Making Cats Bark:
Countercultural Readings of Late Soviet Society

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Introduction

Looking at works on popular music in Russia, one is struck by how highly valued countercultural theory has been in studies of youth culture in the Soviet Union. The ensuing narrow and somewhat awkward picture of cultural life in the USSR can be traced back to "communist studies," a highly politicised brand of cold-war sociology, paired with Birmingham School subcultural theory. I will present examples of problems raised by the insistence on the countercultural concept in works on rock music in the late Soviet era. I then introduce a "horizontal" model for understanding late Soviet non-formal cultural activity.

1. The countercultural concept and political readings

In *Rock Counterculture in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (1985: 151) Pedro Ramet gives two definitions of "counterculture": One broad: "any culture which challenges the Party's official culture;" one narrow: "a set of ideas, orientations, tastes, and assumptions which differ systematically from those of the dominant culture." To this he adds a much-ignored recognition, that dominant culture not always equates official culture. This is his perspective for examining rock music as a "disruptive factor" in Eastern European societies. He soon faces the problem of making Russian rock fit in a picture with openly anti-Soviet styles like Polish punk and is forced to retreat into discarding certain rock styles as not "counterculture *per se*" (ibid: 169). Thus, according to Ramet, new wave becomes *self assertion* while punk remains a counterculture. And since punk in Russia, unlike in Poland, was a rather obscure phenomenon at the time, he finds a way to play down the countercultural nature of Russian rock.

In 1990 Pedro Ramet and Sergei Zamashchikov published *The Soviet Rock Scene*, an article in which they abandon the term *counterculture*, while, typically, retaining the concept´s political perspective. The political limitation of rock culture is at its most striking in what I choose to call "prejudiced readings" of Russian rock lyrics. Prejudiced readings often equal misreadings because of their narrow perspective. They enable the scholar to use song lyrics in a narrow sense to elude "proof" of his observations. Thomas Cushman (1995: 115) provides a good example in translating Leningrad band *Akvarium*'s song "Kontrdans" as "Counterdance." But the Russian prefix *kontr*- corresponds with "contra-" in English, as well as "contre-" in French. The word denotes "contredanse" in English, meaning an 18th-century French country dance related to the quadrille. Now wordplay may of course be involved, but there is more to the poetic song than a simple us-against-them scenario. The music is quiet and acoustic and the singers voice intimately and tenderly directed to a lyrical "you."

Read strictly politically, rock songs tend to appear distorted and banal. The specter of wordly meaning is overlooked and the musical expression entirely ignored. Sadly, political-contextual readings of Russian rock lyrics are nearly omnipresent in works on the subject and my own earlier work is no exception. After writing a thesis on the degree of political motives in *Alisa*'s songs in 1996, I met songwriter Kinchev to discuss my observations. He didn't question my findings, but their relevance. He emphasized that a search for political messages in his songs would render them banal and miss their point. Thomas Cushman, in his interviews with Leningrad musicians, also found that the idea of rock being beyond politics was an important part of the musical community's belief system (1995: 94) and that even bands which fell into disrepute as "political", categorically resented such labeling (ibid.: 112).

But such aspects are little heeded in research from the 1980s and 1990s. Lyrvall (1987) speaks of a political-cultural "underground" of mythical proportions in Leningrad; Easton's "The Rock Music Community" (1989) politicises the city's rock culture; Yoffe's dissertation on hippie culture in the USSR, can't avoid talking of "tight-panted revolutionaries" (1991: 15). But they are all topped by Ryback's conclusion from his book *Rock around the bloc:*

> In a very real sense, the *triumph* of rock and roll in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has been the realization of a *democratic* process. […] In the course of thirty years, rock bands have *stormed*

> *every bastion* of official *resistance* and *forced* both party and government to accept rock-and-roll music as a part of life in the Marxist-Leninist state (Ryback, 1990: 233, my italics).

Thomas Cushman's "Notes from underground: Rock music counterculture in Russia" (1995) uses qualitative-research interviewing and thick descriptions to give a more sophisticated picture of Leningrad rock musicians and their community. Underway, the author sees limitations in the countercultural concept, but he does not replace it. What ideas he brings into the work from the outset become clear in spite of his many reservations.

He observes that much frustration was directed towards parents rather than authorities. He notes the invisibility of the state in rock; that rock retreats from Soviet existence; that rock musicians rejected the official world of Soviet modernity, but remained within it. But he repeatedly speaks of rock as an "active code of resistance" to an undefined dominant culture, a code that *fights* prescriptions for communist identity. In the end he reveals his hand: "What interests us here is not consent and conformity, but dissent and resistance" (ibid.: 193) .

