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**DADAISM AND SURREALISM IN UNOFFICIAL
CULTURE OF LATE SOCIALISM**

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Examining the 'own-alienation' opposition in the cultural materials of late socialism, we use a methodology of reception - an analysis of the perception of one cultural phenomenon in relation to an alien foreign culture. Here, the following issues are of importance:

- how the original source was perceived: directly or indirectly;
- what is in the original, but absent in the borrowed text;
- in the context of which ideas and approaches is the original source perceived;
- what appears in the borrowed text, that was absent in the original source.

At the same time, behind the own-alien opposition, stands a conception of Russian as distorted western, which is discussed in this article with the unofficial culture of the 1950s-1980s being taken as an example. These concepts and their interaction are significant in the history of late Soviet culture, as the western culture, which there was tendency to adopt, was alien. Information on western culture was in great demand as it was believed that an information vacuum existed in the USSR. This was a consequence of the 'iron curtain' - a myth created by the western mass media. In fact, this example convincingly demonstrates that mass media myths, in certain cases, can create reality.

The myth of an information vacuum can only be overturned with difficulty, though it requires certain amendments. Often, western culture was not as poorly represented in the Soviet press as is often imagined. In the 1960s, for example, in the *Inostrannaya Literatura* (Foreign Literature) magazine, one could find many pieces on modernism, say, or on contemporary western culture. For example, back in 1960, on its pages were published

extracts from [Jack Kerouac](#)'s novel *On the Road*, and, in the *Den' za dnem* (Day After Day), one could find out what [Federico Fellini](#), [Paolo Pasolini](#) and [Andrzej Wajda](#) and many others were working on. It seems clear that the generation of the 1960s-70s were, to some extent, more informed about western culture than the generation of the perestroika period and the following period of liberalisation, despite a situation being created where information was more accessible and the iron curtain ceased to exist. Thus, in the years of late socialism, information on western culture was in great demand because of the very existence of the myth of the '[iron curtain](#)'.

It would be wrong to limit the alien in the 1950s-1980s to the merely western. An interest in the 'East' - the religious practises of Hinduism, Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, as well as ancient eastern literature - was often even more widespread. Nevertheless, this interest came via western culture, the ideology of which in the post-war period became Zen Buddhist. One of the most indicative texts in this context was [Salinger](#)'s *Catcher in the Rye*, which was popular in the USSR in the 1960s. The abstract expressionism of [Jackson Pollock](#), whose spontaneous techniques were largely founded on the Buddhist concepts of pure, unconscious action, had a significant influence on the work of the Leningrad artists Yevgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko and Mikhail Kulakov. Equally important for the Soviet underground was the minimalism of [John Cage](#). The Zen Buddhist concept of a void seen as the content of a work of art was clearly expressed in the work of the Leningrad artist and poet [Yuri Galetsky](#), *Pustota* (Emptiness). His concrete and graphic poetry were equally characteristic in this context.

There was also a Russian 'internal' interest in the 'East'. An example is provided by the religious-philosophical studies of [Nikolai Rerikh](#), who, in fact, shared in an earlier wave of western orientalism, which came at the beginning of the Modernist era. The French impressionists had an interest in the 'Chinese' decorative style back in the 1880s. In the 1890s, this interest spread amongst the members of the post-impressionist [Nabis group](#). Of the Russian artists of the early 19th Century that had an interest in the 'East', in the western style, [Sergei Eisenstein](#) is particularly worthy of note. The Russian interest in the 'East' was mediated by western culture. On the basis of these observations, when speaking of the alien in post-Soviet culture, we have in mind western culture.

We should not overlook the function of the western in mass culture. For late soviet society, what was western was fashionable. Western symbols adorned the interiors of apartments during the period. Native masks,

pennants from the town of Schumen, black and white photos of Buddha from Polish magazines, posters from *Rolling Stone* magazine and portraits of Holden Caulfield, the central character in *Catcher in the Rye* could be found on the walls. On the refrigerator there would be a sticker bearing photos of oranges from Morocco. One of the clearest symbols of the West in late Soviet everyday reality was a coffeemaker. People began to make espresso in Leningrad at the beginning of the 1960s. Coffee shops appeared and were always packed with customers. They would attract the bohemian set along with 'fartsovshiki' (illegal traders in jeans, records, chewing gum, etc). The western in the 1950s-1980s was in demand at different levels: both in 'high' culture and in the everyday lives of mass culture.

