

Empty Words? The Function of Obscene Language(s) in Vladimir Sorokin's *Blue Lard*

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WHEN it comes to obscene language (*mat*) in contemporary Russian literature, the name of Vladimir Sorokin is sure to be mentioned. Since the beginning of his literary career, taboo language¹ has featured prominently in his texts and become one of the most distinctive features of the “trademark Sorokin.”² Sorokin’s association with “unprintable language” is, in fact, so strong that Russian literary critics even pay attention to the lack of *mat* in his works. For example, in their review of the novel *Put’ Bro* (*Bro*, 2004), Aleksandr Voznesenskii and Evgenii Lesin noted

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- 1 Russian obscene language emerged in print only after the abolishment of censorship in the early 1990s. While *mat* had featured in literary works before that time, these were usually published abroad (such as Eduard Limonov’s scandalous novel *Eto ia—Edichka* (*It’s me—Eddie*, 1979) or Iuz Aleshkovskii’s *Kenguru* (*Kangaroo*, 1974–75; published 1981). Sorokin’s first texts, too, had to be published outside Soviet Russia. *Ochered’* (*The Queue*, 1983), for example, was printed in 1985 by the French publisher Sintaksis. *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83) and *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1985–89) were Sorokin’s first novels published on Russian soil (by the Moscow-based publishing house Tri Kita in cooperation with Obscuri Viri). For more information on Sorokin’s bibliography, see his website <http://www.srkn.ru/bibliography>, accessed 3 August 2012.
 - 2 Aleksandr Genis, for example, argued that Sorokin’s readers now seemed to know what to expect when opening a book by the writer, having accepted his “poetics of excess” as part of the game. Instead of being shocked by encountering “dirty” words and taboo scenes in his texts, readers would now seek out his novels precisely for these shock effects: [Они] ищут в книге те эмоциональные переживания, что вызывают американские горки: сладкий ужас у «бездны мрачной на краю». “[They] are looking for that emotional kick you get when you ride a roller coaster: the sweet horror of standing on the edge of a dark abyss.” Aleksandr Genis, 1999, “Strashnyi son,” <http://srkn.ru/criticism/genis.shtml>, accessed 3 August 2012.

that the novel hardly contains any obscene terms, concluding that it is “simply a novel”: Даже мата в книжке практически нет. То есть он есть, но в гомеопатических—не верится, но так оно и есть!—дозах. Просто роман.³ Aleksandr Ivanov, Sorokin’s former publisher, attributed the paucity of verbal obscenity in *Bro* to Sorokin’s increasing international success, arguing that the desire to make a fast dollar in the English-speaking world was the reason for the writer’s avoidance of *mat*. According to Ivanov, Sorokin was turning more and more into a “respectable Russian writer,” a writer for the masses, even though sales numbers in Russia were still quite low.⁴

That critics expected to encounter *mat* in Sorokin’s writing does not come as a surprise when considering the scandal the writer was involved in only shortly before *Bro* was published. In 2002, *Goluboe Salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999) was the first novel to become the subject of an obscenity trial in post-Soviet Russia. The many explicit sexual scenes and obscene language in the novel had caused the pro-Putin youth organization *Idushchie Vmeste* (*Walking Together*) and their supporters to press pornography charges against the author in accordance with Article 242 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (illegal distribution of pornographic materials or objects). While there was no doubt about the novel arousing critical controversy,⁵ charging the writer with disseminating pornography seemed absurd given that the surrealist and grotesque nature of the book defies even the faintest association with eroticism and/or pornography.⁶ The scandal appears even more paradoxical when con-

3 “The book does not even have any *mat*. That is, there is *mat*, but in—and this is unbelievable, but true—small homeopathic doses. It’s simply a novel.” Aleksandr Voznesenskii & Evgenii Lesin, 2004, “Chelovek—miasnaia mashina,” <http://www.srkn.ru:8080/criticism/lesin.shtml>, accessed 3 August 2012.

4 According to Aleksandr Ivanov, managing director of Sorokin’s former publishing house Ad Marginem, *Blue Lard* had been the writer’s only bestseller, selling more than 100,000 copies in total. Ivanov is cited in Voznesenskii & Lesin, 2004.

5 As Maks Frai [Max Frei] noted: Ну [...] мне заранее было понятно, что ничего хорошего об этом самом сале народ не напишет. Но забавно было уточнить: за что ругать будут? “Well [...] it had been clear to me early on that nothing positive would be written about this lard. I was curious, though, to see what exactly the book would be criticized for.” Maks Frai, 1999, “Rips laovai Vladimir Sorokin,” <http://srkn.ru/criticism/frei.shtml>, accessed 3 August 2012.

6 Sorokin also dismissed the pornography charges as being absurd, arguing that his book had nothing to do with pornography: Порнография—это конкретный жанр. Ее главная цель—вызвать эрекцию у читателя. Я такой цели никогда не ставил.

sidering Sorokin's conceptualist roots and his approach to literary texts.⁷ Disavowing any hierarchical order of texts and/or genres, he regards literature as a form of art detached from reality, an approach he also takes to registers and styles, including obscene language. For Sorokin, words are "mere letters on paper,"⁸ and he defends the use of *mat* in a similar way:

Мат? Это часть русского языка, но не более того. Я, кстати, умею писать и без мата, у меня есть огромный роман «Роман»—там ни одного матерного слова. Мат для меня—это не самоцель. Я работаю не с матом, а с языком.⁹

The question arises as to whether Sorokin's *mat* terms are indeed only "letters on paper," linguistic signs unrelated to reality. If so, why did the work of a former avant-garde writer become the subject of an obscenity trial and one of the most discussed books of the first decade of the twenty-first century? This article attempts to shed some light on the paradox by analysing the nature and function of verbal obscenity in *Blue Lard*, drawing particular attention to its poetic aesthetics. I shall first briefly discuss the poeticity of obscene language before analysing the poetic function of *mat* in the individual parts of the novel. Given that the novel was blamed for its alleged "pornographic" contents, I shall pay particular attention to the correlation between physical matters and obscene language as the linguistic representation of sexuality.

"Pornography is a specific genre, whose main goal is the sexual arousal of the reader. I have never pursued such a goal." Liza Novikova, 2002, "Vladimir Sorokin: ia ne khotel vyzvat' erektsiiu u chitatelia," *Kommersant Daily*, 28 June.

7 Sorokin spoke about his conceptualist roots in an interview with Sally Laird, his first translator into English. Sally Laird, 1999, *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers*, Oxford, pp. 143–62.

