The Politics and Aesthetics of Waste in Liudmila Petrushevskaia's Fiction

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This chapter examines the fiction of the Soviet/Russian writer Liudmila Petrushevskaia with a particular focus on her use of waste metaphors.[1] I argue that images of waste in late Soviet and post-Soviet culture can function as important symbolic markers of Soviet and post-Soviet society in the process of its sociocultural transition. Petrushevskaia's fiction is especially interesting and representative in this respect, since waste in its literal and figurative meanings reappear in her works belonging to different periods and often acquires additional symbolic significance.[2] Therefore, I examine Petrushevskaia's works belonging to different periods—the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s—to understand the ways this evolution of waste imagery sheds light on both the changes in her fiction and the sociocultural trends of late Soviet and post-Soviet society. In Petrushevskaia's earlier fiction, the metaphors of waste often express a social critique of Soviet life. In her later works, the metaphors of waste become connected to post-Soviet popular culture, or suggest a potential for artistic creativity and transformation, while simultaneously losing a clear sociopolitical stance. Moreover, Petrushevskaia's changing imagery of waste reflects the evolving cultural contexts of the post-Soviet transition—the move from a situation in which the state exercises control over culture to one in which the authors have to consider the

1 In this chapter, I use terms such as "waste," "trash," "rubbish," and "garbage" interchangeably. At the same time, the term "waste" has a more generalized meaning than the other words.

2 This chapter is not meant to be an all-inclusive survey of Petrushevskaia's fiction. Instead, it examines works with significant presence of waste imagery. Works where waste is a marginal element are not investigated.

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influence of a globalized cultural market.

My approach to Petrushevskaia's works draws primarily on the interdisciplinary field of waste studies, which examines "the multivalent significance of rubbish, filth, toxins and remains across a wide range of contexts" and from a variety of perspectives (Harrison 2017, 4). The category of "waste" is important for cultural studies since its material dimensions are inseparable from its figurative significance (Harrison 2017, 4).[3] As a literal substance, waste is closely connected to our physical and social environments. At the same time, images of waste can serve as broader metaphors for social problems, social anxieties, and, more disturbingly, entire social groups. Yet the topic of waste's meaning has not received much attention in scholarship on Soviet and post-Soviet culture. An important exception is a discussion of the imagery of trash in Mark Lipovetsky's study of Russian postmodernism, *Paralogii* (*Paralogii: transformatsii (post)modernistkogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov*, 2008). According to Lipovetsky, in Russian postmodernism, trash (*musor*) represents the manifestation of "the maximally lowered transcendental theme," such as life after death and presence after absence (58). Furthermore, the landfill (*svalka*) and trash represent a number of "explosive aporias," such as "unofficial culture and Soviet society," "the beautiful and the monstrous," and "memory and forgetting" (Lipovetskii 2008, 59–65).

Whereas Lipovetsky's approach focuses on the philosophical or even metaphysical aspects of waste imagery in Russian postmodern art, this chapter emphasizes the ways in which metaphors of waste are linked to the material transformations of Soviet and post-Soviet culture. Petrushevskaia's fiction well illustrates the permutations of waste imagery, since her work includes examples of both naturalistic realism and postmodernism. As Svetlana Boym (1999) argues in her discussion of the trash installations by Soviet and post-Soviet conceptualist artist Il'ia Kabakov, the imagery of trash represented a central taboo of Soviet society, that of the banal and the ordinary.[4] In the Soviet context, the con-

3 Waste studies is a relatively new yet vibrant field; publications on the topic from a variety of perspectives have multiplied in the last two decades (Gille and Lepawsky 2022, 1). As an interdisciplinary field, waste studies combines multiple methods and approaches. For a comprehensive view from the social sciences, see, for example, Gille & Lepawsky (2022). For approaches based in the humanities, see, for example, Morrison (2015) and Harrison (2017).