The Western as Avant-Garde

It seems likely that the central concept in the interest in western culture was the avant-garde - experimental, non-realistic (non-mimetic), non-traditional, orientated towards modernism in the arts. From the end of the 1950s, exhibitions of modernist art in Moscow and Leningrad were extremely popular (contemporary artists were only rarely exhibited in the USSR). One of the heroes of the 'Thaw' was [Pablo Picasso](#). Visitors to the coffee shop on Malaya Sadovaya knew how many cups of coffee a day the great artist drank and tried to follow his example. [Andrei Voznesensky](#), a leading poet who gained mass popularity, was a modernist lyric poet. It is indicative that, even back in the mid-1960s, he published a calligram cycle of poems (a poetic genre invented by Guillaume Apollinaire). Another cult artist of the late socialist period was Ernst Neizvestny, an abstractionist whose works were steeped in a civic and political pathos. Ilya Glazunov, an artist who gained popularity in the late 70s-80s, can be seen as a representative of late modernism and, notably, the Soviet pop-art tradition.

The avant-garde was fashionable for the mass-intelligentsia culture. At the same time, there was an 'elitist' avant-garde, orientated towards the more marginalized forms belonging to that tradition - Surrealism, Dadaism, Expressionism (as well as the Russian avant-garde: Kazimir Malevich, Pavel Filonov, Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, the OBERIU group). It was the marginal, apolitical, asocial avant-garde that lay at the foundation of the so-called unofficial culture.

Unofficial culture is deemed non-state art that is excluded from the official

institutions (the Union of Writers, the Union of Artists, the Union of Composers, the Union of Theatre Activists). It arose on the wave of the liberalizing processes that came during the period of the 'Thaw' in the late 1950s and ended after perestroika - at the end of the 1980s. The artists that could not operate professionally and were part of the unofficial culture, promoted the ideas of experimentalism, modernism and the non-traditional arts. They had a particular orientation towards the western arts that was of an avant-garde character, though those arts were not well-known in the USSR. The marginal avant-garde closely followed western art and its proponents were central figures in the process of assimilating alien late Soviet cultures. They can be considered to be the key figures in the reception of the western avant-garde.

Unofficial culture was diverse. As a totality, it can be characterized as a late modernist phenomenon - the preservation and reproduction of images of the modernism of the first half of the 20th Century. In a series of cases, the late modernism of unofficial authors was archaic in character, doing little to develop the original historical source and limiting itself to reproducing something analogous.

The avant-garde experiments were striking examples of creativity that can be deemed unofficial. The avant-garde represented the most radical and significant movement within the unofficial community. In particular, the writers of the older (Vladimir Ufland, Alexander Kondratov, Mikhail Krasilnikov, the VERPA group, Vladlen Gavrilchik, Yuri Galetsky) and the middle (Leon Bodgandov, A.Nik, the Khelenukty group, Boris Konstriktor, Alexander Gornon) generations of unofficial culture were aligned to this group, which also included avant-garde artists such as Anatoly Gunitsky, Sergei Kuryokhin, Timur Novikov, Giorgy Guryanov and Sergei Bugaev.

In my opinion, the western avant-garde element within unofficial culture was founded on two European artistic movements of the first half of the last century - Dada and Surrealism. From the 1960s, the slang word 'surr' became commonplace amongst bohemians. One of the most popular films of the 1960s-80s was *Un Chien Andalou*, followed by *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. In Leningrad, in the mid-1980s, the *Pesnya dadaista* (Song of the Dadaist), to the poem by Tristan Tzara (performed by the Stranniye Igray (Strange Games) group) was a hit.

The Two Sources of the Western Avant-

Garde: Dada and Surrealism

Here, we shall not examine Russian examples of the avant-garde, such as Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, the OBERIU group and several others. They are as important as western sources, but they are not examined here as they cannot be included in our study of the alien as an orientation towards the western.