8 Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, "Tekst kak narkotik," interview by T. Rasskazova, *Sbornik rasskazov*, Moscow, pp. 119–26.

9 "Mat is part of the Russian language, nothing more than that. I am, by the way, perfectly capable of writing without using *mat*—my grand novel *Roman/A Novel*, for example, does not include a single *mat* term. I don't use obscene language as an end in itself. I don't work with *mat*, I work with language." Oleg Kashin, 2002, "Vladimir Sorokin: ia ne rabotaiu s matom, a s iazykom," *Metromir*, <http://lib.metromir.ru/book24539>, accessed 3 August 2012.

Poeticizing the obscene

First of all, it needs to be pointed out that obscene language must be distinguished from obscenity per se, and that it also stands apart from swearwords, curses and other offensive expressions.¹⁰ As Joel Feinberg stated, “[Obscene utterances] shock the listener entirely because of the particular words they employ.”¹¹ Or, to use a semiotic explanation, it is usually the signifier of a particular sign that is deemed obscene, not the signified.¹² This is the reason why obscene words are recognized easily and stand out even when not applied in their literal meanings. We can therefore argue that obscene words possess a poetic quality in that they refer to themselves (while at the same time referring beyond themselves) and are distinct from other words by their mere phonetic sounds.¹³ This strongly echoes Roman Jakobson’s notion of poeticity:

Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.¹⁴

10 Obscene language is only one particular form in which obscenity can occur. A literary text, for example, can be deemed obscene without including verbal obscenity. Vladimir Nabokov’s notorious novel *Lolita* does not contain a single obscene word, but its subject—the affair between a middle-aged man and a twelve-year-old girl—made it a candidate for obscenity charges when it was published in 1955. Similarly, swearwords and curses only partly correlate with the category of obscene language. Animal names, for example, can function as swearwords but are not obscene. For a more detailed discussion of terminological differences, see Joel Feinberg, 1985, *Offense to Others: The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, New York, pp. 190–208.

11 Feinberg, 1985, p. 190.

12 As Allen Walker Read stated, “The determinant of obscenity lies not in words or things, but in the attitudes that people have towards these words and things.” Allen Walker Read, 1934, “An Obscenity Symbol,” *American Speech* 9 (4), pp. 264–78; p. 264.

13 The correlation between verbal obscenity and poeticity was also discussed by Leslie Dunton-Downer, 1998, “Poetic Language and the Obscene,” *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. J. Ziolkowski, Leiden, pp. 19–40.

14 Roman Jakobson, 1978, “What is Poetry?,” *Language in Literature*, eds. K. Pomorska & S. Rudy, Cambridge, pp. 368–78; p. 378.

Sorokin not only exploited the poeticity of obscene words in *Blue Lard* by drawing on their self-referentiality, but also maximized their poetic effect by establishing a new signifier/signified system. This is particularly the case in the first part of the novel. Set in a futuristic Russia that has come under Chinese influence, this section is told from the perspective of Boris Gloger, a “bio-philologist” working in a laboratory in the middle of Siberia. The year is 2068, and Gloger writes letters to his lover telling him about the GS-3 project, which is the third attempt to extract blue lard (*goluboe salo*) from seven cloned writers (Tolstoy-4, Chekhov-3, Nabokov-7, Pasternak-1, Dostoevsky-2, Akhmatova-2 and Platonov-3). These letters are all written in a new form of Russian that is characterized by a mixture of scientific abbreviations and pseudo-scientific terms, neologisms and foreignisms, spelt in both Cyrillic and Latin letters, thereby reinforcing the futuristic and exotic atmosphere of this part:

Привет, mon petit.

Тяжелый мальчик мой, нежная сволочь, божественный и мерзкий топ-директ. Вспоминать тебя—адское дело, рипс лаовай, это *тяжело* в прямом смысле слова. И опасно: для снов, для L-гармонии, для протоплазмы, для скандхи, для моего V-2.¹⁵

As this passage shows, Gloger’s idiom features an abundance of pseudo-Chinese borrowings, which are reflective of the Chinese dominance in this futuristic Russia. The pseudo-Chinese words, as well as most scientific abbreviations and neologisms, are explained in two glossaries provided at the end of the text. Their actual usefulness is, however, highly questionable, as the explanations given are mostly self-referential or very obscure. This is particularly the case with the glossary of “Other Terms and Expressions.” The “Glossary of Chinese Words and Expressions” is more explanatory, but the high frequency of these foreignisms still makes it difficult to fully comprehend the text. Gloger’s idiom can thus be re-

15 “Hi, mon petit. My heavy boy and tender bastard, my divine and nasty top-direct. Remembering you is a hellish thing, rips laovai, it’s *heavy* in the original sense of the word. And dangerous—for my dreams, for L-harmony, for the protoplasm, for skandkhi, for my V-2.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, *Goluboe salo*, Moscow, p. 7. All subsequent citations from the text refer to this edition. Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

garded as a form of *novoiiaz* (“newspeak”), as it is not created from scratch but based on an existing “oldspeak” (the Russian language as of today).¹⁶

In deciphering the possible meanings of these foreignisms, the reader is, however, not completely left in the dark. For example, it becomes clear from the context that a number of these pseudo-Chinese words are employed expressively, conveying both positive and negative feelings, thereby assuming a function similar to expressive *mat* terms. For example, when Gloger expresses his disappointment over his partner’s infidelity in the letter dated 5 January, he unleashes a stream of invective against the alleged cheater:

И ты гордился своей М-смелостью, узкий подонок: «Я пробирую natural!» Фальшивая мерзость, достойная скуннеров и диггеров. Бэйбиди сятоу, кэйчиди лянмяньпай, чоуди сяочжу, кэбиди хуайдань, рипс нимада та бень!¹⁷

Even though the meaning of these words is somewhat obscure, there is no doubt about their emotional force, which is also signalled by the exclamation mark at the end of this outburst. In particular, the word “rips” comes up frequently in all of Gloger’s letters and is often combined with “nimada” or “nimada ta ben,” thereby assuming a linguistic role similar to “three-storey” *mat* expressions.¹⁸ For instance, Gloger uses these ex-

16 *Novoiiaz* refers to the official language of communication adopted during the Soviet period, reflecting the new regime’s ideological position and the “new reality.” An array of new concepts entered the Russian language, many of which were highly abstract and ambiguous in meaning. For a definition of the term *novoiiaz* see Elena Zemskaja, 1996, “Klishe novoiaza i tsitatsiia v iazyke postsovetского obshchestva,” *Voprosy iazykoznaniiia* 3, pp. 23–31; p. 23.