In line with that warning, Cushman's thick descriptions seldom take interviewee information into account, which makes results of his two methods conflict. Where other scholars describe Leningrad's backyards, basements and alleys as ideal for "underground" activities (see Lyrvall, 1987; Nielsen, 1993), Cushman arrives at the opposite conclusion. "The lack of private places for counterculturalists to congregate," he states, "made it difficult to conduct countercultural activity" (1995: 174). Then he comes to the fact that the Leningrad bridges are raised every night between 1:00 and 5.00 am:

> The raising of the bridges signifies in a regular and standardized fashion the potential of the system to determine the movement of individuals who inhabit the space of the city. The practice reinforced and reasserted in visible fashion and on a nightly basis the particular cultural logic which infused the social organisation of the socialist city (ibid.: 176).

But those bridges were there and opening well before 1917. Whether Cushman had been to late capitalist Amsterdam at the time is another matter.

2. Into the parallel

As the above mentioned sources show, *counter-* is a prefix invested with meaning. It works as a magnet on words like *dissent*, *resistance*, *opposition*, *revolution*, *fight*. Opposed to passive qualities, the term cannot include indifference. One doesn't "counter" anything by ignoring it. Neither does one counter a football with a tennis racket. "Countering," on some level, implies a willingness to play the other's game. The term very easily binds the understanding of cultural activity to systems of binary opposition. There is no doubt that elements of protest may be traced and described in Russian rock of the Soviet era, but the question is the general relevance and validity of such findings. Neither a cultural community, nor works of one of its artists, can be understood by such means only.

Hilary Pilkington's study of youth culture in 1990 Moscow partly succeeds in escaping the problems encountered by countercultural approaches by adopting the Soviet bureaucratic distinction between formal/non-formal cultural communities. With her emphasis on "horizontal" processes of cultural interaction, Pilkington makes an important step away from concepts of binary opposition. But she continues to speak of "multiple incursions and separations between dominant and subordinate cultures" (1994: 307). Not giving any explanations as to the meaning and processes of "cultural subordination," she too is unable to free herself entirely from notions of "vertical" cultural processes.

Cultural anthropologist Alexei Yurchak works on jokes, anecdotes and urban folklore in the "stagnation era." In the article "The cynical reason of late socialism" (1997) he argues that the *anekdoty* in the late Soviet era were not a means of resisting the system, but an element written into it. He observes that earlier models of "Soviet totalitarism," like those of "communist studies," saw totalitarian power as based on belief and/or oppression, which frequently made them equate "awareness of the falsity of the ruling ideology with resistance to it" (ibid.: 161). He suggests replacing the notion of "resistance" with "lack of interest."

Yurchak argues that citizens experienced the falsity of official ideology and its symbols, but also their immutability and omnipresence. There was no way to counter official slogans, so they were simply ignored. This is his background for introducing the conceptions "parallel culture," "parallel event" and "parallel practice" to replace "counterculture" and "underground":

> People learned how to repress (in a psychological sense) their recognition of [this] falsity on an everyday basis when in the official sphere. Simultaneously they were involved in the cultural production of parallel events and meanings within the official sphere and in spite of it (ibid.: 174).

People, then, did not counter official culture, but played another game. They produced parallel culture within official order. And they simulated support for official ideology by “pretense misrecognition” of the gap between genuine parallel and false official meanings (ibid.:175). A consequence of this perspective is that dominant culture is split between the private and the official sphere, which allows for a “horizontal” understanding of culture in line with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of culture at the margins. One of Yurchak’s examples involves the mayday parade:

> The parade itself, being perceived as an unavoidable official event, became also an easygoing, exciting and happy celebration during which many norms of public behavior was suspended: one could scream loudly, be drunk in public, and exchange playful remarks with complete strangers, as long as one carried and shouted official slogans (ibid.: 164).

His informants confirm that the happy smiles and waves to party officials were real and heartfelt enough, though not for the prescribed ideological reasons. Power was domesticated not by ridicule but by transforming it into an ignorable backdrop for the parallel event. If this was the normal way of ensuring a normal life, there were, following Yurchak, two alternatives, represented by the activist and the dissident. The activist was different because he believed in the official ideology, the dissident because he openly protested against it.

But people shunned the dissident. As a joke of the time puts it, the last thing people want you to do when everybody stands up to their neck in sewage, is to make waves. Because the belief in the immutability of society was so strong, the obvious explanation for the behaviour of a dissident was his insanity. To follow the dissident’s example would destroy the balance of simulation of support and pretense misrecognition, and with it the possibility of both leading a normal, quiet life and enjoying the benefits of the parallel sphere.