4 Il'ia Kabakov's trash installations became popular in the 1990s. Some examples of

cept of "consumerist popular culture" was largely replaced by state-controlled "mass culture." Among Western modernist artists such as the Cubists, Italian Futurists, and Dadaists, the interest in popular culture had led to fascination with the processes of consumption and concomitant waste. Similarly, camp and kitsch styles or the "trashy tastes" of the masses became a source of fascination for postmodernist artistic movements such as Pop Art. For example, for such American modernist and postmodernist poets as Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Goldsmith, "waste becomes a source of creative play, innovation, and textured, often eroticized, pleasure" (Schmidt 2014, xii). In contrast, for their Soviet counterparts, waste belonged to the realm of censored expression. The use of waste metaphors, therefore, historically has been confined to nonconformist Soviet art, appearing, for example, in the fiction of Andrei Platonov or the conceptualist art of Kabakov. Petrushevskaia's works can also be interpreted as nonconformist, since they are invested in social and artistic disruptions, breaking social and cultural taboos.

From Soviet to Post-Soviet Materiality in Petrushevskaia's Fiction

Comparing the lives of objects in the capitalist West with those in the USSR, Boym points out the paradoxes of Soviet approaches to material culture: "In Soviet Russia, the experience of material scarcity for the majority of the population and the official critique of bourgeois commodities (combined with thinly disguised social inequalities) endows private objects with a different cultural significance" (Boym 1994, 159). As a result, Soviet and post-Soviet culture could be characterized by a particular materiality, where objects acquired cultural and symbolic meanings distinct from those in capitalist countries.

For example, due to ongoing shortages and deficits plaguing socialist economies, material objects obtained a surplus value. Liviu Chelcea claims that consumer items in socialist economies had additional significance: "Goods that would have been commodities in a market economy acquired the features of gifts or rarities" (Chelcea 2002, 20). Furthermore, even packages and wrappers, which in market economies would be considered trash objects, could have material value. As a re-

his engagement with trash are the installations "Box with Garbage" ("Iashchik s musorom," 1981) and "The Man Who Never Throws Anything Away" ("Chelovek, kotoryi nikogda nichego ne vybrasyvaet," 1988).

sult, in Soviet culture, objects received emotional and even fantastic qualities. Andrew Chapman describes Soviet sacralization of objects as "the practices in which scarce items or even their remnants, such as wrappers and empty boxes, take on added meaning" (Chapman 2013, 143). Due to this persistent condition of scarcity, individuals often tried to extend the lives of material objects by reusing and recycling. While in many respects socialist states had a problematic attitude to natural environment,[5] they implemented recycling programs for select materials. These programs incorporated the whole of society, and included the gathering and recycling of paper, metal, glass bottles, and jars (Gille 2007, 3).[6]

Social attitudes to material and consumer objects were not static. They changed from early to late socialism, and shifted further during perestroika and the post-Soviet period. Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to precipitous changes in social and material life—the move from a planned economy, characterized by deficit and scarcity, to a market economy and conspicuous consumption. This dramatic sociocultural shift had significant ramifications for the country's approach to material objects and waste. Specifically, the socioeconomic shift resulted in a dramatic increase in waste production. In the 1990s, the Soviet recycling systems were dismantled and, to date, have not been replaced by alternative methods of utilization.[7] Moreover, the shift to a consumer society gradually led to the appearance of a "throwaway" culture. The problem of recycling and waste storage plagues post-Soviet Russia and has become even more severe in recent years.

In the sphere of cultural production, the disruptive transition from a Soviet to a post-Soviet society reversed earlier social and cultural norms and broke social taboos. Upon entering the postindustrial economy, post-Soviet literature followed the rules of the global literary market rather than state mandates or rules of an artistic underground. In the early 1990s, "the Russian book market began to take on the familiar

5 William Wheeler (2021) argues that Soviet modernity treated nature as a resource to be mastered to serve human progress. This violent reordering of the environment often led to environmental degradation.

6 Of course, these programs were limited to wastes that were considered important by the state; other types of waste were usually excluded.

