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RUSSIAN ROCK: BORIS GREBENSCHIKOV, INTERTEXTUALIST

Introduction

There are, spread through Western research circles, many stereotypical ideas about Russian or Soviet rock, as there are about Russian culture in general. Saturated with symbols, borrowings, and alien signs, Russian culture - its vast semiotics - entices one towards external understanding, generalization, and superficiality. It is regrettably rare for researchers to be interested in self-understanding, which, however, can be considered the precondition for cultural understanding - that is, for how a culture defines its own in relation to the alien, i.e. what its identity is composed of.

Russian rock and popular culture offer a frame of reference, in which cultural quotation is the starting point, but in which a crucial position is occupied by the key process of self-understanding: making something one's own, producing one's own from an alien starting point [1]. In this context I will handle Russian rock, not only as a cultural-historical subject, but also as a powerfully semioticised concept, which has abundant, mutually diverging connotations. The subject is the work of the so-called "father" of the Russian rock-lyric, Boris Grebenschikov (BG), and the way in which Russian rock's peculiarity - the relation between own and alien - is reflected in his work.

The defining dynamic of Grebenschikov's work is the relation of his own text to the alien, because he is a thoroughgoing intertextualist, who combines various sources, cultures, literatures, and texts in his work. In this his closest kin, besides his American colleagues Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan, are Russian poets from the beginning of the 20th century, especially the symbolists.

One of the defining features of Russian culture is considered to be its logocentrism, its word- and literature-centredness, the fact that literature

has a dominating and especially significant position in the culture, while in Western European culture, for instance, audiovisual media are seen to have a more emphatic role. Even within Russian culture, this idea is certainly giving way and changing, but certain phenomena, such as the colossal scope of the myth and ceremonious cult around the national poet Aleksandr Pushkin, testify to the continuing power, even today, of this logocentrism. There was a desire in Soviet culture to maintain the over-emphasized position of the writer and of literature, as well as to maintain the myth of Russians as the world's most well-read people. So the classics, from Pushkin to Gogol, Dostoevskij, and Tolstoj, grew into mammoths, and Soviet writers, too, sought a similarly mammoth scale, not just to be poets or prose-writers, but to become social influences, moral educators, etc. The latest indication of this could be Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's fate in the early 1990s, with his messianic endeavours and their failure.

Russian rock's text-centredness can also justifiably be held up as an example of this special cultural feature. In Western and Russian research, this text-centredness has from time to time been presented as a consequence of the material poverty of Soviet rock, the inadequacy of equipment, or the poor level of recordings (all considered from the Western standpoint), to name a few. But this is not a sufficient argument; above all, the Russian rock-lyric must be seen against its historical background and intertextual sources. For the early makers of Soviet rock, bardic culture has a particularly special meaning, as does early 20th-century Russian literature (symbolism, futurism, absurdism, acmeism, etc.). The underground frame of reference, in which the Russian-language rock-lyric was born, is strongly literary. Likewise, the influences adopted from the West represent text-centered rock, such as Bob Dylan, whom Maik Naumenko translated copiously and from whom Naumenko adopted song motifs, or Jim Morrison, a model for many other Russians.

There are many stereotypes connected with the choice of Western influences adopted in Soviet and Russian rock and the manner of their adoption, but there are also undeniable special features connected with the semiotics of Russian culture.

According to Yuri Lotman, the famous semiotician from Tartu university, adoption and interaction between two cultures can, from the receiving culture's perspective, be divided into five stages - see Lotman's scheme. It's clear that this conditional scheme will never be completely fulfilled in reality, so that it can be applied only partially.

BG & Jim Morrison: Cultivating the Lyrical Subject

Starting points for Boris Grebenschikov's work include such rock classics as Jim Morrison, Bob Dylan, David Bowie, and Lou Reed. Influences of all these role-models are clearly visible in the various periods of BG's work - nor is BG the only one who adopted whole phrases or "concepts" from Morrison's or Dylan's texts, for example, and gave them a completely new meaning due to the context, simply by translating them into Russian.