17 “And you were proud of your M-courage, you narrow scumbag: ‘I am trying natural! False disgustingness, worthy of skunners and diggers. Beibidi siaotou, keichidi lianmian’pai, choudi siaochzhu, kebidi khuaidan’, rips nimada ta ben!’” Sorokin, 2002, p. 17.

18 “Three-storey” *mat* expressions (*trekhetazhnyi mat*) are more complex *mat* expressions that usually contain the word *mat* (“mother”) such as the phrase *eb tvoiu mat* (“fuck your mother”). As Charles A. Kauffman explained, “The speaker using third-level/story obscenity can go no further in severity.” Charles A. Kauffman, 1981, “A Survey of Russian Obscenities and Infective Usage,” *Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression* 4 (2), pp. 261–81; p. 275.

pressions as exploitive interjections or gap fillers: Ну и: температура в аппаратной -28°C. Не плохо, рипс лаовой?¹⁹ Хочу спать, рипс.²⁰

Mat words are replaced not only by pseudo-Chinese words and other foreignisms but also by euphemisms and graphemes. Again, the established signifiers are not replaced randomly, but Sorokin chooses signifiers associated with the obscene, in particular on the phonological level. Thus, Gloger finishes his first letter with the greeting Целую тебя в ЗВЕЗДЫ.²¹ The Russian ZVEZDY (STARS) sounds similar to the *mat* word denoting vagina (*pizda*), although here it does not refer to the female genitals, since Boris Gloger's partner is male. Even though it is not entirely clear what ZVEZDY signifies, it is without doubt that it refers to a signified related to sexuality, since *vezdochki* ("little stars," asterisks) are often used instead of *mat* words.

In the poem written by the clone Pasternak-1, Sorokin employs a similar analogy, yet this time "star" is replaced with the *mat* term denoting vagina. Instead of featuring a star, one of the recurring motifs in symbolist poetry, the poem gives praise to the "cunt" (*pizda*). Again, this substitution is not random, as both motifs are related to the concept of sublimity. In the same way that the star connotes intangibility and infinity (and hence sublimity), the *mat* word in question borders on the limits of representation as a result of its taboo nature. It is, literally, the unspeakable; that which must not be said, let alone written, and thereby also characterized by a certain limitlessness and intangibility.

Similarly, the graphic symbols embedded in Gloger's letters resemble sexual organs. In his second letter, for example, Gloger compares the Siberian laboratory with "a frozen hole," using the grapheme "O" for the latter: Пытаюсь забыть твоё липкое свинство с Киром и Дэйзи и не могу. Даже здесь, в этой мерзлой O.²² Another example can be found in the letter dated 12 January: Начну писать тебе письма, длинные, как твой божественный **olo**.²³ In other words, "rusmat," as Gloger refers to Russian *mat*, gives way to a new form of *mat*, one that comprises partly

19 "So: the temperature in the apparatus room is -28°C. Not bad, rips laovai?" Sorokin, 2002, p. 9.

20 "I want to sleep, rips." Sorokin, 2002, p. 89.

21 "Kissing you on your STARS." Sorokin, 2002, p. 10.

22 "I am trying to forget your *sticky* messing around with Kir and Daisy, but I can't. Even here, in this frozen O." Sorokin, 2002, p. 16.

23 "I'm going to write letters to you, long ones, like your divine **olo**." Sorokin, 2002, p. 31.

incomprehensible neologisms and foreignisms but whose pragmatic functions are still intact.

Yet “rusmat” has not disappeared completely from Gloger’s newspeak. While pseudo-Chinese borrowings and foreignisms replace certain *mat* words, obscene signifiers are preserved in Chinese words such as *benkhui* (*katastrofa*), *dakhui* (*s’ezd*) and *shanshuikhua* (*peizazh*). Even though these terms are not related to sexuality or bodily functions, the obscene lexemes immediately catch the (Russian) reader’s eye, which is another illustration of the poeticity of *mat*.²⁴

Mat not only plays a vital role in the newspeak of Gloger’s world but also forms an integral part of the language spoken by the members of the *Bratstvo Rossiiskikh Zemlebov* (“Brotherhood of the Russian Earthfuckers”). After attacking the laboratory in order to steal the blue lard, in the course of which they kill Boris Gloger, the *zemleebys* take their loot to their headquarters, located inside a holy mountain. This part of the novel is clearly set apart from the Gloger story. Not only is the beginning of this passage marked by an abrupt shift from first- to third-person narration, it is also marked by a different linguistic code, which is most evident in the way Russian *mat* is employed. While, in the futuristic world of Boris Gloger, “rusmat” is not appreciated²⁵ and is replaced by pseudo-Chinese words, the language of the *zemleebys* is quite coarse and vulgar, featuring an abundance of *mat* terms. Here, too, the language employed is reflective of the narrative setting described, and the ritualistic and strictly hierarchical nature of the Brotherhood resembles the way they speak. *Mat* is employed in a highly formulaic, almost prayer-like way:

24 To Russian ears, some Chinese syllables bear strong phonological similarity to obscene Russian lexemes. In particular, the Chinese lexeme *khui* sounds like the obscene Russian word for “penis,” which is why, since 1956, the Russian transcription for this syllable has been хуэй. Similarly, Soviet newspapers and journals used to transliterate Chinese names consisting of the syllable *khui* as *khoi*. The Chinese military leader Chuan Khui was therefore usually rendered as Chuan Khoi. Aleksei Plutser-Sarno, 2007, *Bol’shoi slovar’ mata*, vol. 1, St Petersburg, p. 25.

25 Gloger expresses his dislike of “rusmat” repeatedly. On one occasion, he reprimands a colleague for using “rusmat”: Я прошу не употреблять русмат в моем присутствии,—сканировал я его. “I ask you not to use rusmat in my presence,” I said, scanning him.” Sorokin, 2002, p. 23. Gloger also refuses to comment on the poem written by the clone Pasternak-1 because it contains “rusmat”: Ты знаешь, я терпеть ненавижу русмат. Поэтому и не комментирую. “As you know, I can’t stand rusmat, which is why I won’t comment on this.” Sorokin, 2002, p. 91.

Великий магистр пяткой нажал на пол; яшмовая панель с нежным перезвоном колокольчиков опустилась вниз, в стене открылся проем, из которого стали выходить карлики и ставить на пол агатовые чаши с едой и напитками.