7 Municipal waste disposal infrastructure and Soviet-era landfills are often ill equipped to deal with the post-Soviet increase of domestic and more complex waste (Josephson et al. 2013, 310).

contours of a capitalist market," and works of literature followed the logic of the international cultural scene (Gorski 2020, 614). One of the ways that the post-Soviet literary scene differs from its Soviet predecessor is the popularity of genre literature and taboo subjects. Reflecting these changes in popular tastes, Petrushevskaia's fiction also underwent significant changes between the late 1970s/1980s and the 1990s and 2000s. It shifted from the prevalence of dark naturalistic prose to the predominance of popular and fantastic genres such as dystopia, horror story, postmodernist novel, and adult fairytale.[8] Petrushevskaia is an extremely versatile author, who over the years wrote in a variety of literary genres, such as prose, poetry, drama, short stories, novels, and fairytales for both children and adults. Despite this diversity in form and style, the prevalence of taboo subjects, especially waste imagery, remains a persistent feature of Petrushevskaia's fiction. Since the 1990s, reception of Petrushevskaia's works has shifted from rejection by Soviet literary censors to critical acclaim by the post-Soviet literary establishment—a shift that reflects the changing cultural scene.

Petrushevskaia's Soviet Metaphors of Waste

The late 1980s and early 1990s became a time of social disruption. Due to glasnost, taboo topics that were previously rarely discussed in the USSR, such as criminality, sexuality, and dark aspects of the Soviet past, began to appear in literature, cinema, and the press. One such taboo-breaking style was the perestroika-era aesthetic of *chernukha*,[9] coming from the Russian word for black (*chernyi*), it represented a kind of kitchen sink realism. This aesthetic transgressed the limitations of Soviet culture by focusing on negative aspects of reality. Chernukha cinema and literature combined aesthetic and thematic concerns to represent the previously silenced negative aspects of Soviet life. On the thematic level, these works were usually concerned with underprivileged or marginal social groups, depicting grim social problems. The works offered almost no solutions and emphasized "physicality and natural-

8 According to Lesley Milne, half of Petrushevskaia's five-volume collected works published in 1996 already consisted of fantastical prose of various genres (Milne 2000, 270). The number of such works has only increased since the mid-1990s.

9 The popularity of this aesthetic is illustrated by the sudden rise to visibility of the figure of currency prostitute (*valiutnaia prostitutka*)—someone who targeted foreigners in order to receive currency rather than Soviet rubles. The best-known example can be found in Petr Todorovskii's film *Intergirl* (*Interdevochka*, 1988).

ism" (Graham 2000, 9). One of the reasons for the popularity of the mode was its parodic inversion of the rules of socialist realism (Graham 2000, 13). In opposition to socialist realist works with their tendency for varnishing reality, chernukha focused on crime and violence, poverty, psychological problems, environmental degradation, drug and alcohol abuse, and illicit sexuality.

The style of Petrushevskaia's prose exhibited features of the chernukha mode even before this style became prevalent in late perestroika fiction and film. An important characteristic of Petrushevskaia's late Soviet prose is that it "deflates and parodies the euphemism of Soviet literature by depicting the human body and its needs grotesquely and minutely, in every conceivable detail" (Ivanova 2015, 29). This aspect of Petrushevskaia's fiction broke the long-standing taboo on depicting sexuality and physicality, which Soviet culture rejected in favor of the ideological and the ideal. Similarly, Petrushevskaia's fiction challenges late Soviet culture by emphasizing the banality of the dark aspects of Soviet everyday life. Her iconic works of the late 1980s and early 1990s further reflect this aesthetic. For example, her short novel *The Time: Night* (*Vremia noch'*, 1992) tells the story of a poet, Anna Andrianovna, who has trouble publishing and lives in poverty in the late 1980s. The novel focuses not on the poet's literary career but on her dysfunctional family, consisting of three generations of single women: a deranged grandmother, the protagonist herself, and her young daughter. Their lives are circumscribed by poverty and cramped and uncomfortable living conditions.

