

We Lost Some Neatness: Mixed Imagery and Russian Incoherence

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In a 1991 article I showed how a widespread and traditional Western condemnation of mixed metaphor is rooted in principles related to those used to judge sanity and morality in people, coherence and autonomy expected of structures and systems, and realism in visual imagery, qualities that are systematically conflated (Pesmen 1991). Eclecticism, which appears often in contexts of so-called development, transition, and other worlds perceived as being "out of joint," has, for the same reasons, also been called *infertile* and *sterile*: *life* cannot result from flawed unions. As Stephen Pepper (1942:112) writes, nothing sewed together from the legs of one specimen and the wings of another will ever move on its own. I found these notions of coherence in early post-Soviet discourses of national and ethnic character and in descriptions of current shortages of reality, nature, life, validity, morality, form, and civilization, and images of riddles, hybridity, paradox, mystery, unclarity, monstrosity, and chaos. But given these discourses, and although space and time in urban Siberian where I did fieldwork, were fragmented, imperfections were often coopted as valuable aspects of national character.

Metaphors join in matrimony not only two terms, but their visualizable worlds; taking up a cross-scent or making impure unions seems to adulterously abandon a world of potentialities. After several such leaps critics move from moral censure to ontological motion sickness, calling mixed metaphor disgusting, nauseating, and spoiled. By examining these prohibitions, I showed ways in which a world's reality is a matter of habit and habitual ideals, *as is a picture's realism*. Mixed metaphor, by violating certain habits, may shatter our persuasion that a given picture reflects *reality*. Realism is, Nelson Goodman (1978) writes, an honorific term. What we consider meaningful seems to promise or deliver something coherent according to some ideal or project (cf. Harries 1968:145). But this passion for a meaningful unitary world is satisfied variously at different times (Goodman 1978:20). We constantly shift models, neither noticing our opportunistic flexibility nor including it in our picture of reality.

Whenever conversation touched on post-Soviet disorder, a doctor I knew remarked "*vot eto nasha russkaia dusha*," "now that's our Russian soul." She even called declining respect for

the Russian language "Russian *dusha*, soul," adding that one must live *this life* a long time to understand *rusaskaia dusha*. If, as Robert Barrett (1987) has written, an integrated, unbroken individual is the Western ideal of a "person" with a grasp of "reality," descriptions of Russian national character and *sumasshedshaia*, *bezumnaia*, crazy, insane, life have long invoked *ill*-formedness, schism, formlessness and disorientation. As Korolenko said in 1917, "The Russian soul has no skeleton ... or we have too little of it" (Sinyavsky 1988:259).

The romantic Russian soul, *rusaskaia dusha*, an important image in non-Russian cultures as well (Pesmen 1998), is often treated as a "deep" "place" where images and opposites struggle. Souls are felt to be *alive* insofar as they are internally unresolved. Confrontations with paradox or multiplicity result in a heightened sense of *life*. A historically and still popular explanation for allegedly "schizophrenic" Russian psyche, culture, and "system" is that East and West meet there. Though most of my Siberian friends were proud to participate in their homeland's vastness, they also often orientalized themselves, opposing their *netsivilizovannaia*, uncivilized, *vostochnaia*, Eastern, *sistema* to what was civilized, cultured, Western. Then they often upped the ante, as my friend Svetlana did when she said: "We have an Eastern-type despotism. Only *there* they have *some* sense of measure. *Here* they do whatever they can get away with. *Russia*: enigmatic to the point of no return," *do bespredel'nosti*, to boundlessness, a word that in 1992 resonated with *bespredel*, popularized prison slang for chaotic rebellion.

In everyday life, flawed or absent coherence was often attributed to that "boundlessness." If a troubled career or multiple talents were evidence of the scale and potential of *one* person's soul, Russia and Russian character were, like the Eurasian landscape, understood, inhabited, and presented in narratives, jokes and remarks as too *vast* to be virtuous, neat, rational, or stable, vital Russian *prostor*, expanses, and *razmakh*, expansive behavior, allegedly dooming any efficiency or attention to petty detail. A joke I heard in 1992 tells of a foreigner who falls into one of the then-eternal construction pits in Moscow, breaking a leg. He wants to sue [at this point many Soviets already laughed, in reference to their incredible lack of such recourse]. He tells the judge that "in civilized countries" there are little red warning flags marking construction sites. The judge thinks, then asks the foreigner how he entered the USSR. "By train." "Didn't you see a big red flag on the border?"