—Здоров ли ты, детка?—спросил великий магистр.

—Слава Земле, здоров, великий отче.

—Готов ли ты к Весенней Ебле?

—Готов, великий отче.

—Стоит ли хуило твое?

—Стоит, великий отче.

—Покажи, детка.²⁶

As this passage illustrates, obscene language is used alongside religious expressions like *otche* and *velikii magistr*. This is reminiscent of the fact that obscene curses and prayers have similar historical roots, assuming similar linguistic functions, a theory supported by Mikhail Bakhtin and Boris Uspenskii. In *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rabele i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i Renessansa (Rabelais and His World)*, Bakhtin identified oaths and curses as “two sides of the same coin,”²⁷ arguing that both forms are inherently connected with the lower bodily stratum and originally related to ancient pagan practices. Boris Uspenskii, too, stated that Russian obscene language has deep ritual pagan roots, tracing the infamous mother curse back to pagan prayers, spells and curses.²⁸ Both curses and prayers are highly formulaic in their linguistic constructions by making use of recurring patterns of syntax and redundant vocabulary, which accounts for their strong mnemonic effect. For this reason, ritualized language plays a significant role in constructing collective identity and collectivism, thereby also assuming a strong performative function.

26 “The Grand Master pressed his heel into the floor; a jasper panel sank down accompanied by some delicate tinkling and a small door opened in the wall, through which dwarves came out to put agate bowls with food and drinks on the floor. ‘Are you in good health, my little one?’ asked the Grand Master. ‘Glory to the Earth, in good health, Great Father’. ‘Are you ready for the Spring Fuck?’ ‘Ready, Great Father’. ‘Has your dick hardened?’ ‘It has, Great Father’. ‘Show it to me, my little one’.” Sorokin, 2002, p. 157.

27 Mikhail Bakhtin, 1984, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Ind., p. 165.

28 Boris Uspenskii, 1983, “Mifologicheskie aspekty russkoi ekspressivnoi frazeologii,” *Studia Slavica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 24, Budapest, pp. 33–69.

Ritualized speech acts, in the form of slogans, appeals, party speeches etc., constitute a defining and essential element of authoritarian and totalitarian languages, as a means of both instilling party ideology and reinforcing the collective spirit. At the same time, however, ritualized languages are also often characterized by their detachment from reality, transforming slogans, phrases and fixed expressions into clichés devoid of any meaning. The “performative dimension”²⁹ of ritualized speech acts therefore often becomes more important than their actual meaning, as Alexei Yurchak argued in his analysis of the last Soviet generation: “It became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the *form* of these ritualized acts of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative meanings.”³⁰

What makes the above-quoted scene so overtly grotesque, then, is the fact that not only are obscene phrases uttered in order to construct collective identity amongst the members of the Brotherhood, they are also employed literally. Moreover, the ritualized language of the *zemleby* draws significantly on such authoritative discourses as Soviet slogans and phrases, which adds to the grotesque effect of this part of the novel. For example, conquering the Siberian land, Father Andrei Utesov is quoted as saying: Только мне другой земли не надо—здесь ебал, здесь ебу, здесь ебать буду до червья могильного,³¹ a phrase that is modelled on Vladimir Maiakovskii’s infamous phrase *Lenin zhil, Lenin zhiv, Lenin budet zhit’* (“Lenin lived, lives and will live forever”),³² which in turn echoes the Christian liturgy “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”³³

Transformations also define the third part of the novel, which is set in an alternative Stalinist Moscow—one in which Stalin is still alive, reigning over a powerful empire after winning the Second World War jointly

29 Alexei Yurchak used the expression “performative dimension” in an Austinian sense, i.e. as ritualized speech acts that bring about changes in social reality. Alexei Yurchak, 2006, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, N.J., pp. 22–24.

30 Alexei Yurchak, 2006, p. 25.

31 “I don’t need any other land—here I fucked, I fuck and I will fuck until I die.” Sorokin, 2002, p. 154.

32 This phrase comes from the poem *Vladimir Il’ich Lenin*, which Maiakovskii wrote as a reaction to Lenin’s death in 1924.

33 The Church Slavonic original of this phrase is Слава Отцу и Сыну и Святому Духу, и ныне и присно и во веки веком.

with Hitler. Again, the blue lard links this section to the previous one. The *velikii magistr* orders Baby Vil to travel back in time and deliver the blue lard to the Soviet leaders. Frozen in a glacier funnel, Vil is sent back to the year 1954 and lands on the stage of Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, where the opening of the All-Russian House of Free Love (*Vserossiiskii Dom Svobodnoi Liubvi*) is being celebrated. This is not the only (ironic) divergence from historical Stalinist Moscow. In this alternative version of Soviet history, the fictional characters merely share the same names with their historical prototypes, while their outward appearance and behaviour have undergone significant transformations. Hitler, for example, is described as being tall and slim and a connoisseur of fine meat—a description that clashes with the historical Hitler, who was a vegetarian and rather short. Stalin's sons are represented as transvestites who love to dress up in women's clothes. The language used by these characters also shows some significant divergence; in particular, obscene language is put in the mouths of characters whose historical prototypes are known for their avoidance of "dirty" words or who are not associated with *mat*. A female character by the name of AAA is particularly foul-mouthed, which reflects her low status in this society. Dressed in rags, she roams the streets of Moscow before giving birth to a hideous-looking black egg that is to be swallowed by her successor.

The abbreviation AAA is easily understood to refer to Anna Andreevna Akhmatova, even though the extremely vulgar woman has little in common with the historical Akhmatova. A good example to illustrate this point is the scene in which AAA runs into her old friend Osip (Mandel'shtam), who has just been released from prison. Overwhelmed with joy, she vents her feelings by releasing a stream of verbal obscenity:

—Осип... —хрипло выдохнула AAA и всплеснула заскоружлыми руками.— Что б мне сухой пиздой подавиться! Что б на своих кишках удавиться!

Освобожденный посмотрел на нее мутными, серо-голубыми глазами, медленно приседая на сильных ногах, разводя длинные хваткие руки:

—AAA... AAA? AAA!

—Оська!!!—взвизгнула она и лохматым комом полетела к нему в объятия.

