lineage of 'dangerous humour' stretches from Diogenes to

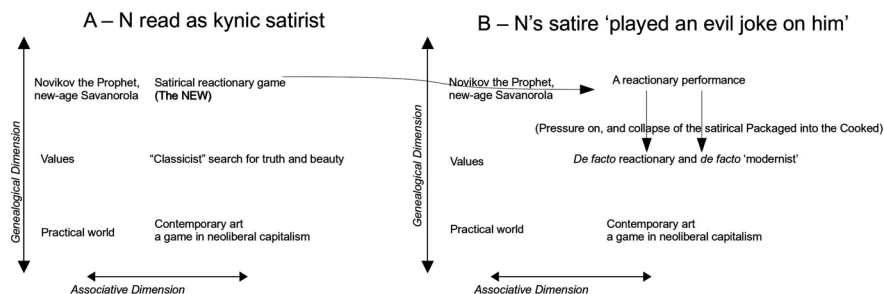
²⁸ Author's interviews/discussions with Viktor Mazin and Andrei Khlobystin, among others.

²⁹ Yurchak 2005:277, Boym 2001, chap. 9, Sloterdijk 1987.

³⁰ This can be seen especially in his obituaries (Stodolsky 2006). For a liberal example, see Olga Kabanova and Nikolai Molok in *Izvestiia* (2002); for a point of view which stands in full sympathy with Novikov's 'dangerous humour' see Aleksei Tsvetkov in the far-right *Zavtra* (2002).

Nietzsche in a tradition of laughing disdain for worldly matters, best described as *kynic satire*.³¹ This was no doubt a key ingredient in Novikov's circle's attitude, epitomised in the subtitle of Ekaterina Andreeva's collection of interviews and essays about Novikov of 2007, *Timur. Vrat' tol'ko pravdu* ('Timur. Lie Only the Truth').³² Let us construct a model of this reading of the author of the *Bonfire*:

Modelling judgements of Novikov as a 'kynic' artist



Variant A: Novikov is an original artist, who created a new artwork. As a truly original work, it created a dialogical shift in the Cooked.

Variant B: The satire is not recognised as satire – it *failed to fail* as an imitation of reaction (being *de facto* reactionary). Novikov is thus an unintentional, hence *self-deceiving poshlyak*. He thinks he is something he is (*de facto*) not: a satirist.

Illustration 10

In (A) in *Illustration 10* above, Novikov is reconstructed as a kynic satirist. Here, I am *assuming* that this political *satire* is *for art's sake*. Novikov's performance as the kynic Savonarola-like Prophet (his Packaged) is thus in some way a true expression of the values of beauty and classicism (his purported Cooked).

Is this genealogy credible? On the occasion of the *Bonfire*, the public was reminded of the story of the famous Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli. Becoming a follower of Savonarola, Botticelli stopped painting, according to the classic source (Vasari 1550), and some maintain that he committed his own works to the flames. This analogy does associate Novikov with Botticelli, but only in that both Botticelli and the New Academy burned art that was *new* to their respective times. So these actions make them reactionaries, and not classicists. Indeed, Savonarola burnt the

³¹ Sloterdijk distinguishes *kynicism*—an oppositional and often visceral, bodily subversion—from the passive 'cynical reason' discussed above and in Yurchak 2005:277 and Sloterdijk 1987. Bakhtin's use of the notion of Mennipean satire is similar (Bakhtin 1973). The Nietzschean tendency, aside from its popularity on the right, regained popularity on the left through the philosophical thought of Deleuze and Guattari. The latter became fashionable in Russian artistic circles from approximately the mid-1990s.

³² The phrase is attributed to Oleg Kotel'nikov (Andreeva 2007:7), although the latter attributes it to Novikov (private conversation with the author, March 2011).

classical Renaissance art that Novikov took as his ideal; so if not his *actions* but Botticelli's *art* was the source of Novikov's attraction, Savonarola's advocating its destruction should have been deeply antipathetic to Novikov.

Something rings false in any case. In what way is the act of burning art—even with the best ironic or kynic intent—in any way connected to classicism? Novikov's ideals of 'beauty', 'light' and 'positive emotions' are nowhere to be found. Instead, we have iconoclasm and destruction. In Novikov's terms, the *Bonfire* is a typically iconoclastic, 'modernist' act. Its results are the charred remains of artworks in an ugly rusty barrel at a disused military installation. What was once the camp *stiob* of dandy 'ironic conservatives' in the 1990s had turned on itself. The Packaged was going *with* the reactionary grain, becoming what it satirised, while the Cooked was becoming what it ostensibly stood against.