In *The Time: Night*, the lives of the protagonists contradict the Soviet narratives of prosperity and equality. Indeed, they appear to have no value. The women are dehumanized and become equated with their inhospitable environment:

> О обманщица природа! О великая! Зачем-то ей нужны эти страдания, этот ужас, кровь, вонь, пот, слизь, судороги, любовь, насилие, боль, бессонные ночи, тяжелый труд, вроде чтобы все было хорошо! АН нет, и все плохо опять. (2013c, 448)[10]

By connecting nature with waste and excretion, such as stench, sweat,

10 "Oh, deceiver nature! Oh, great! For some reason, she needs this suffering, this horror, blood, stench, sweat, mucus, convulsions, love, violence, pain, sleepless nights,

and slime, the novel presents human life as eternal suffering, with a particular focus on women's sexuality, family, and motherhood. For Boym (1999), banality and ordinariness are among the taboos of Soviet culture. Petrushevskaia exaggerates the banality of her characters and their familial stories by adding the taboo of the dysfunctional Soviet family. The protagonist of *The Time: Night* takes a particularly ambivalent view of her family: she questions her children's choices, especially her daughter's, and appears unaware of the fact that her daughter's life seems to replicate her own, as well as that of her elderly mother. This ambivalent view of motherhood and female sexuality challenges Soviet cultural norms. According to Lynne Attwood, starting from Stalinist times, Soviet culture celebrated motherhood (Attwood 2001, 162). An ideal Soviet family had to be productive both at work and at home. In contrast, Petrushevskaia presents a femininity that is productive in a rather anti-Soviet way. Thus, the protagonist writes poetry and diaries that cannot be published, and her daughter gives birth to illegitimate children. Connecting unacceptable forms of authorship and motherhood, Petrushevskaia shows both as a kind of refuse rejected by official Soviet culture. Thus, family life leads to unhappiness and dysfunction rather than to enjoyment and happiness. Social institutions similarly appear absent or inadequate as sources of support for her female characters, leading to a sense of wasted lives. Even more disturbingly, women characters internalize Soviet norms and restrictions, oppressing their own families. Thus, Anna becomes what Helena Goscilo terms "the totalitarian Petrushevskian mother [who] mirrors the totalitarian Soviet state" (Goscilo 1995, 105).

In other instances, the novel offers a more direct critique of Soviet society through the use of trash metaphors. For example, the protagonist is terrified of the fact that her mother will be sent to a mental institution far from Moscow, but she cannot take her in, because she is already housing her young daughter and her three young children. The housing shortage—a common theme in Soviet-era literature—becomes absolutely intractable in Petrushevskaia's prose.[11] These circumstances force the protagonist to finally allow her mother to be moved to a fara-

hard work? Presumably to make things right, but everything is bad again." (All translations of Petrushevskaia in this chapter are my own.)

11 The "apartment question" had been addressed by Soviet writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov and Mikhail Zoshchenko.

way mental institution, which she will be unable to visit, thus symbolically expunging her mother from her life. Once the protagonist makes this decision, she throws all of her mother's belongings into the nearest garbage dump: У ближайшего мусорного контейнера я разгрузила свой чемодан, выбросила пахнущие хлоркой пеленки, остро воняющую клеенку, квач и утку, свои сокровища периода надежд. Туда же пошли рваные простыни, я оставила только ком ваты (Petrushevskaia 2013c, 492).[12]

The discarded possessions represent the prolonged hospitalization and speak of humiliation and discomfort. Soviet institutions of care for the elderly and mentally ill thus appear especially dehumanizing and are symbolically linked to waste. This moment illustrates how Soviet society created hierarchies and exclusionary practices in direct contradiction with the stated emphasis on social equality and progress. While Soviet culture gave additional value to material objects, it also created the means for social distinction based on proximity to valuable goods (Chapman 2017). Focusing on the problems of Soviet women, such as economic insecurities and family fragmentation, Petrushevskaia's prose is especially suggestive of the gendered nature of these social exclusions. In her works, mundane aspects of everyday life such as family, housing, and comforts are associated with forms of distinction that are unattainable for most of her characters. Soviet citizens' distinction was taking place in parallel with the processes of social exclusion and disregard. Consequently, these systems of distinction and exclusion led to the production of wasted lives—a process similar but not equivalent to that of capitalist societies. Whereas globalization and capitalism produce wasted lives through social hierarchies based on economic exploitation (Bauman 2003), Soviet society created wasted lives through limitations of access to material goods, as well as through processes of social division based on a rigid interpretation of social class.