—AAA! AAA! AAA!—сильно сжал ее рыхлое тело Осип.
 —Значит, не уебал Господь Вседержитель!—визжала AAA, повисая на нем и пачкая его светлое пальто.³⁴

This representation clashes with her significance as a cultural icon and her status as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century.³⁵ Akhmatova became a cult figure soon after her first collection of poems was published in 1912, and the myth built around her only increased with the passing of time, not least because it was partly created and fostered by the poetess herself, as critics have pointed out.³⁶ Sorokin debunks this “Anna Akhmatova cult” by relating her name (AAA) to a woman who is literally at Stalin’s feet and who shouts obscenities to the people around her. In other words, the signifier “AAA” is related to a new signified.

Materializing the obscene

Sorokin not only allowed the discourses within *Blue Lard* to clash with the authoritative discourses outside the novel, he also transformed immaterial (textual) concepts into physical materiality and vice versa.³⁷ In

34 “Osip...’ AAA gasped hoarsely and clasped together her hardened hands. ‘I’ll be choked by my dry cunt! I’ll be strangled by my guts!’ The freed man looked at her with dull, grey-blue eyes, slowly squatting down on his strong legs and opening his long, grasping arms: ‘AAA ... AAA? AAA!’ ‘Os’ka!!!’ she screamed and flung herself round him. ‘AAA! AAA! AAA!’ Osip squeezed her flabby body firmly. ‘So, you didn’t get screwed by the Lord Almighty!’ yelled AAA, hanging onto him and smearing his bright coat.” Sorokin, 2002, pp. 227–28.

35 As Gleb Struve stated in 1965, “there can be no doubt that, since the death of Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova is the greatest living Russian poet.” Struve is quoted by Galina Ryl’kova, 2007, *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and its Legacy*, Pittsburgh, p. 155.

36 In his highly controversial and much discussed article “Anna Akhmatova—Fifty Years Later,” Alik Zholkovskii referred to the cult surrounding the figure of Anna Akhmatova as the “AAA institute.” He claimed that Akhmatova herself had contributed significantly to the myth surrounding her, in fact applying the same mechanisms as the regime itself. Alik Zholkovskii, 1996, “Anna Akhmatova—piat’desiat let spustia,” *Zvezda* 9, pp. 211–27.

37 Sorokin is very much aware of the corporeal nature of his texts: Я получаю колоссальное удовольствие, играя с различными стилями. Для меня это чистая пластическая работа—слова как глина. Я физически чувствую, как леплю текст. “I get enormous pleasure from playing with different styles. To me, it’s the same as modelling clay—words are like clay. I can physically feel how I’m forming a text.” Cited in Genis, 1999.

other words, he challenged the correlation between physical materiality and (immaterial) textual representation. A good example to illustrate this point is the materialization of metaphors, in particular of obscene metaphors, a technique frequently applied throughout the novel. In the second part of the novel, for example, one of the core phrases of Russian obscene language (*eb tvoiu mat'*, “fuck your mother”) is employed in its literal meaning and materialized through the Brotherhood of the *zemleby*. Having massive genitals many times larger than the rest of their body, these gnomes do exactly what their name implies, namely to penetrate and copulate with the Siberian soil. Here, Sorokin undoubtedly draws on Uspenskii’s widely accepted theory that the infamous *mat* formula has its origins in pagan myths, according to which the fertility of the earth is the result of the sacred marriage between Heaven (the *Gromoverzhets*, “the Thunderer”) and (Mother) Earth.³⁸ Developing this theory, Mikhail Epshtein pointed out that there is a strong correlation between matter/materialism, the image of Mother Nature and *mat*, not least because all three words have the same root, namely “mat.”³⁹ Sorokin’s image of the *zemleby* is the materialization of the infamous mother curse, a metaphor for the fertile mother soil come alive. At the same time, it is also the physical manifestation of the love Soviet citizens were expected to express towards their Soviet motherland,⁴⁰ an idea that also drew heavily on the concept of the “motherland mother” (*rodina mat'*) as being represented by a maternal figure.⁴¹ In *Blue Lard*, the Soviet slogan “love

38 Uspenskii argued that the Thunderer was later replaced by a deity in the form of a dog (*pes*) and Mother Earth by the interlocutor’s own mother, which then led to the *mat* formula as it is known today. Uspenskii, 1983, “Mifologicheskie aspekty.”

39 Mikhail Epshtein, 2006, “Edipov kompleks sovetskoi tsivilizatsii,” *Novii Mir* 1, pp. 113–26.

40 This also meant that Soviet citizens were expected to give their lives for their “motherland mother.” The fictional Stalin’s remark that the *zemleby* “must indeed love their motherland” while examining their massive genitals is therefore highly ironic (see Sorokin, 2002, p. 219).

41 The image of the Soviet Union as a nurturing mother was immortalized by the song *Shiroka strana moia rodnaia* (*Song of the Motherland*) in Grigorii Aleksandrov’s 1936 film *Tsirk* (*Circus*). Analysing the image of the mother in the song, Hans Günther concluded that it draws heavily on the pagan cult of the Moist Mother Earth, thus embracing vegetative aspects such as fertility and collectivity. Hans Günther, 2005, “Broad is my Motherland: The Mother Archetype and Space in the Soviet Mass Song,” *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, eds. E. Dobrenko & E. Naiman, transl. S. Kerby, Seattle, Wash., pp. 77–95.

your motherland⁴² is thus desecrated by being rendered literally in the obscene image of the *zemleeby*:

На что отец Андрей Утесов обнажил десятивершковый хуй свой, лег на Дающий Холм и проебал три раза подряд родную сибирскую землю с криком и уханьем. Затем встал он и рек: «Братие! Только что на глазах ваших три раза испустил я семя свое в Землю Восточной Сибири, в Землю, на теле которой живем мы, спим, дышим, едим, срем и мочимся. Не мягка, не рассыпчата Земля наша—сурова, холодна и камениста она и не каждый хуй в себя впускает. [...] Земля наша—хоть и камениста, да любовью сильна: чей хуй в себя впустила—тот сыт ее любовью навек, того она никогда не забудет и от себя не отпустит».⁴³

Throughout the text, physical materiality is often expressed by means of corporeality: saturated with bodily images and tropes, *Blue Lard* is a good illustration of the fact that, for Sorokin, textual bodies become physical bodies and vice versa. This becomes particularly evident in the way these bodies are treated: like his textual bodies, Sorokin's physical bodies are destructed, constantly transgressing, forming and reforming (new) boundaries. Both textual and physical bodies are open systems in constant flux, absorbing and rejecting new influences. In the same way that *Blue Lard* appears disjointed and fragmented, so do the human bodies within the text. Violated, dissected, sewn together, mutilated, penetrated and destroyed, they reflect the patchwork nature of the novel.⁴⁴ Examples are numerous and appear in almost every single section of

42 This passage also reflects the gender asymmetry inherent in Russian verbal obscenity: even grammatically, a woman can never be the agent of this obscene expression.