Morrison's starting points are already quite literary (e.g. influences from Baudelaire and Sartre are often evident in his lyrics), and Grebenschikov also strives for an impression born from these same starting points. Sartre loomed large in the underground culture of BG's generation, and this can be seen in BG's texts (*Dva traktorista* [mp3] and *Ivanov* [mp3]).

Let us consider, for instance, the legendary Morrison phrase, and the title of his biography, *No one here gets out alive* [2], and how it translates into Russian in Grebenschikov's song, "Nikto iz nas ne vyjdet otsyuda zhivym" [text] [mp3]. One of the central motifs of Morrison's work is the thought of a visionary who has a visual connection to "the other side" [3]. From this continual aspiration towards the other side comes The Doors' name and philosophy. BG links himself to this visionary in the song, "Nikto iz nas ne vyjdet . . ." Thus, BG uses a direct and unambiguous quotation to get his hands on a Morrison-motif that is important to him, the question of an alternative reality.

One of BG's central recurring motifs of the 1980s is "the other side of the mirror." For the Russian lyric, the unreal dimension offered by rock opens doors to the other side, which is continually paralleled with Soviet reality. The relation to that reality is crucial to BG in the 1980s: he repeatedly handles a situation in which the lyrical subject is outside or above the surrounding reality. At the same time, Grebenschikov faces the same question as the early 20th-century Russian poets: how can one express the concepts and phenomena of another reality, if there are no words for them? The basic trinity covering his whole work is clear: Western rock-culture, Soviet reality, and the Russian literary tradition (especially modernism).

The other side of the mirror or glass, signifying the presence of a second and parallel reality, is a conspicuously frequent symbol in BG's work:

examples include *Peski Peterburga* [mp3], *Marina* [mp3], *Vystreli s toj storony* [mp3], and *S toj storony zerkal'nogo stekla* [mp3].

Repeated motifs and symbols, such as the mirror's other side, are typical in Grebenschikov's work, and in his texts from the 1980s one can easily detect a very limited vocabulary, which leads to continual repetition and the attribution of new meanings. It is as if he creates a great mantra around his lyrical subject, a task that succeeds with the help of the narrow vocabulary. This fits in very well with the emphasis in his work on the idea of cyclicality, as well as with Zen Buddhism which, when combined with Orthodoxy, forms a syncretistic equation.

In Grebenschikov's work, the text has a layered structure, in which the intertextual and intratextual interplay get mixed together. He quotes himself or recycles his text, thus making it esoteric and difficult to unfold. All these features open onto the background of Grebenschikov's work, where the traditions of Russian modernism can be seen, especially those of Russian symbolism. Besides the fact that he recycles his text, he also constructs a myth about himself:

> My mother said, "Fly lower."
>
> My wife said, "You'll sink to the bottom."
>
> But I live in the eye of the hurricane,
>
> Up or down - it doesn't matter.
>
> [*Tsentr tsiklona*] [mp3]

The text of *Tsentr tsiklona* is in a key position in Grebenschikov's works of the 1990s: in it the mythologically based search for a cyclical center (in contrast to the vertical-horizontal opposition) is very revealing from the standpoint of the image of the lyrical subject. It must be understood particularly against the background of Russian Symbolism.

In the spirit of a "neo-mythologism" [4] typical of symbolism, Grebenschikov constructs a myth about his life, a myth in which it is not just by chance that the pair of letters BG turns into the word Bog. In Russian symbolism, cyclicality and a cyclical concept of time have a special meaning connected with a mythologistic worldview. But we are interested now in the "cult" of BG's lyrical subject and in the conspicuous role, shared by Morrison and Grebenschikov, as an aspirant to the "other world," or as a "theurgist." These are characteristics that are particularly connected with the Russian symbolists' world-view, and this fact also influences their way

of shaping the world through their texts polygenetically. This polygenetic quotation [4] is also a feature characteristic of the Russian symbolists, a feature closely tied to the mythologism of their work and world-view. In the intertextuality of Russian rock classics, there are always at least two starting points: Russia's own literary tradition and Western rock-lyric tradition. Often one runs up against the charge of imitation and belated copying: in Grebenschikov's case, direct quotations have been taken as evidence of this. To this charge, Grebenschikov offers a reply that ties him to symbolist mythologism:

8th-century Celtic bards - I understand their work methods. In my opinion, everything else is poor [...] Bards operated naturally in four or five mythologies, languages, cultures. And, on top of that, the listeners even understood them. In five lines, five different cultures were borrowed. And all this was gathered into an absurdly complicated and clever system [...] [5]

And so, in the song *Elektricheskij pes* [text] [mp3], there can be found quotations from Aleksandr Blok's and Mihail Svetlov's poems, a modified quotation from Hamlet and a fragment from Bulat Okudzhava. Besides his aforementioned rock idols and Russian poets, BG quotes Indian and Chinese religious mystics, the book of Revelations, Lomonosov, French poets (e.g. Apollinaire), and others. Grebenschikov does not conceal his sources of inspiration, and he willingly tells critics about those of his sources that the critics have not noticed. A new whole, the creation of a social and cultural frame of reference, is the goal of his polygenetic quotation, so that the task is definitely constructive, rather than the deconstructive task of his fellow post-modernists. In this respect he proves to be very close to bards, such as A. Galich or A. Bashlachev, but the rock lyric is, nevertheless, more removed from the presentation of one's own poems than the bardic lyric is.

The counterweight to this textual and cultural polygenesis is Grebenschikov's quite monotonous melodic repertoire - he has been accused of being "monomelodist and multiculturalist". But we obtain another perspective by considering his work's unity, if we approach all of it as a single text. This unity is connected to ritual and function in a song's melody; melodies in a particular style acquire a certain social role. This feature can be seen especially clearly in the records of the 1990s, in which certain melodies recycle a unified broader text from album to album. In this way we also find a series of albums from the 1990s in which the unifying

motifs are the melodies themselves. Viewing one's own work as a unified text, which for Grebenschikov is clear in, e.g., a somewhat restricted vocabulary, can easily be seen in conjunction with the symbolist idea of the author's work as a unified "novel" with a plot.

In Grebenschikov's texts of the 1980s, attention is drawn to the position of the lyrical subject. He usually perceives the world from above, from outside, from a mountainas part of a dream, from a wall, in such songs as *Pesnya dlya novogo byta* [mp3], *Sidya na krasivom holme* [mp3], *Aristokrat* [mp3], and *Sny o chem-to bol'shem* [mp3].

By placing itself outside or above everyday reality, Grebenschikov's lyrical subject assures his position in relation to Soviet reality. He is either on the boundary - a mediating figure between present reality and "the other reality" - or else examining present reality from the perspective of the other reality. The social aspect in this relation can fall a bit short, but it turns out to be essential in examining the difference between Morrison and Grebenschikov as theurgic figures. Considerably later, on the *Lilith* album of 1998, Grebenschikov contributes to this theurgic figure something from a completely different culture. *Bolota Nevy* [mp3], a text strongly bound to the myth of St. Petersburg, which itself is one of the most notable characteristics linking Grebenschikov's work to the Russian literary tradition, also includes the idea of B(o)G-theurgy, which comes to bring a relieving message in the midst of a Petersburgian ecocatastrophe.

BG and Bob Dylan: Making the Alien His Own

BG's *Lilith* album, on which he is accompanied by The Band, a legendary group that have also played with Bob Dylan, can be considered in general as a sort of tribute to Dylan or as a huge Dylan-quotation. The first song on the record, *Esli by ne ty* [mp3], borrows its very title from Dylan's *If Not for You*; *Ten'* (Shadow) [mp3] seems to be based on *What Was It You Wanted?* from Dylan's *Oh Mercy*; and *Moj drug doktor* [mp3] recalls Dylan's classic, *Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues*.

In Grebenschikov's work of the 1990s, one piece can be found that, with the aid of literary and cultural quotation, powerfully reflects Russia's current situation. This piece is *Drevnerusskaya toska* (Old Russian Longing) [mp3], in which swaggering, SUV-driving, nouveau-riche mafiosi are portrayed as boyars, young intelligentsia who abandon their country are named after the

heroes of the epic folk poems called "bylina", Hare Krishna monks are equated with rows of Young Pioneers, and so on. In other words, everything happening in 1990s Russia is reflected through a cultural-historical prism.

