The Violent Frame: Vladimir Sorokin's "White Square"

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Sorokin's modernist interlocutors

Few writers have heightened the tension between politics and aesthetics like Vladimir Sorokin. With his unique chameleon stylistics, Sorokin consistently engages with hegemonic discourses in his postmodern fiction. His conceptualist project consists in propping up venerated forms of literary discourse such as the great Russian novel and socialist realism, only to tear them down in a violent, degrading fashion. Sorokin lets the text and, by implication, the discourse, collapse upon itself. His irreverent deconstruction of ruling discourses has also sparked controversies in the political arena, including lawsuits and protests condemning his writing.[1]

His collection of early short stories (Sorokin 1979–1984), *The First Saturday Workday* (*Pervyi subbotnik*) toyed with the aesthetics of socialist realism. Formally, the stories also share common ground with the miniatures of Daniil Kharms, the way each story goes off the rails. In an attempt to pin down the quintessential features of postmodernism as it appeared in the mid-80s, Jean-François Lyotard claimed that modern aesthetics paved the way for postmodernism by presenting the unpre-

1 In 2002, the conservative youth coalition Idushchie vmeste (Walking together) launched a campaign against Sorokin, accusing him of spreading pornography, even lodging a criminal complaint with the authorities. Most memorably, they organized an event outside the Bolshoi Theater where people were invited to tear apart his books and throw them into a giant toilet bowl—a reaction, in part, to his depiction of an imaginary sex scene in *Blue Lard* (*Goluboe salo,* 1999) between Stalin and Khrushchev. Sorokin later noted that the absurd spectacle of young students and elderly women bonding over the destruction of his literature, was like something out of his own books.

sentable through negation, i.e., by insisting on the existence of the unpresentable (Lyotard 1984, 78). Kharms' miniatures do exactly that: they dismantle themselves and disintegrate into nothingness as the narrative inevitably changes tack and undermines the very foundations of its own poetics.

Kharms cultivates Lyotard's "presentation through negation" by tearing his narratives apart, erasing whatever they initially purported to represent. A case in point is "Blue Notebook, Number 10," which encapsulates this strategy of representational negation; the piece undercuts itself by describing the non-features of a man, before self-effacingly signing off with the phrase: Уж лучше мы о нем не будем больше говорить.[2] This kind of textual self-sabotage is a key feature of Sorokin's poetics, and one that he implements at scale.

Sorokin took this deconstructive strategy to a new level in *The First Saturday Workday*. According to Lyotard (1984, 81), the postmodern artist takes on the role of a philosopher, and "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself," avoiding the "solace of good forms." Sorokin's collection fits this description in that he first builds a world of order, valor and beauty, featuring responsible workers overfulfilling their duties and wholesome community leaders mentoring the next generation while enjoying the wonders of nature. He then, through seamless transitions, lets the kitsch and glossy world of these socialist workers devolve into murder, scatology, sexual denigration and violence.[3] As Ilya Kalinin (2013, 129) puts it, for Sorokin, utopia signals destruction: "[…] (be this the deconstruction of specific discursive or social practices, a general discursive collapse, or a global apocalypse)."

Everything nostalgic, romanticized and idealized plunges into chaos (Marusenkov 2013). In the words of Dmitrii Prigov (1985), Sorokin, unlike Chekhov, doesn't cover chaos with a membrane of cultural sophistication, rather the *plenka* that Sorokin deals with […] приблизилась к человеку и пытается обволочь его, даже больше—пытается стать им самим, его образом мышления и чувствования. Приблизившись

2 "We'd better not talk about him anymore." Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

3 For a discussion on the function of violence in Sorokin's literature more generally, see Ilya Kalinin's (2013) "The Blue Lard of Language: Vladimir Sorokin's Metalingual Utopia," and Mortensen 2020.

к человеку, она тем самым приблизила к нему вплотную и хаос.[4] Moreover, the values and forms that sustained the discourse put their palpable emptiness on display, or, if we tweak Nietzsche's notion of nihilism (1968, §2), the highest socialist values devalue themselves. Aided by the materialization of metaphors (Uffelmann 2006, 109), or *carnalization* (Lipovetsky 2013), this also constitutes a linguistic operation on Sorokin's part. Orderly factory jargon turns into nonsensical tools of violence in "Meeting of the Factory Committee" ("Zasedanie zavkoma"),[5] high words of praise at a funeral wake become a story of abuse in "A Word of Farewell" ("Pominal'noe slovo"), and edifying admiration for the starlit forest grows into a nauseating focus on feces in "Sergei Andreevich" (Sorokin 1979–1984).

Much has changed since then. Sorokin's writing has passed through a number of phases, including science (pulp) fiction with *Blue Lard* (*Goluboe salo*) and esoteric fantasy with the *Ice Trilogy* (*Ledianaia trilogiia*). One should also bear in mind that the contemporary discourses that his post-2005 writing grapples with are hardly as monolithic as socialist realism, and far from as revered as the great Russian novel.