43 “To which Father Andrei Utesov exposed his nine-verst-long cock, lay down on the Giving Hill and fucked the soil of his native Siberia three times in a row, screaming and hooting. Then he rose to his feet and cried out: ‘Brothers! Three times before your very eyes I have just given my seed to the soil of Eastern Siberia, on whose body we live, sleep, breathe, eat, shit and piss. [...] Our Land is neither soft nor crumbly—it is hard, cold and rocky, and it does not admit every cock. Yet even though it is rocky, our Land is full of love: he whose cock is let in will be fed her love forever; she will never forget him and never let go of him.’” Sorokin, 2002, p. 154.

44 For a detailed discussion of the novel's narrative structure, see Peter Deutschmann, 2003, *Intersubjektivität und Narration: Gogol', Erofeev, Sorokin, Mamleev*, Frankfurt/M.

the text. Thus, early on in the novel, in the text produced by the clone Dostoevsky-2, a machine invented to sew together human bodies in order to unify humankind is introduced to the guests assembling at Count Reshetovskii's house. One of the strongest scenes in the novel is the one in which Khrushchev tortures a young artist to death in the basement of his mansion only to later devour the man's body with other guests at a lavish feast.⁴⁵ It is reasonable to argue that Sorokin's open, penetrable and fluid bodies are directly opposed to the "closed" Soviet body that signified ideological homogeneity, stability and strength, as well as resistance to external influences. While the Soviet body was kept under control, Sorokin's bodies spin out of control, growing to excessive proportions, only to ultimately destroy themselves, which is also the case in *Blue Lard*. At the end of the novel, Stalin's brain grows bigger and out of proportion until it finally blows up and destroys the universe.⁴⁶

In many cases, sexuality serves as the driving force behind these bodily transformations. Violent and destructive, sexual acts are never performed to provide pleasure but almost always function as anti-carnavalesque indicators of power. Therefore, they are usually associated with pain and excess, turning the highly sexualized discourse of the novel into an extremely anti-erotic one. In the Turgenev story, for example, the count is sexually aroused by a bleeding 16-year-old maid urinating on him. At the dinner reception at Berchtesgaden, Hitler finds an opportunity to rape Stalin's daughter Vesta and is shocked to learn that she is in fact not a virgin. In the second part of the novel, the gnome Vil is asked to masturbate in front of the *velikii magistr* in order to demonstrate his suitability for embarking on a journey through time. Khrushchev tells Stalin about the case of a certain Ivan Leopoldovich Denisovich, a teacher who was sentenced to 10 years of LOVELAG for luring female students to his house, drugging them, raping them and sewing up their vaginas after filling them with his faeces.

In other words, sexuality in *Blue Lard* is highly transgressive, transcending boundaries both in a literal and a figurative way. Despite its

45 This can be interpreted as a materialization of the way in which culture (materialized by the artist) was "fed" to the Soviet people.

46 Yet this excessiveness does not entail pure negativity, since the ending means literally a (new) beginning, as readers find themselves again at the beginning of the novel: Stalin turns out to be a servant of Gloger's lover, who is reading out to him the first letter written by Gloger.

violent and destructive nature, sexuality is, however, not rendered by obscene language, a fact that contradicts the often-expressed dictum that where there is sexual transgressiveness, there must be *mat*.⁴⁷ For example, the infamous sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev only features one *mat* term. In fact, the dialogue between Stalin and Khrushchev is rendered in almost child-like language:

Хрущев поцеловал его взасос между лопаток, дотянулся губами до уха, прошептал:

— Чего боится мальчик?

— Толстого червяка... — всхлипывал Сталин.

— Где живет толстый червяк?

— У дяди в штанах.

— Что хочет червяк?

— Ворваться.

— Куда?

— Мальчику в попку.

[...]

— Ты... это... ты... — замычал Сталин. — Что дядя делает с мальчиком?

— Дядя ебёт мальчика в попку, — жарко шептал Хрущев.⁴⁸

What makes this scene even more disturbing than the subject matter alone is the fact that the sexual intercourse between the two political figures clashes with the language describing it, thus enhancing the shock effect of this passage. A similar subject matter and discrepancy between

47 In analysing Sorokin's poetics, Vitaly Chernetsky stated that "suddenly and without warning the calm tone of the narrative [...] shifts to a depiction of transgressive acts (of a sexual, excremental, or violent nature) that is usually combined with transgressive vocabulary (profanities and curse words)". Vitaly Chernetsky, 2007, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization*, Montreal, p. 75. This observation certainly does not apply to *Blue Lard*; in fact, Sorokin here evokes obscenity *without* using obscene terms.

48 "Khrushchev kissed him passionately between his shoulder blades, brought his lips up to Stalin's ear and whispered: 'What is the little boy scared of?' 'Of the fat worm,' Stalin sobbed. 'Where does the fat worm live?' 'In the nice man's pants'. 'What does the worm want?' 'To force his way in'. 'In where?' 'In the boy's butt'. [...] 'You ... what ...,' Stalin moaned. 'What is the nice man doing to the boy?' 'The nice man is fucking the boy in the butt,' Khrushchev whispered hotly." Sorokin, 2002, p. 258.

content and form can be noticed with regard to the rape scene between Hitler and Stalin's daughter at Berchtesgaden.

Руками он дернул ее за предплечья, наклоня к себе. Волосы Весты накрыли его. Он стал подробно сосать ее грудь. Веста смотрела в сторону на бронзового рабочего, гнущего винтовку о мускулистое колено. Гитлер разорвал на ней трусики, толкнул. Она упала на диван с сиренево-бело-золотистой обивкой. Адольф подполз к ней на коленях, развел ей ноги и беспощадно растянул пальцами половые губы, покрытые не очень густыми волосиками. Орлиный нос его жадно втянул запах ее гениталий, коснулся неразвитого клитора и тут же уступил место языку. Гитлер прошелся им по раскрытой раковине Весты снизу вверх, потом сверху вниз, впился в узкое влагище. Но вдруг язык фюрера разочарованно отпрянул за его неровные зубы.⁴⁹