The song's first lines lead us into classic Russian literature:

> Where, troika, are you rushing,
> Where are you traveling?
> The driver's snatched some vodka again
> Or slumped over on the coachman's seat.
> The wheels have been taken to a museum
> - The museum's been taken away, too.
> And in homes there echoes a sad song
> Or inconsolable weeping.
> Just as the saints predicted,
> The land is hanging by a thread.
> I can see through the Old Russian longing.

It is not difficult to guess the identity of that driver who sits at the reins of the wheelless troika Russia, slumped over on the coachman's seat, since his bumbling figure was the object of the whole world's constant attention only a few years ago. Also familiar is the Slavic melancholy ("In homes there echoes a sad song...") borrowed from a poem by Nikolaj Nekrasov, the well-known folk-inspired poet; this melancholy acquires completely new dimensions in a Russia struggling in the grips of a market economy. The feeling is indisputably apocalyptic, but much else can also be found from the quotations.

The song's apocalyptic feeling, monotonous melody, chord changes, and rhythm point strongly to *Political World* (1989), a song on Bob Dylan's *Oh Mercy* album. Grebenschikov turns the universal questions of Dylan's broadside into the question of Russian culture's fate. If we think of Dylan's song as Grebenschikov's starting point, we can conclude the following: at the beginning of the song he translates an alien text into his own language by relating it to his own tradition, and then depends on a reference to the famous troika comparison from Nikolai Gogol's classic novel, *Dead Souls* (1842):

Where are you speeding, Russia, pray tell? It won't tell. The bells break into a wonderful jingling; the air, ripped to shreds, starts roaring and becomes wind; everything on earth flies by, and other peoples and states, looking at

it disapprovingly, stand aside and give it way.

Russian rock-culture - like the ideas, trends, ideologies, and -isms in the overall Russian cultural mosaic of quotation - is a peculiar Russianisation from Western culture: it is something born when an "alien," adopted idea crashes into Russia's "own" cultural context [6]. In Grebenschikov's work, this distinctiveness is seen as a strong intertextuality, a continual reference, not only to the Russian literary tradition, but also to the conventions of Western rock and to other rock texts. All in all, the dynamics of his work are a unique mixture of fanatically Russian and extremely Western components.

The Russian Album - Russia and Syncretism

In 1991, Grebenschikov made a decisive turn that affected his work of the 1990s: he founded a new group, the BG band, and recorded something completely alien to his well-known style, a kind of synthesis, a whole not without contradictions, a whole called *Russkij al'bom* (Russian Album).

Undisputably, *Russkij Al'bom* can be spoken of as a work, because it is the most unified of Grebenschikov's albums. The synthesization of the whole is surprising, because it would be hard to find a more splintered time in Russian history. On the other hand, the historical context explains much of the work's thematics: it is a heavily apocalyptic and specifically "Russian" album, which is dedicated to questions about Slavic mythology, history, symbolism, and future prospects. The frame of reference in which the *Russkij Al'bom* was born includes the reality of Russia's most recent revolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the toppling of statues, and Yeltsin's revolutionary-romantic rise to power.

Nationalistic ideas are naturally very close to the surface in Russian culture these days, and there are very imaginative combinations containing Orthodoxy, Communism, and nationalism. At the same time, Grebenschikov, who had been the figurehead of the dissident youth of the 1980s, but who had just attempted a breakthrough in America (in 1989) and had lost his figurehead position along the way - this "former" rock star suddenly makes a "Russian" album, the immediate connotations of which bring to mind national Orthodoxy. But Grebenschikov's approach is syncretistic and neomythological - he takes his sources once again from various eras, in order to explain Russia's new upheavals. There is nothing

monologic in Grebenschikov's Russian study; there is, instead, a seemingly chaotic mixture of times and realities. Musically, it is a combination of Orientally spiced "vegetarian rock" [7] elements with folk-music influences: Oriental horns and harps play alongside balalaikas and mandolins.

Grebenschikov has said that the album's central motif is a typical Russian viewpoint, examining the Orthodox faith through the bottom of a vodka bottle. The work is crowded with historical symbols, which, on the one hand, are easily connected with the crucial problems of contemporary Russia's destiny; on the other hand, they also function as a starting point for Grebenschikov's texts of the 1990s on the theme of Russia.