My friend Mila mentioned that "unfinished projects and angles" were "among our character traits. We lost some neatness, some order." Both internal conflict and sublime scale

imply wholes that can't be trivialized by what Bakhtin called monologic explanation. Such imagery can be traced at least to medieval Orthodox hesychasm's prioritizing of the irrational, by which human beings could experience things which far transcended their "rational understanding." Aspects of what Victor Turner (1969) calls liminality are coopted as *soulful* nature, using passion, parody, pollution, drink, inferiority, complaining, and foolishness to invert, negate, or shift at any perceived threat of classification.

Among other meanings I found in everyday speech, *netsivilizovano*, uncivilized, could imply absence of moral order, rule of law, rule of anything predictable. When I said I was studying Russian culture, people always asked me to let them know if I found any. People *both* craved politeness, ease and order and ridiculed "civilized" countries' insincere, naive banality. They implied that Russia was *wild* because of its stage in cultural-economic evolution or by nature. In the early 1990s, people found themselves accumulating capital in *primitive* ways, and blamed Lenin, Stalin, and Gorbachev.

1990s Russians' discourses of themselves as primitive featured mention of Africa, Chukchi, monkeys, or *papuary*.¹ One strain targeted Soviet infrastructure and *khaltura*, shoddy workmanship. *Dazhe v Afrike*, "Even in Africa ...," which originally meant "everywhere," became common in remarks such as "*Even in Africa* public transportation is better than here." But post-Soviet poverty was often called African in order to then say how much more *spiritual* Russians were than Africans. If, as Elias writes, the discourse of civilization expresses Western self-consciousness, when Russians engaged in what Leerssen (1996:37-38) calls auto-exoticism it was partially in the voice of Western self-consciousness, partially in one responding to it, German Kultur against the "external shell" of *Zivilisation*, in turn answered by specifically Russian and Soviet voices.

Foucault (1970) offers Borges' so-called "Chinese encyclopedia" to show how juxtaposed points of view, though labeled "exotic" or "foreign," make us aware of our own thought's limitations. "*Ekzotika*" was how some Russians explained my interest in their incoherent picture. Common also were ironic quips on how *interesnaia*, interesting, or *ves'laia*, merry or fun, the country was, and about service "*na grane fantastiki*," verging on science fiction. I noticed a particularly interesting meaning of "primitive" when a curator asked me if her exhibit on local history looked like African art. When I expressed surprise, she explained: "We make everything *ourselves*, out of *nothing*." So "uncivilized" could imply using "magic" to jerry-rig new things

out of bits of old ones, significantly called *nothing*, and absence of division of labor. Situations seen as governed by self-interest were also *uncivilized*. A synonym for such dearths of healthy culture was, one man told me, "In one word, *Russia*. Where everyone is engaged in what he should not be engaged in."

If, in the Eastern Orthodox church, *this* world is seen as "nothing," "a shadow, a dream" (Harakas 1990:51), late-Soviet and early post-Soviet *byt*, modes of everyday life, were in many ways "not *real* life" (Pesmen 1998). Again, though, surface messiness and lack of structural elegance were often taken to indicate integrity on "another level," *internal* integrity. Epithets indicating such attitudes to Russia's holy disorganization and complexity were the exclamations *Rossiia!*, *Sovetskii Soiuz!*, *sibir'!*, and *Aziia!*²

Textbooks occasionally condone mixed metaphors in literature when they express or generate appropriate *moods*. In other words, a domain may be fractured or bricolaged (Levi-Strauss 1962) if it is to be *experienced formally*, as indicative of disorder *itself*. Thus when Hamlet *takes arms* against a *sea* of troubles, critics call him impassioned, distracted, confused, states in which metaphors mix and which supposedly characterize Hamlet's fragmented internal "space." Such hypothetical spaces defy us to understand "where we stand," as Foucault (1970: xvi) says, *the site* on which propinquity of these things would be possible. The former Soviet Union, as the significantly dated map at the head of this essay implies, was such a site. "Only *here*," people said, "could things work like this." This cartoon map also alludes to a popular Friday night television game show, *Pole chudes*, "field of miracles." Modeled on an American show, "Wheel of Fortune," the Russian version was named after a setting in the mythical geography of Aleksei Tolstoi's version of the Pinocchio story, *Buratino*.

A man told me that the mentality behind the similarly popular phrase *strana durakov*, land of fools, was born of the Petrine reforms. "If you change too fast," he said, "people don't understand. We all became Russian fools." His dating is off; the Primary Chronicles imply that even *proto*-Russians were incapable of making order, and the "fool for Christ's sake" certainly also predates Peter. But this man's use of two points of view is astute: 18th and 19th century nationalists formulated an inexpressible, unmannered, unpredictable, unmeasurable Russian soul in opposition to supposed European rational articulation, precision, delimitation, and predictability (cf. Rogger 1960, Williams 1970, Greenfeld 1992), imagery still current in the 1990s. When someone labeled Russia or part of it "theater of the absurd" or "circus" or

displayed appreciation of the aesthetic that Bakhtin (1984) says erases barriers between genres, systems, and styles, a voice which valued coherence was *implied* to be *refuted*.