As we said at the beginning of the lecture, we are employing a receptive scheme. We will cover those sources from which information about Dada and Surrealism was gathered during the period of late socialism. We should note what was present and what was absent in the Russian retellings and presentation of the information. We shall see which elements of Dadaism and Surrealism can be found in the works of unofficial culture.

The sources from which the information on these artistic movements could be gathered were, primarily, Soviet monographs and brochures criticizing the bourgeois capitalist arts. Often, they contained information on the works or artistic practices, which were subjected to criticism. One of the clearest and most well-intentioned of books of this kind was the work of Lifshits and Rheinhardt, *Krizis Bezobraziya* (The Crisis of Deformity). Another source was provided by contemporary periodicals - first and foremost, the *Inostrannaya Literatura* (Foreign Literature) magazine. The most inquisitive read old magazines (*Internatsionalnaya Literatura* (International Literature)).

The precursors of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, for Russian authors, can be considered to be Guillaume Apollinaire, who invented the word 'surrealism'. He defined the drama *The Breast of Tiresias* as Surrealist. Similarly, that author influenced the Dadaists in the sphere of graphic, visual poems. Certain calligrams were published in Russian translation in the 1967 collection (*Golubka* (Dove), *Nochnaya Poezdka* (Night Trip)). These texts are comparable with Leonid Aronzon's poem [Pustoi Sonet](#) (Empty Sonnet, 1969). In 1971, a Russian translation of a book by the Polish academic Yulia Hartwig, covering the life and work of Apollinaire, was published. This monograph, along with the memoirs of Ilya Erenburg and excerpts from the reminiscences of Francis Carco and an Ernest Hemingway book, can be considered to be the main sources on the basis of which the bohemian community of the late Soviet period was formed.

Dadaism

Dadaism brought several important innovations into unofficial culture.

1. The collage techniques of writing arose on the basis of the Dadaist sources. A good example would be the cycle of collage-poems entitled *Dada* by the poet VNE, who belonged to the Khelenukty group. It seems they were created on the basis of the myth of the hat of Dadaists. As follows from an article by Kulikova, *Estetika i praktika syurrealizma* (The Aesthetics and Practise of Surrealism) (in *Kritika osnovnykh napravlenii sovremennoi burzhuznoi estetiki* (Criticism of the Main Tendencies in Contemporary Bourgeois Aesthetics 1968. p.188), the Dadaists created poems from words cut out of newspapers, put in a hat and then picked out by chance. The poems of VNE were written in an analogous manner, as was the *Chasy* cycle by Aronzon and Earl (to the words of Anna Akhmatova).

Another clear example of collage technique comes from the songs of Alexei KHVOSTenko and Anri Volokhonsky, in which prepared melodies are used within the framework of a 'ready-made' technique, invented by a participant in the Dadaist movement, [Marcel Duchamp](#). For example, *Orlandina*, written to the motifs of a novella by Jan Potocky (*Manuscript Found in Saragosa*) and filmed by Wojciech Has, was popular in Leningrad in the second half of the 1960s.

2. Dadaism brought to unofficial literature an irrationality of the text, which is to say an absence of content in the literary work, as well as the idea of pagan chaos which followed from the criticism of language as a basis for social ordering. It was these features that were described in an article by Balashov from *Istoriya frantsuzskogo literatury* (The History of French Literature v.3, 1963, p.142-143), dedicated to Dadaism and Surrealism. As an example of the reception of this, we can take the text from the third VERPA compilation - the poems of Ivan Steblin-Kamensky, which are formed from lists of words. Alternatively, we can take the text of A.KHVOSTenko - *Yeyo techot korma* from the fourth VERPA compilation.

3. Another significant influence on Dadaism was provided by the infantile artistic practices characteristic of the avant-garde of the beginning of the century. They became a reality in the behaviour of the Khelenukty group. In addition, in the ideological-collective works of Dada and the Khelenukty group, we can note a shared technique - the reduction to absurd of the clichéd language of newspaper slogans. The Dada manifesto, *Down With Combed Chicory*, viewed from this stylistic viewpoint, can be put alongside the 'polemical' text of the Khelenukty group - *Obuzdat bzdunov i*

obmanshikov.