Throughout its history, Soviet society often undervalued entire social groups, turning them into outcasts, such as enemies of the people (*vragi naroda*) during Stalinism or the dispossessed (*lishentsy*) during the 1920s. These social exclusions persisted throughout the Soviet era, since the loss of social status and capital could not be fully recovered

12 "At the nearest dumpster, I unloaded my suitcase, threw out the smelly bleached diapers, pungent oilcloth, potty, these treasures of the times of hope. There went the torn sheets; I left for myself only a clod of cotton."

during the partial rehabilitations of the 1960s. The reality of social distinctions further contradicted the discourses of Soviet equality. This tendency to waste human lives appears in Petrushevskaia's 2004 autobiographical novel, *Girl from the Metropol* (*Devochka iz Metropolia*), which tells of the experiences of Petrushevskaia's family in the Stalinist 1930s and 1940s. One of the signs of the family's social status was their apartment in the Metropol Hotel in Moscow, home to some of the most privileged members of the Soviet nomenklatura. However, in the 1930s, her relatives were pronounced enemies of the people and arrested or exiled from the capital. Together with her mother, grandmother, and aunt, young Petrushevskaia had to leave for Samara, and the family was reduced to abject poverty. In the early 1940s, Petrushevskaia lived almost as if she were homeless, often running away from home and begging for food on the streets of Samara.

This dramatic change in her family's fortunes reflected the insecurity of Soviet life. Under Stalin, a privileged family could lose its fortunes overnight and be imprisoned or exiled. Thus, the processes of social exclusion acquired an unpredictable or seemingly random quality. Petrushevskaia describes in detail the deprivation experienced by the families pronounced enemies of the people. For example, her grandmother and aunt had to scavenge their neighbors' trash for food (2013a, 418). Under these conditions, trash turns into a symbol of both possibility and humiliation, appearing, for example, in the image of the dolls that young Petrushevskaia finds in the neighbors' bins.

> Но тут я как замерла. Я ничего не могла с собой поделать. Выброшенные куклы лежали, а я не верила своему счастью. Я знала, что у нас нет будущего, что я не имею права и помечтать о том, чтобы сшить им платья и где найти лоскутики, я не смела даже думать, куда их положу и какую жизнь мы могли бы прожить вместе! (418)[13]

Symbolic of a traditional girlhood that was denied to many Soviet girls, the dolls symbolize what Boym calls the "precarious objects and

13 "But here I froze. I couldn't help myself. The discarded dolls lay there, and I did not believe my luck. I knew that we had no future, that I had no right to even dream about sewing dresses for them, and where would I even find cloth pieces, I didn't even dare to think where I would put them, and what kind of life we could live together!"

marginalized domesticity" of Soviet culture (Boym 1994, 160). Significantly, the girl is unable to imagine even the discarded dolls as her potential possession; we later learn that the neighbor's mother took the dolls back. While this autobiographical work replicates the darkness of Petrushevskaia's earlier prose, it is nevertheless lighter given its focus on a lively child, as well as the child's eventual return to Moscow and reentry into a more or less normal Soviet childhood.

Fantastical Waste and Its Post-Soviet Transformations

Many of Petrushevskaia's works of the 2000s belong to the genres of fantastic and subversive short stories and fairytales. For example, her collection *Sea Garbage Stories* (*Morskie pomoinye rasskazy*, 2001) consists of absurdist fairytales, which contain linguistic games and bizarre situations. This playful and humorous collection depicts both sea creatures and trash floating in the sea as fictional human-like characters; it does not distinguish between animate and inanimate objects. The collection is a satire of post-Soviet society, of its youth culture, new forms of consumption, and environmental degradation. The collection draws attention to the pieces of trash commonly found at seaside resorts, such as plastic bags, condoms, and plastic bottles, and its humor derives from the fact that these objects become the stories' main characters:

> В воде все было нормально: плавали пустые пластиковые бутылки, громко смеясь. Три помятых презерватива обсуждали вчерашний футбольный матч, отмахиваясь от назойливых мальков. Мимо проплыла знакомая резиновая подошва, которая весело воскликнула:
> —Уау! Кого я вижу типа! (Petrushevskaia 2001)[14]

The stories rely on the readers' knowledge of environmental problems, since almost everyone has probably encountered a plastic bag or plastic bottle floating in the sea or lying on the beach. At the same time, this pollution represents the post-Soviet transition, since it draws attention to the appearance of new types of packaging and new consumer goods.[15]

14 "Everything was normal in the water: empty plastic bottles floated, laughing loudly. Three crumpled condoms were discussing yesterday's football match, brushing off annoying fry. A familiar rubber sole swam past, exclaiming cheerfully:—Wow! Who do I see, like!"

15 Robert Argenbright (2021) points out that, in the 1980s, the USSR was inundated

Thus, in the 1990s, plastic bottles replaced Soviet glass ones, contraception became more readily available, and Western goods came together with new types of packaging.

While environmental problems appear to be at the center of this collection, it treats post-Soviet pollution parodically. Rather than depicting trash as an environmental and social problem, Petrushevskaia presents it as an artistic challenge: How might an item of waste be turned into a fictional character? Like modernist artists such as the Cubists, Italian Futurists, and Dadaists, who "assembled work from constituent elements rather than painting, drawing, or sculpting" (Surak 2016, 533), Petrushevskaia treats trash in a way that challenges notions of value and decorum by giving objects once considered garbage a new parodic consideration. The author emphasizes the vitality of these objects rather than their destructive or unseemly nature.

Maite Zubiaurre suggests that discarded objects are "more powerfully 'animated' than 'useful' ones. Suddenly void of desirability and functionality, the discarded object transcends its utilitarian meaning and adopts an identity of its own" (Zubiaurre 2017, 324). Bearing the traces of their former owners, trash objects speak to our imagination. Petrushevskaia's trash characters similarly speak of the pleasures of life in a resort town. To symbolize the new post-Soviet reality, both animate and inanimate inhabitants of the sea behave as a motley crowd of post-Soviet citizens and represent distinct social types: Как-то раз одна медуза не вписалась в поворот и задела пластиковый пакет. Пакет тут же облепил медузу с трех сторон и стал говорить всякие слова про царапину на боку, поврежденный борт и про евроремонт за большие баксы.[16] The jellyfish represents the new post-Soviet generation that came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In other stories in the collection, she behaves as a typical young person of that era, attending night clubs and engaging in parodic online chats with her boyfriend. Similarly, the plastic bag appears to stand in for a bandit or a shady businessman, who seems to engage in racketeering and speaks in a contemporary slang. Thus, to extort money from the jellyfish, the

with garbage, much of which "consisted of previously unseen materials such as polyethylene and polystyrene foam."

16 "Once, one jellyfish did not fit into the turn and touched a plastic bag. The bag immediately stuck around the jellyfish on three sides and began to say all sorts of words about a scratch on the side, a damaged body and about a European-style renovation for big bucks."

plastic bag mentions *evroremont*,[17] a fashionable new term of the 1990s and 2000s. As with Petrushevskaia's other absurd fairytales, the language games are important for the collection; they rely on slang and popular culture idioms of the time. Petrushevskaia uses the slang not to criticize the "immorality" and "linguistic impurity" of the post-Soviet generation, but to emphasize the democratizing and artistic potential of these new idioms. Similarly, Petrushevskaia's use of trash imagery is subversive not because of its social critique of the new capitalist society with its wasteful production and consumption, but because of its artistic reversal of social boundaries and taboos.[18] Alexandra Smith argues that in the 1990s Petrushevskaia's fiction seemed to move away "from the realistic or sociological mode towards subversion and anarchy" (Smith 1997, 108). This tendency has become even more pronounced in Petrushevskaia's fiction of the 2000s and 2010s.