Passing a children's playground, a friend marveled at low metal structures which, like all monuments to the degrading incompetence of "our Soviet system," were, he said, "good for nothing but for little kids to *trip* over." He grinned. "But they really trip, from the depths of their souls." Then we passed a factory. He said that part of a process involving warheads registered on radiation therapy gauges at the oncological center and vice versa. "No joke," he said. "*Rossiiia*." Only one word (and others of its genre) could adequately gesture *at this life*.

Important members of this genre were the terms *sistema*, system, *nasha sistema*, our system, *nasha sovetskaia* (or *sovkoiaia*³) *sistema*, our Soviet (or post-Soviet) system. Siniavskii (1988:xi) calls *sistema* "so extraordinary that even those who grew up in it see it as a monstrosity or alien environment; one, however, in which they belong." This is part of a *sistema* which my friends called variously "no system at all," "hard and soft boiled at the same time," and vinegret (a party salad of vegetables, contingent on availability, chopped up or shredded into bits the diversity and equality of which Borges' "Chinese Encyclopedia" would envy) These descriptions may imply an *unsystematic sistema*, but their *form* certainly encapsulates and values the inchoate coherently, points at mess and inexpressibility *neatly*.

That outsiders cannot possibly "understand" is a theme in everyday talk and popular comedy routines.⁴ What's more, Russians have long claimed that not even *they themselves* understand *sistema* and their enigmatic *dusha*, soul. Nikitenko, in 1867, claimed that though Russian *spirit* stood for "great, meaningful essences," no one in Russia understood them (Cherniavsky 1969:196). But even without *understanding*, by *using* or correctly responding to such dense, wry comments, people shared consensus on the meaningfulness of their *mess*. Another summary was *marazm*, funny the way a doctor called the sterilizing room in his hospital the *funniest* place there. Calling a context some form or other of psychiatric hospital or madhouse (*psikhol'nitsa*, *durdum*, *psikhushka*) or otherwise *nenormal'no*, in Bakhtin's (1984:168) words, "laughed in the face of horror," while at the same time affirming entire narratives unnecessary to formulate because they were suffered *together*.

Russia was not only mythologized as a site of ideal disorder and monstrous abomination; juxtaposed objects, tactics, economic systems, and styles were heterogeneous. *Rossiiia!* or *russkaia dusha!* explained how nuclear disasters were hushed up, remarked on an entrance to a

public toilet by metro token or on the exorbitant cost of humanitarian aid at kiosks which also offered toxic instant coffee, underwear, newspapers of varied dates and “vodka” or “cognac” bottles with misspelled English outside and stolen industrial alcohol inside. Leather miniskirts in mink berets stepped over drunk quilted peasant jackets in dog fur hats outside rotting apartment blocks looming over ornately carved houses, exchanged for cars by workers paid in canned meat and shoes of useless sizes. The radio asked how the same Supreme Soviet could declare both the October Revolution or November Coup and Christmas national holidays. In spring it broadcast congratulations to those celebrating May 1st “as well as those not celebrating what ought not be celebrated.” People jokingly greeted each other with the slogan “Peace, Labor, May!” and responded “*Voistinnno voskres!*”, “Truly, He is risen.” Taxes appeared and vanished. Overnight, street corners sprouted pyramids of ketchup; the next day there was only one bottle, at the market. Between a pair of socks and a pig's head. Time was fragmented as people debated planting their gardens according to astrology or almanacs and then used both, and as they forgot where they were going to queue up for whatever was available, causing gridlock as other people waited for *them* elsewhere.

This texture *can*, of course, be explained as a by-product of socioeconomic change, corruption, and a shortage economy in which money was weak and networks strong, but such explanations were not usually interesting to people. Although “*sovetskaia sistema*” explained when things did not work, that *sistema* also had an invisible hand; I heard that though the Soviet system had been corrupt and the stores empty “every family had *somehow* gotten approximately what it needed.” A table set for guests condensed people's life stories, talents, temperaments, opportunism and luck in buying, hoarding, sharing, gardening, canning, stealing, bartering, bribing, and calling in debts. Yet when women *worked* this system to materialize a meal, people called them *volshhebnitsy*, *magicians*, speaking in the voice of naive observers who see only *strana chudes*, a “Land of Miracles.” As the Soviet *sistema* began to disintegrate, many people who hated it still complained that *dusha* was dying. One man told me, launching into a special military industrial lament,⁵ that “Lately *dusha* has become undirected ... *lost its steering, like a missile with no guidance system.*”

Concurrently with late Soviet use of the word *sistema*, hippies adopted it to describe their *counterculture*.⁶ *Sistema*, though often discussed as *dusha*'s loathsome nemesis, was overdetermined with enough of the right stuff to be revitalized as newly soulful.