In his 2018 short story "White Square" ("Belyi kvadrat"), which has given its name to the whole collection, Sorokin performs a slew of discursive operations all at once. The musicality of his early stories is absent, as is their neat composition and sense of timing. "White Square" instead relishes in maximalism. The short story conceptualizes the nationalist discourse of talk-show television, transitions into a *chernukha*[6] depiction of poverty, before ending up in a totalitarian, hyperreal cinema simulacrum of Red Square. Television, the white square, is conceptualized as a social structure that cynically swallows up any discourse it comes into contact with, even that of the Russian avant-garde.

Kharms has ceased to be Sorokin's modernist interlocutor, as we saw in *The First Saturday Workday*. Instead, in "White Square," Sorokin's point of orientation is the avant-garde painter Kazimir Malevich. Mikhail Epstein's explanation of how postmodernism levels its attacks on the tran-

4 "[that membrane] has approached the person and tries to envelop that person, even more than that, tries to become that person, his way of thinking and feeling. Having approached the person, it thereby brought chaos up-close to him."

5 For a detailed reading of this story, see Noordenbos 2016, 62–65.

6 I.e. overly bleak.

scendental values of modernism, while also being historically dependent on modernism, can help us grasp why Sorokin turns to Malevich:

> These hyperphenomena would be impossible if not for the revolutionary obsessions with the "super" that gave rise to the tangible "voids" and flamboyant simulacra of contemporary civilization, including totalitarianism's nonsensical, empty ideological forms that gave rise to Russian postmodernism. (Epstein 2016, 48)

This negative materiality and palpable emptiness becomes an essential prerequisite for Sorokin's aesthetic procedures resulting in a totalitarian simulacrum of modern-day Russia.

Framing the short story

The short story can be divided into three parts. It begins as a seemingly innocent television talk-show called "Belyi kvadrat," where four contestants are tasked with defining the essence of Russianness. The show ends in carnage as the contestants are injected with an experimental drug, making them turn on the host and flay him alive in an orgy of violence.

The second part details the misadventures of the flayed skin. The skin is dragged around a bleak Moscow by crows, cars and dogs, before it lands in the hands of dirt-poor Muscovites selling fake honey outside a church. The loop of skin makes its way into the cabbage soup (*shchi*) of an old couple, who mistake it for mutton tripe. They then consume the soup in front of the TV, while watching the very same talk show.

In the third part, the story stops in mid-motion. Alex, the protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange*,[7] appears in the TV studio with his band of thugs and takes a walk backwards through the storyline, frozen in time. Alex leaves the White Square talk show's studio set, and ends up on a new set labeled Victory Day, where he enters a copy version of Red Square. Here, with the skin dangling from his cane, Alex takes part in a totalitarian

7 Alex is the sadistic protagonist in Anthony Burgess's dystopian novel from 1962 and Stanley Kubrick's film version from 1971. It was banned in South Africa and Brazil, and also by some local councils in England, before Kubrick pulled the film from all British cinemas in 1973, after copycats started to replicate some of the violent scenes, and his family received death threats. It remained unavailable in the country until his death in 1999. The turbulent history of the film shows how art can intervene, sometimes violently, in real life.

Victory Day celebration, as he heads a chain-gang of prisoners marching in honor of a regime of zoomorphic rulers lined up on the mausoleum.

The mere heterogeneity of the plot speaks to how Sorokin has replaced the elegant simplicity of his early stories with excessive saturation. An added layer is the fact that the piece was dedicated to theater director Kirill Serebrennikov, who at the time had been placed under house arrest for allegedly embezzling money from his state-funded art projects.[8] Sorokin thus lent his name to a high-profile court case targeting a fellow artist, in effect letting his autonomous art intervene in real life.[9] The details of the Serebrennikov controversy notwithstanding, Sorokin blatantly flirts with stereotypical images of an oppressive Russian state—a main theme in the short story—while, at the same time, as we shall see, he highlights the fakeness and artificiality of these images, thereby problematizing literal, referential, and political readings of the short story.

In this analysis, following Jacques Derrida, I suggest that "White Square" reads as a postmodern reimagining of the inherent violence found in any framing. It performs several operations at once, pulling in two directions: on the one hand, the story plays on discursive tropes of the strictures of the state in its nation-building efforts to emblematically consolidate society; on the other, it problematizes the meta-implications of framing—be it visually or textually—and the inherent violence of this delimiting process.

Though the short story invites an overtly political reading on the nature of oppressive regimes or a commentary on the enduring hardship of a neglected segment of Russians, it persistently foregrounds the leitmotif of the white square (*belyi kvadrat*). As an emblem of autonomous, avant-garde art, this motif implicitly rejects satire.

8 While Serebrennikov is thought by some to be the victim of present-day Russia's authoritarian crackdown on artistic discourses challenging the regime, others think Serebrennikov and his staff should have known better than to accept state money in the first place, and that their bookkeeping was cause for suspicion (Gordeeva and Super 2018).

9 Я посвятил Кириллу Серебренникову этот текст. Но не потому, что текст о нем, а потому что Серебренников попал в эти жернова, практически стал жертвой Белого квадрата. Я ему искренне сочувствую, желаю поскорее выбраться оттуда. (Sorokin 2018). ("I dedicated this text to Kirill Serebrennikov. But not because the text is about him, but because Serebrennikov landed in this terrible situation, in practice becoming a victim of The White Square. I truly sympathize with him, and hope he gets out of there very soon.")