Like other postmodernist artists, Petrushevskaia seems to be simultaneously fascinated and troubled by post-Soviet popular culture, associated with new consumer goods and the concomitant "trashy" production of both consumer and cultural products. For example, her short novel *Little Sorceress* (*Malen'kaia volshebnitsa: kukol'nyi roman*, 1996) features a Barbie doll as the protagonist, cast as kind and helpful despite its iconic status as a Western consumer good. Moreover, television shows play a central role in *Little Sorceress* and some of Petrushevskaia's other short stories and fairytales. In the fairytale "The City of Light" ("Gorod sveta," 2005), the evil sorcerer uses a television show to ensnare viewers with the allure of an affluent life. However, the show turns out to be a magical illusion. When the show ends, the sets and the prizes turn into a pile of trash.

Reality TV and game shows represent both the illusory nature of contemporary life and the superficiality of popular culture. The appearance of reality TV and game shows were an important feature of the 1990s and 2000s and represent the transition from socialist mass culture to consumerist popular culture. Postmodernist works such as Viktor Pelevin's *Generation P* (*Pokolenie P*, 1999) and Vladimir Sorokin's "White Square" ("Belyi kvadrat," 2020) focused on this sim-

17 "European style renovation"

18 In this respect, Petrushevskaia's approach is markedly different from most contemporary trash art with its preoccupation with social critique of capitalist wastefulness and throwaway culture (Surak 2016, 534).

ulative aspect of post-Soviet society. However, whereas popular culture usually acquires dark and dystopian meanings in Sorokin's and Pelevin's fiction, it is presented with more ambivalence in Petrushevskaia's works. For example, in *Little Sorceress*, the television show leads to the complete and positive transformation of reality. Petrushevskaia's stories criticize popular culture for its creation of illusive and empty reality for the masses, but also celebrate it for its vitality and popular appeal. In this way, Petrushevskaia's fiction challenges the traditional elitism of Russian high culture; it "invites us to reassess our perception of popular culture as something threatening and vulgar" (Smith 1997, 122). While Petrushevskaia's work lacks some of the critique of capitalism present in Pelevin's and Sorokin's fiction, she also avoids the potential elitism of such representations.

Artistic Transformations of Chernukha

Petrushevskaia's adult fairytale "Seven O'clock" ("Sem' chasov," first published in 2010) relies on but also reverses many elements of her own earlier dark naturalistic works. The story features a typical character and situation from Petrushevskaia's earlier chernukha prose—a teenage girl who becomes a single mother after an encounter with a man she hardly knows. "Seven O'clock" tells the story of a young artist named Aia. As a sixteen-year-old girl, Aia visits a seaside resort town and meets a young man. She falls in love and spends four nights with him, even though she does not know his name. Scared of this unexpected romance, Aia's parents quickly force their daughter to leave the town. The only thing Aia remembers about her lover is his broken gold watch that appeared to always read seven o'clock. Despite her family's efforts, Aia becomes pregnant and gives birth to a girl. Later, she finishes an art college and becomes a multimedia artist. The focus on young people and their uncontrolled sexuality is a popular topic in chernukha fiction and film.[19] However, in "Seven O'clock," Petrushevskaia turns the dark plot of works such as *The Time: Night* into a story of eternal and romantic love. She also focuses on the redemptive power of art. Thus, the tale depicts a young woman who becomes not only a teenage mother but also an artist, and who eventually finds her lover and the father of her child.

The story's setting provides the first clue of the reversal of the chernukha themes. The setting is a seaside town with a temple dedicated to

19 A well-known example is Vasilii Pichul's *Little Vera* (*Malen'kaia Vera*, 1988).

the ancient Christian saint, the young girl Eufimiia. The fictional town is reminiscent of ancient Mediterranean or Crimean towns. Similarly, Aia's name and life details are somewhat difficult to place historically, even though signs of contemporary post-Soviet life appear in the story. As a result, the work acquires a timeless and universal quality.