3. Russian rock as parallel culture

One important argument for seeing Russian rock as parallel culture lies in its music and words. The relatively soft style and mild manners of 1980s Russian rock and its insistence on poetic qualities is very distant from British anti-Thatcherite protest rock of the same decade. It has a flavour other than *Chelsea* barking out “Right to work” or *The Newtown Neurotics* howling “Kick out the Tories.” Moreover, such issues of protest were untranslatable to a Soviet context, given the full employment and relatively solid social system which was secured by the State. Living and transport costs were kept low and *pro forma* “boiler room” or night-watch jobs ensured plenty of free time to indulge in parallel cultural activities. Rather than bark slogans of protest, Russian rockers sang about eternal values, about *istina* (absolute truth), as opposed to *pravda* (relative or political truth). Both individuality and spirituality, of course, were provocative subjects, but hard to sanction because of the poetic complexity idealised in songwriting. Leningrad band *DDT*’s frontman and songwriter, Yuriy Shevchuk, who himself started out as a dissident provocateur rocker, went as far as to claim that Russian rock in the 80s was all about poetry, not politics (quoted in Cushman, 1995: 105).

To see rock as a parallel culture does not imply being ignorant of the strained relationship between Soviet authorities and the rock communities, nor does it depend on a cover-up of rock repression by cultural authorities. Anti-rock polemics were harsh, and police harassment and arrests occurred, culminating in *Alisa* singer Kinchev’s arrest in 1987. But more often rock musicians had troubles with gangs of violent “Lyubery” from the suburbs, who nurtured an intense dislike for non-conformists. The role of the KGB in the opening and running of the Leningrad Rock Club from March 1981 is another complicating element. It was an obvious advantage for controlling authorities to gather non-formal cultural activities where they could be easily monitored. The bands that signed up for membership were offered rehearsal space, access to better equipment and concert venues in return for answering to the demands of a *khudsovet* (artistic council) of rock bureaucrats, complete with a lyric censor. When rock repression reached a record intensity level under the Andropov administration, as one Moscow rock concert organiser remembers, inviting a band over from the Leningrad Rock Club no longer meant having a Leningrad band playing; it meant having the Club administrator in the audience with a tail of KGB officers:

> In the end I started reasoning like Winnie the Pooh: What do you call a hive? It’s a place where bees live. And if some place in answer to an enquiry sends the cops, what kind of a place is it? A rock club? (Rybin and Starcev, 2000: 112, my translation).

The taming of ideologically problematic cultural activities by way of the client – patron relationship, as the KGB did in this case, is centuries old in Russian bureaucracy. In order to save their own heads, the Rock Club's artistic council would make sure that club members who put them in danger of secret police involvement were punished. In turn, some of the older members, who felt comfortable with the degree of artistic freedom offered, often led a strained relationship with younger bands of "provocateurs" who aimed to constantly test or push the borders. Mikhail Borzykin's band *Televizor* was expelled from the club for up to six months at a time for playing sanctioned songs. They were punished, not by the KGB, but by their "own" rock bureaucrats in alliance with older musicians. In Borzykin's view his songs were commentaries on existence, not politics (quoted in Cushman, 1995: 113).

The notion of the parallel sphere allows for a more nuanced and complex picture of rock in Russia than that of an oppressive official/dominant culture versus a countercultural resistance movement. As a subculture, the rock environment defined itself in opposition, not to State authorities directly, but to the "Èstrada," or Soviet pop mainstream, whose stars from a rock viewpoint had given up their artistic integrity in exchange for fame, recordings, tours and TV-appearances. The parallel-culture model is closer to the version given by Cushman's interviewees, who describe a culture that retreats from confrontation and itself sanctions negativity and overt political critique in order to gain status on their own terms as a "high culture art form."

Returning briefly to Ramets 1985 definitions of "counterculture" in the light of these findings, Russian rock of the Soviet era no longer seems to fit in as smoothly. If it "challenged the Party's official culture," it was chiefly by evading its control, not by confronting it. Neither can it be seen to "differ systematically from the dominant culture" if "dominant culture" is perceived as something more than the musical "Èstrada," as the strategy of Yurchak's "normal citizens," where official culture of power becomes a backdrop for more meaningful events in a parallel sphere.

Among all the lyrics selected by counterculturally minded scholars, the following, famous 1982 reggae by Akvarium has, strangely, been overlooked. Allow me, then, to close by offering you a prejudiced reading of another, parallel kind:

Aristocrat

Oh, they walk on the green light;
Oh, they walk on the green light;
They're not telling them 'no',
When they walk on the green light.
I could've given them advice,
Give them some wild advice,
But they know where's butter, where's bread,
When they walk on the green light.

And I'm on the rooftop and I'm very glad,
Sitting on the rooftop and I'm very glad,
Burning sensimilla like an aristocrat;
Sitting on the rooftop…

I don't see no point in wrangling with me,
I don't see no point in bickering with me,
I don't see no point in even striving with me,
You can pick a quarrel with your wife instead.

You can pick a quarrel with your wife instead,
You go start a row with your wife instead,
'Cause I've got my own point of view from up here,
I don't see no point in wrangling with me.

And I'm on the rooftop and I'm very glad,
Sitting on the rooftop and I'm really glad,
Burning sensimilla like an aristocrat;
Sitting on the rooftop…

Akvarium, 1982
(BG: 1993, p. 153, my translation)

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