Presenting the unpresentable

Lyotard looked to the Kantian sublime as a possible path to a coherent definition of postmodernism. Kant's account of formlessness and abstract concepts leads him to conclude that some things cannot be represented aesthetically (e.g. the world, infinity, the universe, the ocean, quarks and atoms). Still, these entities are sometimes aesthetically alluded to, Lyotard reminds us, through negation. As a painterly example of presenting the unpresentable, Lyotard names Kazimir Malevich:

> As painting, it will of course "present" something though negatively; it will therefore avoid figuration or representation. It will be "white" like one of Malevich's squares; it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain. One recognizes in those instructions the axioms of avant-gardes in painting, inasmuch as they devote themselves to making an allusion to the unpresentable by means of visible presentations. (Lyotard 1984, 78)

The protean yet ubiquitous motif of the white square in the story becomes especially interesting in light of the iconic painting by Kazimir Malevich that Lyotard and Sorokin both allude to, namely *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (*Suprematicheskaia kompozitsiia: Beloe na belom*), also known as *White Square* (*Belyi kvadrat*) from 1918 (see Appendix). Malevich's painting can be perceived as a statement on art as pure abstraction, akin to Kant's mathematical sublime, displaying an image of nothingness by material means. This allusion, which permeates the story, paired with its excessiveness, speak to a *resistance to framing.*

The short story can be read as an allegory of the impossibility of attaining good artistic forms, or put differently: the act of framing inevitably cuts something out, and traps something inside, disfiguring the object it aims to represent. The image seen on the television screen, the most influential frame *par excellence* in the age of media, is but one of many. Framing can never avoid the totalizing procedure of boxing something in. Here we should also note that Sorokin tries to tease out a slippage from *totalizing* to *totalitarian* in the course of the short story.[10]

10 In *A Month in Dachau* (*Mesiats v Dachau*), we find the same conflation spelled out: […] и Деррида прав каждое автоматическое движение текстуально каждый текст тоталитарен мы в тексте а следовательно в тоталитаризме как мухи в

In order to shed light on the meta-discursive features of the short story, I turn to Jacques Derrida's concept of the *parergon*, where he argues for the inherent violence found in the frame. The aesthetic ramifications of this logic also align with Malevich (1919) and his artistic-political stance, voicing his disagreement with the authorities' museum strategy. Malevich wanted a new, post-revolutionary art free of the strictures of tradition, and sought to pulverize the art of the past (Groys 2013), or perhaps more metaphorically, to pulverize their indisputable authority in Russian culture. This attempt at wiping the slate clean would be a means of re-framing post-revolutionary art as vital and dynamic, and finding new ways of exhibiting art, unfettered by the conventions of old. The remnant powder of this pulverizing process, Malevich suggested, could be placed in a pharmacy for posterity. Similarly, Sorokin is well-known for staging the demise of his own work, most notably in *Roman,* a book that self-destructs at the very end, and in *Manaraga* (2017), a novel that ironically revolves around the destruction of books. Could an analogous poetics of auto-annihilation be found at the basis of "White Square," and if so, how does the shift from logocentrism to visual forms impact our interpretation?

The nine stories in Sorokin's *White Square* are for the most part united by their lack of conceptual cohesion. As in Sorokin's pseudo-novel *Telluria* (2013), each story comprises a separate plot, with separate characters, albeit all the stories seem to be set in the same overly carnivalesque version of Russia, a space in which the past is slowly overtaking the present. The constant change of frameworks makes the collection prototypically postmodern. Playful in its nihilistic repositioning, "White Square" disingenuously purports to discuss the modern-day political vicissitudes of contemporary Russia, but ultimately provides no political or ethical grounding to latch on to. As far as elaborate plots go, operating on a number of meta-levels, Sorokin's eponymous short story is also one of the few texts that comes close to rivaling the excessively nested narratives in *Blue Lard*.

меду а выход выход неужели только смерть […] (Sorokin 1992). ("[…] and Derrida is right every automatic movement is textual every text is totalitarian we are in the text and therefore in totalitarianism like flies in honey and the only way out way out is death […]").

As mentioned in the synopsis, the story reframes itself at least three times, from first focusing on the host, then on the skin and the old couple living in poverty, before finally zooming in on Alex. There is a constant shift, in other words, between spectators and performers. The story begins *in medias res* while the camera is rolling, we then get to go backstage in the studio, after the talk-show has already derailed. The show later reemerges when the impoverished couple have their dinner while watching the show. This narrative circularity is deepened even further as a new hyper-diegetic level reveals itself when the narration is frozen in time, as if the implicit author hit the pause button on the remote, allowing Alex to crawl out of the television screen, mirroring the TV host literally and metaphorically crawling out of his own hide. This doubling effect within the story itself unsettles the prospect of ascertaining any kind of stable vantage point. Getting the full picture becomes virtually unattainable, and every time the reader thinks she has arrived at an endpoint, a new diegetic level unfolds, without ever hinting at which storyline it is that could constitute a proper frame narrative.