Fernandez (1982:562-565, 1986) brilliantly describes how Bwiti knowledgeable ones mix metaphors, "cross-referencing domains" into "spaces" where, "by condensation, extension, expansion, and performance of metaphoric predications," aspects of a broken cultural life seem to be reconciled. Perestroika and early post-Soviet Russia also featured challenging fragmentation, in the face of which individuals systematically wove images of emptiness, failure, incompleteness, and *communitas* into identity, a fabric made dense by conflation of different definitions and contexts into the condensed unity of words like *soul*, *system*, or *Russia*; seeming incoherence seemingly reconciled by an apparently higher principle.

Now this portrays pictures of wholes in their best light, integrations that *help*. But such pictures also have an element of what Karsten Harries (1968:75-6, 149) calls kitsch; by offering the solace of a simplified image of humans and groups as coherent, they are in bad faith. As Adorno said, inverting Hegel's dictum, "the whole is the false" (Adorno 1974:50). One note at this point: I want to make it clear that, although I have used the Russian case here, I began this study with broadly Western notions of coherence, and my critique here includes my own soul and my own culture. This said, the coherence without which common sense refuses to confer the honorary title of real is, I suggest, kitsch; it only soothingly *appears* to reveal identity. What's more, creation of realistic wholes is fully continuous with how ethnicity is constructed, politicized, and made violent. Identities created by exaggeration, conflation, and generalization and felt to be authoritatively real are made to be manipulated.⁷

One tactic of *dusha*, soul, is to coopt daily life by denying it reality, affirming solidarity and the unfinalizable depths in a potlatch of self-defamation. In a 1992 joke, Bush, Mitterrand and Yeltsin come before God. Bush asks God when things will be OK, *really* OK, in America. God thinks and says "50 years." Bush bursts into tears and leaves. Mitterrand asks God when things will be OK, *really* OK, in France. God thinks and says "100 years." Mitterrand bursts into tears and leaves. Yeltsin then approaches God and asks him when things will be OK, *really* OK, in Russia. God thinks, bursts into tears and leaves. The size of *dusha*, its "depth," like the scale of the so-called "mess" in Russia, seem to defy reckoning in part by exploiting the fact that no person, group, or culture is a coherent whole, but is rather *moments*, impulses, tropes, approaches, habits, and practices. Soul is one way of giving this a clear form, the form of the unclear and unformed, of the transcendently *huge* or *deep*, of what may be more messed up than God is powerful. In critique and complicity, the Russian soul, like most, searches for coherences

and rebels against them. *Dusha*, soul, identity, and other illusory wholes are modeled on timeless moments generalized in the image of reason.⁸

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Notes

1. Soviet children read of the travels of Russian ethnographer Nikolai Miklukho-Maklai (1846-1888) in New Guinea in the 1870s and 1880s (cf. Stocking 1992:212-275). The publication of his diaries in 1923 and his collected scientific works in the 1950s certainly is the origin of this usage of term *papuasy* to refer to primitive society. As Stocking notes, "the age-old European dream of the Noble Savage" was definitely a presence in Mikluho-Maklai's writing (ibid.:231).
2. I discuss elsewhere (Pesmen 1998) obscene or rude phrases referred to as "porusski".
3. Sovok (p. sovki), lit. dustpan, is derogatory slang for "post Soviet," implying a jaded, hyperbolically crude type with no trace of (communist or any "higher") ideals. This late- and post-Soviet Person was imagined as frazzled, run down, internally and externally shoddy.
4. I discuss this theme in discourse and practice in Pesmen 1998. During the early 1990s Zadornov performed a sketch on how only Soviets can understand Soviet jokes. He would move from there to marveling at the eclectic inventiveness mandated by "how we live" and to how he "loves" "monstrous" Soviet types such as shop clerks who lack the muscles and brains to smile.
5. On laments, cf. Ries 1997.
6. Cf. Rayport-Rabodzeenko 1998 on youth culture *sistema*.
7. Cf. David Lloyd 1993:89, 98-9.
8. This paper is a short version of chapter 15 in Pesmen 1998.