One might call this state of affairs '*stiob* gone rotten', a case of *poshlost'*. While a *stiob* copy of something over-identifies with its original to undermine it, in this case it promotes it. In *stiob* an alternative (if unspoken) Cooked can be visualised as being hidden within a mock-loyal Packaged (such as the 'Deed' of *Null Culture* in *Illustration 5 B*). This Packaged is ruptured by *stiob's* absurd humour, un-packaging it, thus giving food for thought (if you'll excuse the pun). In the case of *poshlost'*, on the contrary, the process works from the Packaged down, as it were, rather from the Cooked up (see *Illustration 10 B*). The copy's Packaged becomes a trap, a dead-end for the genealogy of the copy's Cooked. By promoting 'classical' values in the awkward, intentionally over-identified way typical of *stiob*—rather than merely reproducing them as a conservative would—it caps and preserves them badly (to continue the metaphor) and they begin to give off a stench of rot.

Satire (the running *assumption* of the current reading) is by definition a distorted imitation of some original. If it *fails to fail* in its imitation—a double negative—it becomes ever more like the original. A true sign of the collapse of satire is when the satirical act *becomes what it satirises*. This is what we have called '*stiob* gone rotten'. In (B) in *Illustration 10* above, we see the process of Novikov's kynic prophetic-fanatic performance *fail* to *mis-identify* with the original. In this way Novikov's kynic performance becomes a performance of the *de facto* reactionary values. While he attempts kynic satire in search of classicist values in (A), in (B) he is shown to collapse into simply promoting destructive, negative values. As a result, he ends up in the role of a *self-deceiving poshlyak*. Novikov thinks he is something he is not—an *ironic classicist*. In fact, he is a *reactionary modernist*.

This, to be sure, is what is called *tragic irony*. This is not the kind of irony we have been speaking of heretofore, that is, *intentional* irony. The Greek notion of tragic irony involves the divine workings of Fate—as when Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother: it is not of his own choosing. The same could be said of Novikov the kynic ironist. As Mikhail Sidlin wrote in his obituary in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Sidlin 2002), 'his irony played an evil joke on him' (*ironiia sygrala s nim zluu shutku*).

EVIL AND BANALITY

Novikov's fickle game with fascism can only seem banal and *poshly* given the experience of the twentieth century. This is the unfortunate predicament of art in the age of *poshlost'*: its half-ironic strategies slip into a cesspit of bad faith. It is akin to what one might call the 'evil of banality'. It need not be intended, and as such this evil is not direct. Rather, it is a by-product of the moral and often aesthetic vacuum that it opens up.

Of course, this 'evil of banality' is radically different from Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil'. Everyday fascism, Arendt claimed, was not orchestrated by irrational monstrous pervert-villains, but by the average bourgeois bureaucrat, a nine-to-five official. On the most individual level, Arendt saw in this sort of person a 'failure of imagination'. Only in this sense is it similar to the 'evil of banality' described here. As an ironist, Novikov played the mock villain, but was not directly complicit in any crimes. He was, however, not oblivious to the potential outcomes of his personifications. He simply could not take their horrors seriously.

But what would be the case if we were to take Novikov's 'new seriousness' seriously? Further dampening his circle's revelry at the turn of the millennium, Novikov claimed that '[i]t is a new time, not for joking' (*nastupilo vremia, kogda ne do shutok*) (Zlobina-Kutiavina 2000). What would be left of his persona, his art?

In this case, the *Bonfire* could only be seen as a purely destructive political act, with no artistic content. He would also be a failed art-politician, seeing that he acted in a modernist manner. In actual fact, Novikov regularly promoted his 'enemy', contributing to the development of 'modernist' art.³³ What is left of Novikov's persona is a serious, politically-engaged reactionary with a classicist programme. This would admittedly be quite a 'dull' and 'mimic' end for a former laughing cynic. Sadly facts do point to the validity of this interpretation. According to various accounts, Novikov was close to the painter Ilya Glazunov, the chauvinist and anti-Semite, and put him forward when asked to recommend a Russian artist for the Venice Biennale. The teachings of the arch-reactionary Metropolitan John of Saint Petersburg and Ladozhsky also attracted him.³⁴ His flirting with such harsh views could be demonstrated with many further examples.