On a political level, the short story just stops short of suggesting the potential for violence in any expression of nationalism, in the sense that agreeing on an emblem also implies agreeing on what is unacceptable to, and must be repelled from, the nation state. The initially cozy talk-show and the contestant's automatized exhibition of patriotism on Victory Day here transmute into triggers of bloodshed and repression. Yet there is reason to believe that Sorokin might simultaneously be toying with set idiomatic phrases, retooling the discourse by letting the body invade the linguistic realm.

Art as exuviation

The following statement by Sorokin on the process of writing the short story is particularly striking in this regard: Я вылез из старой кожи, вернулся к столу, чтобы добавить нечто новое к давно начатому разговору на бумаге.[11] The story can in this sense be read as an example of his materializations of metaphors, or carnalizations, as a rendition of the idiom *lezt' iz kozhi* (*von*), to crawl out of one's skin. In Russian, the phrase, which is often negatively charged, usually signifies doing every-

11 "I crept out of my old skin, returned to the table to add something new to a conversation on paper started long ago."

thing in one's power to achieve a goal, going maybe too far, even, to the point of crossing a line or losing control. The story about the flayed skin could therefore be read as a reworked idiom, one of Sorokin's trademark inversions, making the *metaphor into the plot itself*, as it were, in this case a TV host literally crawling out of his skin.

Not unlike the story's resistance to a single, stable perspective, Sorokin himself displayed a similar recalcitrance in an interview when asked to weigh in on how to "correctly" approach "Belyi kvadrat," mockingly providing the following set of instructions:

> Как правильно читать рассказ «Белый квадрат»? Это не так сложно: нужно встать с восходом солнца, наполнить белое квадратное ведро холодной водой, раздеться догола, выйти из дома, встать на землю, окатить себя водой, надеть пустое ведро на голову и, напевая то, что первым придет в мокрую голову, постараться на ощупь вернуться домой и сесть за стол. Затем можно снять ведро и предаться чтению.[12]

Notwithstanding him trolling this poor reporter, reading the piece can indeed feel like taking a cold shower, and finding an analytical approach that will do the text justice seems like a bit of a trap. Conversely, the defiance against framing could paradoxically be a framework in and of itself. While the plot presents itself as an allegory on the intoxicating effects of modern-day propaganda television, the white square, as title and leitmotif, reappears countless times throughout the story. That is why Kazimir Malevich's suprematist painting, "White on White," from 1918, is key.

Malevich's painting features a frame escaping its own frame, an image shedding, as it were, its own canvas. The basic function of a frame is to define the borders of an object so as to attain wholeness, that is, to delimit a larger context in order to constitute a cohesive work of art. Formally, the state's attempt to shape cultural expressions to fit a given political agenda can be re-found in artistic attempts at framing. There is an element of violence and destruction involved here at the root of any

12 "How to read "White Square" correctly? It's really quite simple: you have to get up at sunrise, fill a white square bucket with cold water, get naked, go outside, stand on the ground, douse yourself in water, put the empty bucket on your head and, while drinking the first drops to hit your wet head, try to grope your way home and sit down at the table. Then you can take off the bucket and commit to reading."

attempts at creating a coherent story, be it for nationalist or artistic purposes: i.e. the frame cuts out and blocks from view the surrounding noise and distractions that prevent the object from taking form.

In "About the Museum" ("O muzee") Kazimir Malevich (1919) draws a line from the realm of politics to that of art, declaring the need to create a new artistic power house in Russia, since Russia had recently become the epicenter of political change. Such a revolutionary shift would require an equally merciless attitude towards the artistic creations of the past as towards the political regimes that had been overthrown. In order to create a wholly new and revolutionary art, the museum had to cease to be a locus of conservation, but instead take on the role of housing a vibrantly futuristic thrust into the future.[13] The art of the past—or perhaps rather its unwavering authority, if we read him less literally—should be pulverized forever, according to Malevich (1919).[14] This shift would herald in a new epoch without ties to the past, devoid of the values of old:

> [З]десь должна возникнуть новая культура современности и нет места подаче старой. [...]
>
> Современность изобрела крематорий для мертвых, а каждый мертвый живее слабого написанного портрета.
>
> Сжегши мертвеца, получаем 1 г. порошку, следовательно, на одной аптечной полке может поместиться тысячи кладбищ.
>
> Мы можем сделать уступку консерваторам, предоставить сжечь все эпохи как мертвое и устроить одну аптеку.[15]

13 As Groys (2013) notes, there is a specific historical context that spurred Malevich to enter into what I regard as his poetic and imaginative polemics on the topic: "At that time, the new Soviet government feared that the old Russian museums and art collections would be destroyed by civil war and the general collapse of state institutions and the economy. The Communist Party responded by trying to save these collections. In his text, Malevich protested against this pro-museum policy by calling on the state to not intervene on behalf of the old art collections, since their destruction could open the path to true, living art."

14 Malevich touches on a related concept in "On New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed," ("O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve: Statika i skorost'") also from 1919.

15 "[H]ere, a new contemporary culture has to emerge, and there is no room for the old. […] Modernity has invented a crematorium for the dead, and every deceased is more alive than a weak, painted portrait. Having burnt a corpse, we get 1 g of powder, so it follows that thousands of cemeteries can fit on one pharmacy shelf. We can make a concession to the conservatives, let all epochs be burned as dead and set up one pharmacy."