Surrealism

As has been noted, the slang term 'surr' became a key word for unofficial culture. It was directly connected to other central concepts of that environment - the notion of the absurd. The poet and compiler of an anthology of the latest Russian poetry *U Goluboi Laguny* (By the Blue Lagoon), Konstantin Kuzminsky, sees its roots in operations on language clichés:

As the girlfriend of my former fourth wife, also from the Theatrical Institute, liked to joke: from the textbook on judicial-medical examination. Strict, in glasses, a couple enters the room, hugging each other, thrilled - and intones, adjusting the glasses: 'The pose of the corpse is evidence of rape.' The couple disintegrate [...] Oh great, powerful and free! Why look afar for surr and the roots of absurdism? The great is with us. [...]

And then the pose of the corpse. The corpse took up a pose. The call-sign of the corpse. - a strict associative series. From here come the plays of Khvost-Entin-Erl-Galetsky. (Kuzminsky K. *Malaya Sadovaya. Neoberiuty. Erl// Antologija noveishei russkoi poezii "U Goluboi Laguny"*, v.4A, Newtonville, 1983. C.194-198).

Surrealism touches upon many other key concepts that define unofficial artistic practices. We shall stress just a few of them.

1. For unofficial authors and, in particular, the VERPA and Khelenukty groups, the 'author-matic' writing of the Surrealists was an extremely important technique. Both groups practiced the collective creativity which was often fixated on the psychical sensations of the participants in a 'séance' or literal, automatic writing down of a conversation taking place between them. For example, we can take the series of plays written by KHVOSTenko, Galetsky and Entin and certain other 'dramagedies' of the Khelenukty group. Here, the ideas which the unofficial authors could gather from the article by Balashov mentioned above are important: the blending of dream and reality through the medium of automatic writing, the achievement of sur-reality (p.149); the omnipotence of dreams: psychical automatism, thought dictation, the fixation of thought-dreams (p.150).

2. The quasi-scientific avant-garde letter was overshadowed by the experiments of the Surrealists. An example is provided by the forms of the Bureau of Surrealist Research (I.Kulikova. *Estetika i praktika syurrealizma*

(Aesthetics and Practise in Surrealism) p. 183). Analogous examples can be found in the works of VERPA and the Khelenukty group. It shouldn't be forgotten that the Surrealist ideas of 'dreams' can also be found in other works. Thus, the above-mentioned film by Has, *Manuscript Found in Saragosa*, motivated the writing of the song *Orlandina* to a greater extent than the book, as the adaptation is founded on the motif of a sleep from which the central character cannot awake - a central motif in Surrealist aesthetics.

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Thus, viewing western avant-garde as being alien, we have found several aspects of influence through reception of Dadaism and Surrealism. These artistic tendencies brought experimental approaches and techniques (collage, automatic writing), as well ideas for the representation of the artistic (infantilism, the work of art as dream).

Viitteet

[1] *Inostrannaja literatura* -lehti oli tärkein neuvostoajan lehti, josta sai tietoa länsimaisesta kirjallisuudesta (ja osin kulttuuristakin). Nimenomaan tässä lehdessä julkaistiin "suojasään" ja pysähtyneisyyden kauden suosituimmat ulkomaalaiset teokset. Ks. [Inostrannaja literatura](#) -lehti nykytilassaan.

[2] Jevgeni Mikhnov-Vojtenko ja Mihail Kulakov olivat 60-luvun alussa työnsä aloittaneita abstraktionisti-taiteilijoita. Erinomaisia esimerkkejä leningradilaisesta absurdismista, jossa yhdistyy newyorkilainen uusabstraktionismi, zen-buddhismi ja OBERIU-traditio. Juri Galetski taas on Absurdisti-runoilija, prosaisti, näytelmäkirjailija ja taiteilija, edellisten oppilas. Muutti väliillä pois Venäjältä, mutta palasi takaisin perestroikan myötä. Julkaissut paljon samizdat-lehdistössä [runojaan](#).