Rendered in a highly emotionless language which clashes with its disturbing content, the passage abounds with detailed descriptions conjuring up numerous images of bodily imperfections, thereby enhancing its nauseating effect. The feeling of nausea, as Jean Paul Sartre showed in his novel *La Nausée* (*Nausea*, 1938), is typically the result of excess. This is also realized by Roquentin, the novel's protagonist: "I shouted 'filth! what rotten filth!' and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held fast and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless: I stifled at the depths of this immense weariness."⁵⁰

Sorokin achieves this nauseating effect by means of textual excessiveness, which in turn is informed by corporeal excessiveness, as is the case in the scene where Vesta is woken up by her governess and made ready for

49 "Bending towards her, he pulled her by the forearm. Vesta's hair covered him. He began sucking her breast. Vesta looked away at the bronze worker, who was bending a rifle over his muscular knee. Hitler tore her panties and pushed her. She fell onto the couch, which was upholstered in purple, white and gold. Adolf crawled up to her on his knees, pushed her legs apart and with his fingers cruelly stretched her labia, which were lightly covered with hair. His aquiline nose eagerly sucked in the smell of her genitalia, touched her underdeveloped clitoris and immediately allowed his tongue to run along Vesta's labia, surrounding her closed clam from bottom to top and from top to bottom, before entering her narrow vagina. But suddenly Hitler's tongue disappointedly slid back behind his uneven teeth." Sorokin, 2002, p. 322.

50 Jean-Paul Sartre, 1964, *Nausea*, transl. L. Alexander, New York.

the day. Even when Vesta is on the toilet, the governess is right next to her and has to wait until Vesta has finished “her business,” thereby being exposed to both the sound and smell of the very same. This is also reflective of the power relations between Vesta and her governess; despite her young age, it is Vesta who is in a domineering position, forcing the governess to succumb to her moods and demands. Like the governess, the reader is compelled to witness this scene, which is rendered in minute detail.

—Молчи...—напряженно выдохнула Веста, и ее кал стал падать в воду. Горничная смолкла, отмотала от рулона туалетной бумаги недлинную полосу, сложила пополам. Веста снова выпустила газы. Легкий запах кала пошел от нее. Она выдавила из себя последнюю порцию и со вздохом облегчения встала. Горничная сноровисто подтерла ей оттопыренный упругий зад, кинула бумагу в унитаз, закрыла крышку, потянула никелированную ручку. Забурлила вода, Веста присела на биде. Горничная подмыла ее, затем помогла почистить зубы, расчесала и заплела косу. Душ Веста утром никогда не принимала.⁵¹

This scene abounds with seemingly superfluous, insignificant details forcing themselves on the reader. In other words, the textual/physical excessiveness discussed above manifests itself in an extreme—hence “excessive”—mimicking of the extra-literary world, while at the same time drawing on—excessive—bodily images and tropes. This textual excessiveness shows not only in the extreme level of detail in the description but also in the way this excess is visualized: Instead of hiding inappropriate details, everything is “let out” and put on display. We can therefore argue that obscenity is evoked through excessive realism that at the same time challenges its referentiality to reality.⁵² In other words, the obscene

51 “Shut up...” Vesta breathed hard, and her stool began to drop into the water. The governess fell silent, unwound a short strip from the roll of toilet paper and folded it in half. Vesta again broke wind. A faint smell of faeces emanated from her. She pushed out the last portion and got up with a sigh of relief. The governess skilfully wiped her soft behind, which she was sticking in her direction, threw the paper into the toilet, shut the lid and pulled the nickel-plated handle. The water began to seethe, and Vesta sat down on the bidet. The governess cleaned Vesta’s behind, and then helped her clean her teeth and combed and braided her hair. Vesta never took a shower in the morning.” Sorokin, 2002, p. 267.

52 Obscenity has only relatively recently acquired the connotation of excess. As Joan E.

nature of the text is informed by a “self-referential hyperrealism.” This shows that the text *as a whole* draws on the poetics of *mat*, employing the latter as a means to visualize “the invisible,” as well as that which is to remain invisible.

Performing the obscene

The visualization of verbal obscenity entails a strong performative element, affecting both the discourses within and about the novel. As was discussed above, in the novel, obscene verbal images are often visualized by being transformed into corporeal images, which is, for instance, the case with the *zemleby*. Yet these gnomes not only materialize the infamous mother curse, they also *perform* it by copulating with the Siberian soil. Another example is the depiction of the Bolshoi Theatre as a huge sedimentation tank, with human faeces and excrement floating on the surface. The sacred place of culture is thus transformed into a facility which is literally processing “dirt.”⁵³ Last but not least, the well-known sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev also has a performative dimension to it, as Stalin is literally being “screwed” by Khrushchev.⁵⁴

It was this scene, amongst other things, that in February 2002 prompted the organization *Walking Together* to “perform” a public campaign against such “marginalized writers” as Vladimir Sorokin.⁵⁵ In an attempt to “cleanse” Russian culture of harmful influences, they called upon the Russian population to swap books by these writers for a novel by Boris Vasil’ev, a Soviet prose writer known mainly for his patriotic war novels. Initially, however, the campaign backfired. Not only was the book

DeJean notes, “The earliest denunciation of obscene excess noted by the *OED* is from 1974 and refers to oil profits; [...]” Joan DeJean, 2002, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France*, London, p. 181, note 17.

53 For a discussion of the concept of catharsis with regard to this passage, see Brigitte Obermayr, 2009, “Während wir nachzudenken beginnen, lachen wir bereits: Komische Katharsis und die nicht ablachbare Differenz,” *Grenzen der Katharsis in den modernen Künsten*, eds. D. Linck & M. Vöhler, Berlin, pp. 117–37.

54 This was also observed by Dirk Uffelman, 2006, “*Löd tronulsia*: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin’s Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism,” *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 100–25.

55 Boris Iakemenko referred to Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Pelevin, Eduard Limonov and Viktor Erofeev as “marginalized writers”: Anonymous, 2002, “Idushchie Vmeste’ ne nashli dlia Sorokina mesta v istorii,” *News.ru*, 18 July, http://palm.newsru.com/russia/18Jul2002/sorokin_idushie.html, accessed 3 August 2012.

swap anything but a roaring success, with only a handful of books being traded in, but the unexpected media coverage helped promote the works of the writers being attacked, as a result of which book sales flourished.⁵⁶ The campaign reached new heights in June of that year, and this time Sorokin was the only target of the youth movement. The spark that had ignited the fire was Sorokin's contract with the Bolshoi Theatre regarding the libretto for the opera *Deti Rozentalia* (*Rosenthal's Children*, 2005).