Central to *Russkij al'bom* is its apocalyptic feeling. In *Nikita Ryazanskij*, the first piece on the album, a powerful dialectic between hope and desperation already emerges. The only source of hope is to fall back on faith and prayer:

> Look, Lord:
> A fortress, and in its shadow only fear,
> And we are children
> In Your palm, Lord,
> Teach us to see you
> Behind every sorrow...
> Accept, Lord, this bread and wine,
> Look, Lord, how we sink to the bottom;
> Teach us to breathe underwater...
>
> [text] [mp3].

Sinking to the bottom is also the basic idea in *Gosudarynya*, in which the Soviet period and its eyewash esthetics are examined with a nostalgia tinged with irony and yet powerfully symbolic. The question of collective guilt also arises. The new age, the post-Soviet reality, still appears everything but rosy:

> So all for nothing we spent
> So many years building a house
> - Is it our fault that it's empty?
> Now, instead,
> We know what it's like to live in silver,
> Let's see what it's like to corrode into acid.

[text] [mp3]

Grebenschikov does not, in general, relate to the upheavals and toppling of statues with the least bit of enthusiasm; he reflects the new time mainly through syncretism. Already in his texts from the 1980s, the fear of civil war appeared, a fear that is present in one of his songs, called *Sirin Alkonost Gamayun*, named after apocalyptic birds from Slavic mythology:

Night arrives
- we're preparing for winter;
And maybe the next one that knocks
On our door
Will be war...

[text] [mp3]

Through the whole album, desperation is indisputably crystallized into vodka, the archenemy and bosom friend. The originality of *Russkij al'bom* is that alcohol continually appears in the context of Orthodoxy - vodka is prayer, and excessive drinking in Grebenschikov's songs is compared with the desperate pursuit of something higher. Someone wants to get to heaven, but falls because of drunkenness; another tries to concentrate on a search for truth, but he, too, lapses into clutching his vodka. Alcohol and the thirst for mercy go side by side. When one has a hangover, holy water changes into the people's enemy, into a sign of "the yellow peril", the fear of Mongol rule, as in the song *Volki i vorony*:

We gilded crosses and scattered them hither and thither;
We traded one we'd been given for liquor.
Hung over in the morning, we went to get water from the river,
And there in place of the water was the Mongol Shuudan.

[text] [mp3]

This alcohol-fumed search for salvation is perhaps best crystallized in the album's last piece, which returns to the question of collective guilt and salvation. Grebenschikov had already brought up this motif in his works of the 1980s, especially clearly in the song *Angel vsenarodnogo pohmel'ya* [mp3]. The metaphor of a colossal hangover is naturally linked with the end of the Soviet era; it is purgatory, which, on the one hand, is the excruciating consequence of an unrestrained anti-ideological binge, but is, on the other hand, a cleansing and renewing state. The way Grebenschikov

presents this metaphor brings to mind the great prose poem, *Moskva-Petushki* (1975), by Russian postmodernism's early figurehead, Venedikt Erofeev. In that work, the Christ-figure Venichka Erofeev, who makes an alcohol-fumed, hallucinatory trip from Limbo (Moscow) to Paradise (Petushki), presents the redeeming power of a hangover as a state of extreme humility, where there is no room for any kind of enthusiasm or aggression. For Grebenschikov, too, the hangover's role is to provide mercy:

> Someone is wandering over our land and blessing one person after another
> - we're guarded by the nationwide hangover angel.
>
> [text]

And in *Russkij al'bom*'s finale, the piece *Burlak*,

> I left to get to the beginning of time,
> But I boozed and I fell - that's the whole story;
> ... Is this the redeeming fast or the redeeming poison;
> But do you hear, when I knock - open!
> Count us as angels or beasts,
> But don't just be silent,
> I can't make it without the fire.
> But wherever I go, I'm still knocking at your door,
> Lord, My God, have mercy on me!
>
> [text] [mp3]

It's clear that, in *Russkij al'bom*, Grebenschikov reflects his Russia more against the East than the West, which is surprising against the intertextual background that we have examined above in relation to Morrison and Dylan. For Grebenschikov, Russia's self-understanding, as well as its fate, are not bound to the West, nor does he present to Russia a messianic role in European or world history, as so many before him have done when considering Russia's nature. For Grebenschikov, Russia is inescapably between East and West, but that is not its tragedy; instead, Russia's great tragedy and fate is its own history and its attitude toward its own history. *Russkij al'bom* shows that Russia recycles its own fate. An authoritarian and narcissistic culture wrapped up in itself will, according to Grebenschikov, remain behind God's back, and it will drown in its own endlessly pride-inspiring vodka.