Art as such was in Malevich's vision to be seen as disintegrating from the moment of its creation, bound for cremation. The only enduring image of art would therefore be the image of art being perpetually destroyed (Groys 2013). Not even the museum would be a safe harbor. The pharmacy would be every artwork's last resting place.

Derrida's violent parergonality

Attempting to frame something is therefore a violent move, as Jacques Derrida argues in his discussion of the *parergon,* being that which stands next to the work, the *ergon*. Examples of *parerga* can be adornments, columns, draperies, ornamentation, anything that compels us to dwell on the fringes of the artwork, "acting on the sidelines," as Derrida puts it. In its purest form the *parergon* is *the frame* around the artwork, the zone or threshold that delimits it, without being an integral part of the work itself or its environment, which it is the frame's job to keep at bay. The frame is the clear-cut line that bridges the gap in the artwork: "only an adjunct, and not an intrinsic constituent of the complete representation of an object" (Derrida 1979, 18). The frame highlights the artwork's inability to exist independently. It underscores an inherent lack, since the artwork is dependent on this additional move, a violent squaring off, in order to sustain itself. The function of the frame is crucial, yet also threatens to draw attention away from the object itself (Derrida 1979, 21).

We might therefore ask where the work really begins and ends, given its inability to mark its own borders. And what happens when the *parergon* is set to augment a work that is ostensibly about absence? In Sorokin's story, the vacuous nothingness emanating from the television screen has in other words become the modern-day white square that has supplanted the *krasnyi ugol*, the red (beautiful) corner where the icon would hang. Framing entails an "artful sort of violence" according to Derrida. "The frame doesn't fit[.] The violence of framing proliferates" (Derrida 1979, 30). Thus, the boundaries of the frame invite their own violation and the lines of demarcation ultimately undermine the cohesion of the work itself. This paradox gives a clue as to how Sorokin can paint "White Square" in such stark political terms, while simultaneously sabotaging that interpretation altogether. The same way the frame deconstructs the artwork, so too does the television square simulate the political reality as something entirely detached. The frame leaves the fray,

ending up in an uncanny parallel dystopia. It is not quite Putin's Russia, but it also can't be anything else.

With this in mind, framing the collection of short stories as a whole also then means exerting a certain degree of violence upon it. For one, the stories seem to strike the same tone, exuding a kind of sinking feeling; but above all, they revolve around a set of symbols. One can think of the collection as pictures at an exhibition, with titles such as "Purple Swans" ("Fioletovye lebedi"), "The Fngernail" ("Nogot'"), "In Field" ("V pole") emblematic stories serving as allegorical images of the Russian state in its current condition. In "Red Pyramid" ("Krasnaia piramida,") Sorokin conjures up a powerful image of a demonic train ride around Moscow, reminiscent of Venedikt Erofeev's *Moskva-Petushki;* like Erofeev's poem, the hallucinating protagonist ends his journey on Red Square (just as in "White Square") in a bloody, otherworldly vision, where the red, terrifying echo of Lenin's Bolshevism ceaselessly reverberates from an invisible pyramid.

Icy allegories

Certain elements in the stories harken back to the 1980s, but each story deals with the *Zeitgeist* of present-day Russia, and they all have one thing in common: *temperature*. The collection makes for a chilling read, another feature of whiteness. Winter metaphors have become a favorite of Sorokin's, not just with the publication of the *Ice Trilogy* and the *Blizzard*; in several interviews, he sees Russia as undergoing a protracted political winter, seeing the past as a slowly progressing glacier gradually crushing the present and any concept of a future, and describing Putin's regime as an ice box that works to preserve the rotting corpse of its Imperial and Soviet predecessors. In *Telluria* (chapter 11), mother Russia is shown as a sleepwalking ice giantess wading aimlessly though a blizzard; the country is depicted as frozen in time, its people haplessly daydreaming in order to survive.

This chilling effect also holds true for "White Square." In the banal talk-show, four contestants are asked to suggest the truest image of Russia, and the audience chooses a winner. We have Irina, who works for the municipality. Her answer is that Russia is like a childhood song. Then there is Iurii, a military man. He thinks Russia has most in common with a cave, a sort of spiritual treasure trove of oil and gas. Then there is Pavel,

a businessman; to him, Russia is first and foremost a struggle for survival. Finally, we have Anton, a theater director. He has the following take on Russia:

> Антон. Я представляю нашу страну в виде огромной, гигантской, нечеловеческой по размеру вши. Причем сильно замороженной, спящей в своем глубоком анабиозе. […]
> Ведущий. Антон, скажите, вот эта ваша ледяная вошь, она что, сосет народную кровь?
> Антон. Она достаточно насосалась за двадцатый век.
> Ведущий. А теперь переваривает?
> Антон. Да, переваривает, медитирует, отдыхает. (Sorokin 2018, 60 and 66)[16]