What makes this campaign so interesting is the manner of its performance. As critics have pointed out,⁵⁷ it was highly conceptualist in nature: *Walking Together* had put up a gigantic fake toilet into which they tossed numerous copies of Sorokin's works. The act of "flushing his novels" thus expressed their opinion of his literary achievements, namely that his books were "worthless shit." Of equal significance is the "stage" they chose for their "performance": in front of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, one of the very symbols of "high Russian culture." *Walking Together* did not leave it at that, though, and later marched to the Chekhov monument (with Chekhov representing the Russian classics and hence "good" literature), where they distributed brochures containing excerpts from Sorokin's book, including the sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev.⁵⁸

Thus, *Walking Together* not only applied the same technique as Sorokin did in his infamous novel, namely a materialization of obscene metaphors, but they, too, *performed* the obscene by reading out the very text they condemned in order to convey their (non-obscene) message. In the same way as Sorokin put the obscene on display and "let it out," so did *Walking Together* by reading from the book and transforming verbal images into tangible ones. They, too, "let out the obscene," which in fact created a conflict between what they publicly stated as the reason for their

56 Anonymous, 2002, "Idushchie Vmeste' uvelichili prodazhi knig Sorokina, prokuratura nachala novoe rassledovanie," *Lenta.ru*, 17 February, <http://lenta.ru/culture/2002/07/17/sorokin>, accessed 3 August 2012.

57 Evgenii Bershtein & Jesse Hadden, 2007, "The Sorokin Affair Five Years Later: On Cultural Policy in Today's Russia," *ARTMargins Online*, 26 June, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/121-the-sorokin-affair-five-years-later-on-cultural-policy-in-todays-russia.html>, accessed 21 September 2012.

58 The radio station *Ekho Moskvy* reported widely on the campaign: Anonymous, 2002, "Molodezhnaia organizatsiia 'Idushchie Vmeste' segodnia organizovala v Moskve neskol'ko aktsii v znak protesta protiv publikatsii proizvedenii pisatel'ia Vladimira Sorokina," *Ekho Moskvy*, 27 June, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/news/111873.html>, accessed 3 August 2012.

protest (fighting cultural and moral decline as exemplified by novels like *Blue Lard*) and the nature of their performance (acquainting the Russian public with the “pornographic” contents of the novel). In other words, the discourse revolving *around* the novel was as sexualized as the discourse *in* the novel—albeit for different purposes: while Sorokin employed the obscene (the “non-normative”) to make visible the norms regulating collective and authoritative discourses, *Walking Together* employed the “non-normative” to fight for the maintenance of the norm.

The culmination of this visualization process was the trial against Sorokin and its excessive media coverage. Yet rather than representing a celebration of the freedom of speech, the trial exemplifies the indirect control measures implemented by the Russian authorities.⁵⁹ After the chaos and instability of the 1990s, the wish to “return to normality” was expressed with regard to all facets of Russian society, including culture and language.⁶⁰ At the beginning of the new millennium, voices of concern over the dreadful state of the Russian language were growing louder. As Lara Ryazanova-Clarke has pointed out, most language debates were informed by a “discourse of threat,” in which “the present state of the Russian language [was] regularly conceptualized through metaphors of disease, dirt and death.”⁶¹ In particular, the penetration of obscene language into the realm of literature became an issue widely discussed in the media and on the Internet.⁶²

These developments also reflect the two distinct phases identified by Vladimir Elistratov with regard to the linguistic situation in post-Soviet Russia. First, so he claims, there was a “destabilization of the norm” (*raznormirovanie*), which was caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the new political and linguistic situation with which people

59 As Bershtein & Hadden also noted, the Kremlin did not speak in a uniform voice about *Blue Lard*, which for many was a sign of the Kremlin defending freedom of speech. In particular, the then minister of culture, Mikhail Shvydkoi, reacted immediately to the protests initiated by *Walking Together*, condemning them as a threat to these writers’ freedom of speech. Bershtein & Hadden, 2007.

60 Putin’s “politics of normality” was discussed by Richard Sakwa, 2008, *Putin: Russia’s Choice*, New York, pp. 49–52.

61 Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 2006, “The Crystallization of Structures: Linguistic Culture in Putin’s Russia,” *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 31–63.

62 For example, the question “Is *mat* necessary in literature?” has repeatedly been discussed in Internet forums, on television shows and on the radio.

were confronted. This first phase was then followed by a “crystallization of structures” (*kristallizatsiia struktur*), which would correspond to the aforementioned “return to normality” that started in the late 1990s.⁶³ The campaign by *Walking Together* and their alleged intention of “cleansing” the Russian cultural landscape of harmful influences must therefore be seen in the light of Vladimir Putin’s politics of re-negotiating and re-establishing norms, which was regarded as paramount in finding a way out of Russia’s identity crisis. And this process, first and foremost, affected linguistic norms: *Поиск национальной идеи—это проблема в первую очередь лингвистическая*.⁶⁴ It is therefore not so paradoxical that Russia’s first obscenity trial took place in the early years of the Putin era, targeting the work of a former “avant-garde hero.”

In conclusion, we can therefore say that *mat* does matter, in Sorokin’s case *mat* even becomes “matter” by means of materialization, with the latter drawing on bodily images and tropes. Sorokin’s obscene words are therefore not “empty”; on the contrary, they are made tangible and therefore highly visible. And it is this excessive over-visualization (Sorokin’s self-referential hyperrealism) that constitutes the obscene mode of the text. This strongly echoes Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal. The French thinker understood the hyperreal to be an excessive representation of the real, which is why he regarded the hyperreal as obscene. His definition of the obscene drew on the original meaning of the obscene—the ob-scene, i.e. that which is offstage and not exposed to the public eye. Arguing that nowadays nothing is “offstage” anymore and everything is revealed in overwhelming brutality, he maintained that it is this form of over-visualization that constitutes our modern mode of obscenity: “It is no longer then the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible.”⁶⁵ This certainly applies both to Sorokin’s fictional worlds in *Blue Lard* and to post-Soviet reality.

63 Vladimir Elistratov, 2001, “Natsional’nyi iazyk i natsional’naia ideia,” *Gramota.ru*, 2 February, http://www.gramota.ru/biblio/magazines/gramota/opinia/28_54, accessed 3 August 2012. Elistratov is also quoted in Ryazanova-Clarke, 2006, p. 31.

64 “*The search for a national idea is, first and foremost, a linguistic problem.*” Elistratov, 2001, emphasis in the original.

65 Jean Baudrillard, 1985, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” *Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster, London, pp. 126–34; p. 131.