In addition to intertextuality, a host of features - the mythologizing of the self-image, cyclicality, symbolic language, an eschatological attitude toward Russia, the recycling of myths, reconstruction and recreation - seem to be determining ones in Grebenschikov's rock lyric. Consequently, it is not hard to tie his work to the tradition of Russian modernism, and particularly to that of symbolism. Like the symbolists, Grebenschikov sees the world as a Text that is realized in the texts of "life" and "art", as a synthesized unity that is in a hierarchical relation to these other texts [9]. The "text of life" can be seen in the myth of BG, in a life that becomes art. Besides being able to talk about BG's text, we can talk about a text called "BG." Grebenschikov's literary starting point is strongly modernist, but with his neo-primitive and even conceptualist recycling of myths and texts, and with his way of assembling his songs into simultaneously textually and musically syncretistic wholes, he is writing his own page in the history of Russian postmodernism [10]. As a whole, Grebenschikov's mythologised self-image, the polygenesis (that is, combining different cultures simultaneously) learned from "Celtic bards", and an almost harmonious dialogue between culture and nature together create an undeniably original, confusing concoction in late Soviet and post-Soviet culture, a concoction that is, from its starting point Western postmodernism's "own," but in the Russian frame of reference, very "alien."

Notes

[1] See Pekka Pesonen's introductory article, *East or West - The Crucial Question of Russian History*.

[2] From the song, *Five to One* [real audio] [text].

[3] For example, *Break on through (to the other side)* [real audio] [text].

[4] The concepts of "neomythologism" and "polygenetic quotation" are connected to Russian symbolism and come from Zara Mints, a researcher of symbolism (see Mints 1973, 1978; Pesonen 1982).

[5] Quoted from Smirnov 1999.

[6] See, for example, Papernyi 1996, 16-17. Papernyi examines Russian culture as a system of continual adoption, as a mosaic of quotation. According to Papernyi, in order to understand any period or style in Russian culture, one has to pay attention to precisely how an idea adopted from another culture changes in the Russian cultural context, that is, to its transformation. Compare Lotman 1992, 105. Lotman treats Russian culture as a dynamic system of continual explosions, a fact that derives from its prevailing dualistic nature. According to Lotman, when the "alien" bumps into the culture's "own," a third thing is born, which cannot logically be inferred from either of the colliding elements.

[7] The metaphorical, but fairly accurate, characterization of Aquarium's music as "vegetarian folk-rock" belongs to Artem Troitski, who, in his work *Greetings to Tchaikovsky: Rock in the Soviet Union* (Troitski 1988, 175), attached the label principally to the *Ravnodenstvie* album. "Vegetarianism" can be linked, not only with the general impression given by the hippie-image group and with the vegetation-related motifs adopted by Grebenschikov (e.g. *Derevo* (Tree) and *Ivan-chaj* (Willowherb)), but also with the musical pursuit of a closeness to nature and, specifically, to plant

life.

[9] See Pesonen 1982, 160.

[10] Compare Kuritsyn 1995, 58. Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, in his article, links Grebenschikov's ritualism to Russian postmodernism's general neo-primitivism.

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Links

[Planet Aquarium]: Akvarium-discography; Akvarium-library; Akvarium: official English site; A brief history

[Akvarium -kotisivu]: Albums

[Zvuki]: Akvarium-albums in mp3-files

[VNE]: Virtual'noe neformal'noe edinstvo

[Bob Dylan -Homepage]

[The Doors -Homepage]

Rebjata lovjat svoj kajf [teksti] [music]

Ivan Bodhidharma [tekst] [mp3]