Sorokin presents a striking image of Russia as a blood-sucking pest, sated temporarily on the life force of its own people while hibernating through the current political ice age. The theatrical qualities of "White Square" are another characteristic of the story, reading at times like a play in the tradition of Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty, as mentioned by Aleksandr Genis (2018), but these sections are also reminiscent of the brutal plays of Sarah Kane. The short story diverts from the genre in other respects. Before appearing in its final version in book form, it was first launched on December 25, 2017 as a multimedia artwork on lenta.ru, supplemented by dystopian sounds and nightmarish illustrations in elemental colors, a crossbreed between the graphic novel and moving animations.[17]

A discourse on drugs

To return to the plot in "White Square," after Irina's song has been declared the most apt image of Russia, the TV host offers the contestants

16 "ANTON When I think of our country, I imagine it as a huge louse. An enormous louse. A […] monstrously large louse. The louse is completely frozen and in hibernation. […] / HOST Now, Anton, tell us. Your icy louse. What does it do? Suck the people's blood? / ANTON It had enough to drink in the 20th century. / HOST And now it's digesting? / ANTON Yes. Digesting, meditating, and resting." (All English quotes from "White Square" derive from Max Lawton's translation (Sorokin 2020).)

17 Sorokin only provided the text, and a team of sound and visual artists created the rest. We should also note that the final version, published in book form, is not entirely identical to the text on lenta.ru, with quite a few stylistic changes having been made throughout the piece.

an injection of a newly approved drug, BD-4, or *White Hype 4* (*Belaia dvizhukha 4*), soon indicative of violence. Right after the injection, the contestants lose their minds, letting out all their pent-up aggression, flaying the talk-show host using Iurii the military man's AK-47 knife. They stretch out the skin on the white table where the game show had taken place, in effect creating a canvas, before the whole scene escalates into what can best be described as a frenzied Dionysian orgy, in which they make a Jackson Pollock-like painting on the flayed skin with urine and blood.

This violent depiction of intoxication is hardly Sorokin's first time experimenting with hard literary drugs. As a meta-literary device, Sorokin uses intoxication to implode the text from within, like Derrida's notion of *pharmakon*: it is that which both propels the text forward, while also ensuring its demise. The incident here highlights the rambling and addictive qualities of writing—its capacity to undo any existing order in a meta-literary maze. It is Sorokin's signature way of staging the destruction of his own writing: injecting the substance BD-4 into the narrative wipes the slate clean by destroying the game show called White Square—and by association both the story and the book.

The scene instigates a violent rupture amounting to what Boris Groys (2010, 1–4) sees as Moscow conceptualism's endgame: a *return to realism*, to a reality in flux, constantly subject to a radical reframing. Sorokin's scenes of violent intoxication are not simply a gesture toward death and destruction, but also a performative way to cut through the noise. The use of drugs reframes reality as perpetual transmutation, a mode of operating in the present tense of what Groys calls "permanent change."

The flaying of the talk-show host marks a dramatic break in the narrative, reframing and removing it from the histrionic discourse of propaganda television. The second part of the story—moving at a slow, dismal pace—constitutes a radical break in focalization: the skin taken from the talk-show host's mangled body, covered in urine and blood, now becomes the posthuman protagonist of the story.[18] We follow the remnants of his skin as it is rolled up behind the scenes by the TV studio staff, and hung around the neck of the director. The skin then travels through a bleak Moscow between various animals, before it ends up in the hands of the

18 Honoré de Balzac's *La Peau de chagrín* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*) from 1831 might be a possible source of inspiration.

dirt-poor couple selling fake honey outside a church. The husband brings the hoop of skin home to cook cabbage soup on it, as if it were giblets. After being snatched up by Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*, the skin finally ends up on the Red Square studio set, where a new oppressive regime—its leaders all portrayed with the heads of various animals—greets a chain gang of prisoners in an eerily totalitarian totem ritual.

As argued, we are faced with highly competing avenues of interpretation. How does one frame a story that is ostensibly about the violence and impossibility of framing, a story that has overdosed on its own contextual excess and allegorical surplus?

White square, Red square

First, the motif of the white square could be read as the TV screen itself, devouring any discourse, even that of the avant-garde, through a propagandistic flattening. Second, the play on red and white also evokes a long history, with Whites against Reds, playing on a longstanding political and ideological tension in Russian culture, while aesthetically, the colors represent life and death, vitality and entropy. As the head of the studio tells the director, who after the carnage suggests renaming the show "Red Square": Белый квадрат остается. Бренд, который все знают.[19] The cynical branding that the discourse of television represents flattens real life, like the body of the talk show host, into a dead surface that can manipulate any discourse for propaganda purposes.

The motif also brings us back to Malevich's painting from 1918. It is one of the most daring examples of abstraction ever attempted. Not only is there no narrative, no subject—the painting barely contains color. The smaller square is not even a proper square, when examined closely, undermining the formation of a stable image, and the possibility of likeness to itself. It is the pictorial embodiment of pure emptiness, a depiction of nothingness. In a utopian gesture, Malevich's painting frees itself from the constraints of reality, deconstructing its own framework.

It is as if the *parergon* has taken over the picture and become the *ergon* itself: the secondary support function being given pride of place at the expense of mimesis. The painting thereby highlights the placidity of the medium, the mere materiality of paint, materializing the impossibility of contrasting a lack of color by adding even more lack of color: white

19 "We'll stick with White Square. It's a brand everyone knows."

on white. The framing of Sorokin's short story in a word venerates the autonomy of art, and its triumph over mimetic depictions of reality, underscoring instead the parergonality of the frame itself.