Reactionary rhetoric has reactionary consequences. Heinrich Heine famously wrote, 'This was a prelude only; where they burn books they will eventually burn people.'³⁵ With the persistent strength and aggression of fascist and ultra-nationalist movements in Russia since the late 1990s, Heine's words once again ring all too true. Novikov's avant-garde 'cool conspiracies' (Chernov 1995), to quote Novikov's friend Kuryokhin, made such opinions palatable—*salonfähig* as the Germans say.

³³ Novikov sat on the board of the 'Andy Warhol Week' in Moscow, for example, which included works from his private collection of Warhol pieces.

³⁴ Interviews (names withheld for personal reasons).

³⁵ 'Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo man Bücher / Verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen'. (Heine 1821)

KYNIC AGAIN

We might remind ourselves that Novikov's circle, whatever their discourse, quite emphatically was not a party of reactionary 'purity' and 'order' in practice. The year after the *Bonfire*, for example, Novikov co-organised the 'Festival of Petersburg Decadence' (Matveeva 1999). For insiders it was clear that Novikov was active in precisely the type of anti-traditional, avant-garde/modernist art which was his sworn enemy. When Novikov, Khlobystin and their circle posed for a now-famous group portrait, axe-in-hand, mock-terrifying grimaces on their faces—they had invited, as chance would have it, a black man to join them. Nobody seems to have raised an eyebrow. Novikov was not a racist—but he thoroughly enjoyed ranting in pseudo-racist tones about Africa's 'war' by 'shamanic magic' on 'classicism' (Novikov 2003).

Likewise, Novikov and Khlobystin's *Bonfire of Modernism* may have been a pleasurable game by its poet-jesters for the proverbial Petersburg court. What of it, if an artwork—a Packaged—leads us astray, plays with our wits? The problem lies in what Alexander Pushkin saw as the danger of 'unconstrained critical genius too quickly turn[ing] poetry into "trivial toys of wit" and sacrific[ing] everything to "the demon of laughter and irony"' (Emerson 1998:660, citing Pushkin). As one of his characters says, admonishing the artist: 'But satire is not criticism; an epigram is not a refutation. I am worrying about the good of literature, not just my own pleasure.' (ibid.)

One would laugh, were it not for the tragic irony of these artists' oeuvre. For the outcome was not some sort of new 'deterritorialized' Cooked, but rather a re-awakening of latent imperial, racist and reactionary tendencies in Russian society. Today, artists and curators are being prosecuted for 'incorrect' art along the lines Novikov semi-mockingly proposed (RFE/RL 2010).

SUSANIN GONE ASTRAY

Playful irony and reactionary politics, classicism and avant-garde technique, anti-modernism and PR sensationalism are strange fellow-travellers. In Novikov's oeuvre, they were kept from parting ways through an ongoing charade of declared and implied intentions. The tensions to which the mutually contradictory judgements to which his works gave rise—the multi-lectic whole—were at the heart of his audience's sustained interest. In the above exegesis, my method has been to follow each of the possible readings of the artist's intentions through to its ultimate conclusions. As a tool, the multi-lectic method allowed a certain kind of mapping, showing hidden stepping stones over the quicksand and through the insect-ridden swamps of Petersburgian postmodernism. Following each path we found ourselves at a dead-end, deceived by trickery. At times, even the leader himself was seen to be (self-)deceived.

Yet looking at the map as a whole, we finally catch a glimpse of the artist. For him, perhaps, all but the *cognoscenti* sympathetic to his cause were invaders on his territory of art, trying to besiege and pen him in with rational, ethical, political and stylistic demarcations—the very tools he used as instruments in his manoeuvres. Leading the 'invaders' astray in the urge to remain free of all constraints—regardless

of the collateral costs, and regardless of where the path would lead—is the recurring narrative of this postmodern-day tragic Ivan Susanin.³⁶

Indeed, the need to escape the existing order, and general scepticism of all forms of politically or culturally ‘correct’ norms is a hallmark of the nonconformist intelligentsia of the *perestroika* generation. Its ingrained distrust of authority and absurd sense of humour had its origins deep in the Soviet period. This experience created many grandiose desires, and left behind many unresolved traumas and few enduring beliefs. Anything could emerge from this pure irrational form with a huge empty hole in it. It was, as it were, a giant *Null Object*.

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³⁶ Legend has it that the folk hero Ivan Susanin saved Russia’s tsar elect Mikhail Romanov during the Time of Troubles by leading Polish invaders astray, deep into a wintry forest. *Susanin* was, in fact, the title of one of Khlobystin’s satirical periodicals (Khlobystin 2010).

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