[3] Kuvallisuuden ja runouden yhdistävä genre, jonka kehitti ranskalainen runoilija [Guillaume Apollinaire](#) (1880-1918). Apollinaire oli "symbolismin viimeisin edustaja", joka vaikutti voimakkaasti ensimmäisen maailmansodan jälkeiseen ranskalaiseen kirjallisuuteen ja kuvataiteeseen, etupäässä surrealismin ja futurismin. Ks. Apollinaren [kalligrammi](#), joka on ensimmäinen häneltä julkaistu teos Neuvostoliitossa.

[4] [Ernst Neizvestnyi](#) (1926-). Tunnetuimpia venäläisen uudemman avantgarden nimiä. Voidaan pitää jo klassikkona. Kuvanveistäjä, joka oli mukana kaikissa merkittävimmässä 1950-luvun lopun ja 1960-luvun avangarde-taiteen näyttelyissä ja liikkeissä. Julkisen uransa aikana Neuvostoliitossa (1945-76) sekä sai tunnustusta että oli vainon kohteena. George Costakis - venäläisen taiteen kuuluisa kreikkalainen mesenaatti - osti hänen töitään jo 60-luvulla. Emigroitui Yhdysvaltoihin 1976. Kuuluisia teoksia: *Gigantomachia* (1962-77). Ilja Glazunov (1930-) herätti 60-luvulla virallista pahennusta avoimesti uskonnollisella tematiikallaan ja kuvastollaan, mutta sai sitten sille hyväksynnän. Taiteen nationalistiset painotukset tekivät hänestä jo neuvostoaikana mm. Neuvostoliiton kansantaiteilijan (narodnyi artist) arvolla palkitun hovitaiteilijan. Maalasi mm. Urho Kekkosen muotokuvan.

[5] Tällaisia [venäläisiä avantgardisteja](#) ovat [Kasimir Malevitsh](#), [Pavel Filonov](#), [Velimir Hlebnikov](#), [Aleksi Krutshenyh](#) ja OBERIU-ryhmä.

[6] Näitä virallisia instituutioita olivat kirjailijaliitto, taiteilijaliitto, säveltäjäliitto ja näyttelijätyöntekijöiden liitto.

[7] VERPA - kirjallinen ryhmä, joka toimi Leningradissa v:sta 1964 n. v:een 1970-71. Harjoittivat

absurdismia ja saivat oppinsa pop-taiteesta ja konkretismista. Ryhmään kuuluivat Aleksei Hvostenko ja Anri Volohonski. Kirjoittaneet mm. venäläisen rockin klassikon - "Gorod"-laulun sanat - jonka Akvarium-yhtye on tehnyt tunnetuksi rock-elokuvassa ASSA.

[8] Helenuktit - kirjallinen ryhmä, joka toimi Leningradissa v:sta 1965 n. v:een 1970-71. Harjoittivat absurdismia taiteessa ja kirjallisuudessa, ottivat oppinsa dadaismin, surrealismin jha venäläisen futurismin avantgardistisesta traditiosta. Ryhmään kuuluivat Vlarimir Erl', Dm. M., Aleksandr Mironov, VNE jne.

[9] Vanhemman sukupolven nimiä ovat mm. Vladimir Ufljand, Aleksandr Kondratov, Mihail Krasilnikov, Vladlen Gavriltsjik, Juri Galetski, keskimmäistä edustavat: Leon Bogdanov, A. Nik, Helenuktit, Boris Konstriktor, Aleksandr Gornon. Nuorin sukupolvi: Anatoli Gunitski, Sergei Kurjohin, Timur Novikov, Georgi Gurjanov, Sergei Bugaev.

[10] Dadaistin laulun on kirjoittanut dadaisti-runoilija Tristan Tzara, ja laulun esitti tuolloin kulttiasemassa ollut rockyhtye Strannye igry.

[11] Ks Kulikova 1968, 188.

[12] "Orlandina"-laulu (levyltä *Tshainik vina*) löytyy real audio -muodossa ja tekstinä Auktskyon-yhtyeen viralliselta kotisivulta [[real audio](#)] [[teksti](#)].

[13] Ks. Balashova 1963, 142-143.

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