Significantly for Petrushevskaia's aesthetics, the story also reimagines trash as an artistic object. Ten years later Aia returns to the seaside town with her daughter. She combines a holiday with her artistic work. Among her other artistic techniques is the making of collages out of the assembled objects she finds in her environment, essentially items of trash: Приехав в свой любимый городок, Ая забросила краски и кисти, вместо того она собирала по побережью выкинутые морем деревяшки, обрывки сетей, пузырьки тряпки, и все это приклеивала, а что и приколачивала гвоздями близко друг к другу, чтобы получилась какая-то общая пестрая картина, память о море (Petrushevskaia 2013b, 349).[20] It is through this collage that the story reaches its happy ending. One of the objects that the protagonist finds is the glass from her lover's watch. She uses the glass fragment as a message to her lost lover, incorporating the object into her collage.

> Ая тут же сделала свою лучшую работу—как обычно, она приклеила к деревянной дощечке несколько простых камешков, прядку сухих водорослей—и накрепко, мелким гвоздиком, прибила между ними две стрелки, указывающие на недостающем циферблате семь часов, а сверху, тоже с помощью крепчайшего клея, уместила стеклышко, сверкающее, как огромная слеза […] (Petrushevskaia 2013b, 350).[21]

The story has a self-referential quality, since like Petrushevskaia herself, Aia practices a collage art that helps her transform reality. Avoiding direct social critique, the story emphasizes the possibility of positive

20 "Arriving in her beloved town, Aia threw away paints and brushes; instead of that she collected pieces of wood thrown out by the sea, scraps of nets, small bottles along the coast, and rags, and glued all of this, and what she nailed close to each other, to get a general motley picture, the memory of the sea."

21 "Aia immediately made her best work ever. As usual, she glued a few simple pebbles, a strand of dry seaweed to a wooden plank—and firmly, with some small nails, nailed two arrows between them, indicating seven o'clock on the missing watch dial, and on top, also with the help of the strongest glue, placed a glass sparkling like a huge tear […]"

change and reversal. The reuse of trash objects functions here as a mnemonic device that connects nature and the past to personal memories.

Conclusion

The evolution of waste imagery in Petrushevskaia's prose sheds light on both the changes in her fiction and the sociocultural trends of the late Soviet and post-Soviet transitions. It demonstrates that metaphors of waste connect the politics of representation to the politics of everyday life, raising a variety of social and even ethical questions relating to contemporary society. In Petrushevskaia's earlier fiction, the metaphors of waste often express a social critique of Soviet life. Thus, in *The Time: Night* and other works from the 1980s and early 1990s, Petrushevskaia shows Soviet society's propensity for wasting human lives. These depictions acquire a renewed importance in the context of the current nostalgic romanticization of the Soviet era, which has even acquired political and geopolitical significance (Boele, Noordenbos & Robbe 2020, 1). Additionally, her use of waste metaphors illustrates the changing materiality of late Soviet and post-Soviet society in their shift from late Soviet scarcity to the consumerism and popular culture of the post-Soviet period. Like other post-Soviet liberal writers of an older generation, Petrushevskaia appears to be much more critical of Soviet society and its legacy than of the post-Soviet period.[22] In her works of the 2000s and 2010s, the metaphors of waste become connected to post-Soviet popular culture, or suggest a potential for artistic vitality and transformation, while simultaneously becoming less invested in direct social critique. The evolution of waste symbolism in Petrushevskaia's prose thus reflects the political and aesthetic changes of the transitional period with its growing interest in popular culture and taboo topics. Unlike other artists who use waste imagery, Petrushevskaia seems less interested in serious engagement with the questions of capitalism, consumption, or environmental problems, responding to these challenges in an ironic and parodic manner. The political significance of Petrushevskaia's post-Soviet prose can instead be seen in its democratizing, anti-elitist, and anti-authoritarian tendencies.

22 See, for example, the works and interviews of writers such as Vladimir Sharov, Vladimir Makanin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Ol'ga Slavnikova.

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