Malevich's painting foregrounds the frame's protean transmutations throughout Sorokin's story. It also marks the transition from modernism to postmodernism. In one of the earliest essays dealing with this shift in paradigms, Groys leaves no hope or future for the white squares of modernism:

> Ничто, символизируемое молчанием в литературе или абсолютно белым в живописи, стало на какое-то время последним прибежищем европейской культуры. Но это время прошло, и стало ясно, что само молчание и белое выродились в пустой жест, в общественный ритуал, в признак хорошего тона. В их аутентичность нельзя было больше верить.[20]

The body of the work—going from lifeless television surface to a human skin canvas, sprayed red with spurts of blood—makes the move from the autonomy of art (*belyi kvadrat*) to the blood-stained revolutionary discourses of power and politics (*krasnaia ploshchad'*). No longer a symbol of beauty or transcendence, this image amounts to but an abstract idea drenched in blood, ushering in an artificial projection of a totalitarian brave new world of posthuman hybrids.

The Greek myth of the satyr Marsyas is repeatedly brought up in the story, a device to make the lofty white square, promising redemption, coagulate into a pool of blood.[21] The act of speaking truth to power, but also suffering the dire consequences, is inscribed into the story. The flaying could similarly be read as the dressing down or exposing of the hegemonic discourse geared towards brainwashing poor and uneducated viewers.

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20 "Nothingness, which is symbolized by silence in literature or absolute whiteness in painting, at some point became the last sanctuary for European culture. But this time has passed, and it has become clear that silence and whiteness have degenerated into an empty gesture, into a community ritual, into a sign of good manners. There was no longer any reason to believe in their authenticity."

21 Marsyas had the audacity to challenge Apollo, god of the arts, to a musical contest, which Marsyas lost when Apollo played the lyre upside down, but he could not do the same with his woodwind. As punishment, Apollo had him flayed.

Ingesting ideology

The fact that the poor couple in the story actually end up eating and ingesting the propaganda man, the TV host, later morphing into the bodily incarnation of the TV screen, drives the point home: viewers are fed the flattened reality propagated by state television.

A parallel can be found in Aleksandr Zel'dovich's fascinating film "Mishen" ("The Target") for which Sorokin wrote the script. The film, on Ilya Kukulin's reading, is a depiction of Russian society, especially the elites, as "radically alienated from the historical process" (Kukulin 2013, 316). One scene features a banal game show not unlike the one we find in "White Square," where the contestants are made to cook in front of an audience to convince them of their happiness and success in Russian society, whereupon the host throws the repugnant product of their cooking at the audience, who flee in disgust when they realize the junk fantasies of Russia and Russian identity they have been devouring all along. Sorokin returns to an old trope of his, namely *ingestion*, most famously found in his first novel, *Norma*, where the characters in part I are made to eat a stinky factory-produced substance, namely small parcels of feces. In other words, the Soviet population was force-fed the regime's ideology: shit.[22]

With "Belyi kvadrat," Sorokin reframes the device of ingestion, bringing it into current-day Russia, and the over-the-top talk and game shows framed by the TV screen: people screaming at each other in what are supposed to be debates; obvious falsehoods being driven home by pundits like Dmitrii Kiselev and Vladimir Solovev, amounting to a violent void, an oversaturated informational vacuum that eventually becomes hard to endure before switching to the next channel, in the story metaphorically described as taking a stroll onto the next set.

Conclusion

Crucially, in Sorokin, the Russian tongue itself is coded as a language of propaganda through the recycling of the Nadsat slang from Anthony Burgess' novel, in which Alex's speech is described precisely as: "'Odd bits of old rhyming slang', said Dr Branom, who did not look quite so

22 On a more basic, ontological level, the ingestion of the norm also foregrounds how one must make concessions to survive, it underscores man's thrownness into the world, having to accept and internalize language, the law, the social structure. Also, "norma" can be the ration given to each citizen, thus paradoxically representing the limits of personal consumption through the necessity to consume.

much like a friend any more. 'A bit of gipsy talk, too. But most of the roots are Slav. Propaganda. Subliminal penetration'" (Burgess 2011, 90). In a mirroring move, Sorokin (2018, 103) regurgitates their speech in Latin script, as Alex and his band of hooligans, all dressed in white, come upon the white square table from the game show, before he beats them into submission with his cane, (as in the famous scene from the original film):

> Алекс (*трогая тростью белый стол*). Что это?
> Друг 1. Это moloko vellocet. [...]
> Алекс (*выдержав паузу*). Мои старые, добрые, дорогие droogs, вы меня принимаете за gloopy devochka?
> Друг 1. Нет, Алекс.
> Друг 2. Ну что ты, Алекс! Ты не gloopy devochka!
> Друг 1. Ты наш друг и leader.
> Друг 2. Да, Алекс! Droog и leader.
> Алекс. Значит, вы все сделали horrorshow?[23]

By turning the Russian language in on itself, "good" and "bad" become indistinguishable: *khorosho,* "good" is now also "horrorshow." The move empties the Russian language of meaning, as Sorokin turns language and text against themselves, this time with the added tweak of also letting a number of screens and canvases face each other, an all-encompassing visual display of senseless propaganda made flesh as screen, canvas and skin. Sorokin's story is at once a terrifying vision of totalitarianism, where the totalizing propagandistic discourse of television is constantly transmogrified anew, while also freeing itself from its initial framing, highlighting the artificiality of this vision.

"White Square" allegorically apprehends a populist TV discourse, a social structure capable of reworking anything by emptying it of meaning and projecting it to the masses. There is a double emptying, a double kenosis of the image, as Malevich's empty painting is exhausted of its non-meaning, freeing its freedom, as it were, of its ties to reality. Epstein

23 **ALEX** (*Tapping the white table with his cane*) What's this? / **DROOG 1** It's moloko vellocet. […] / **ALEX** (*After a pause*) My dear, old, darling droogs. Do you take me for a gloopy devotchka? / **DROOG 1** No, Alex. / **DROOG 2** What do you mean, Alex? You're not a gloopy devotchka! / **DROOG 1** You're our droog and our leader. / **DROOG 2** Yeah, Alex! Our droog and our leader. / **ALEX** Does that mean you did everything horrorshow?

(2016, 54) touches on a similar idea, that harkens back to Baudrillard: "Television produces an event, which is specially produced in order to be reproduced by television. Such a counterfeit event, which supposedly reflects some sort of reality but instead replaces this missing reality, is called a simulacrum." In this sense, television is the founding simulacrum, and the true master signifier of our age: it signifies nothing, but sends us on an endless quest for the reality that it purportedly reflects. Like Malevich's painting, it simultaneously puts forth an image of art in constant deconstruction, or is subject to permanent change, as Groys would have it. An artwork that continually undoes its own boundaries and framework, the intoxication of the discourse of television also functions as an escapist image of freedom, emblematic as a white square that is always already leaving itself behind, as Malevich's painting seems to do.

In conclusion, the short story reframes the divide between aesthetic autonomy and political discourse, parroting the deranged discourse of television talk-shows that would have us imagine that we are living in a make-believe political world. The motif of the white square has unmistakably repressive ramifications in Sorokin's story, but the political reality that the short story alludes to seems to have been artificially produced in a studio; it is first and foremost a discursive projection, a totalizing fantasy of art and totalitarianism. It says very little about contemporary Russia and its political struggles, but quite a lot about the deranged conceptualizations of that reality as portrayed through the television screen. The white square is therefore nothing but the frame that ultimately disturbs the cohesion that it was initially meant to provide. The white screen now having annexed the icon's corner (*krasnyi ugol*), the short story is Sorokin's violent avant-garde framing of a fictionalized hyperreality that has freed itself from a mundane Russia in the age of propaganda television. In the narrative, the televised propaganda gets dressed down through the flaying of the talkshow host, while conceptually, on a metalevel, Malevich's square perpetually exuviates its canvas, the same way Sorokin's short story continues to shed its own framework. White Square is Russia's TV discourse on speed, taken to its utmost extreme.

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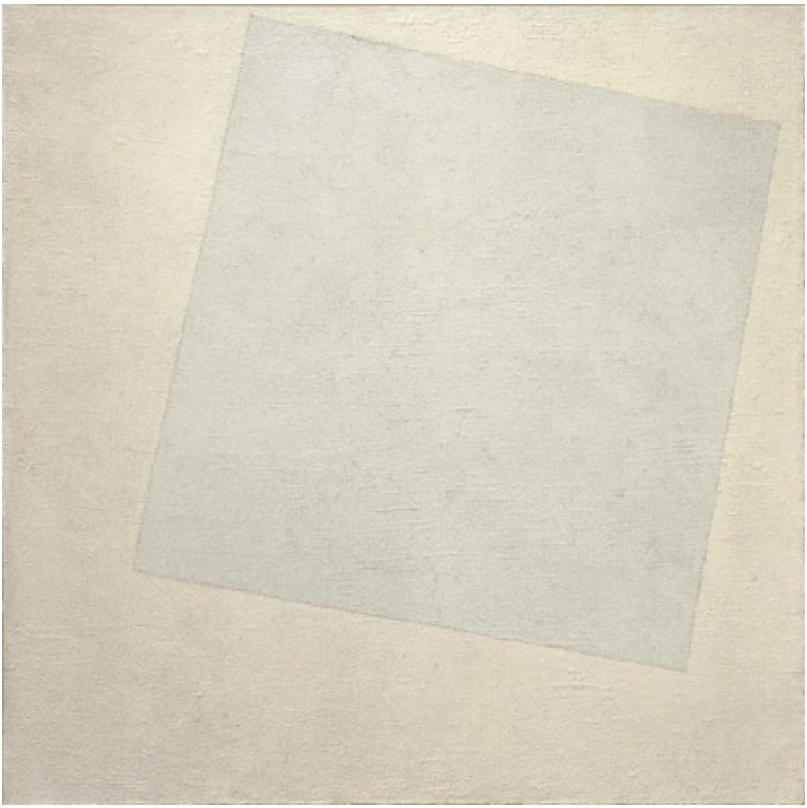
Appendix



Kazimir Malevich: *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918)