

## The Chinese Future of Russian Literature: “Bad Writing” in Sorokin’s Oeuvre

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Что-то есть в этом скрипте М-неприятное, рипс-табень.<sup>1</sup>

*Goluboe salo*

[...] нужно писать плохо, как можно хуже, и тогда на вас обратят внимание; конечно, научиться писать плохо не так-то легко, потому что приходится выдерживать адскую конкуренцию, но игра стоит свеч, и если вы действительно научитесь писать паршиво, хуже всех, то мировая популярность вам обеспечена.<sup>2</sup>

V. Kataev

### *Classicist and modernist “bad writing”*

Vladimir Sorokin is an excellent writer. Most of his conceptualist and also post-conceptualist texts display homogeneity in their stylistic dimension which is aesthetically highly valuable. I thus disagree with those critics of

1 “There is something M-nasty in this script, rips-taben’.” V.G. Sorokin, 1999, *Goluboe salo*, Moscow, p. 80, abbreviation gs. If not otherwise stated, the translations are mine. In the following I deliberately do not provide translations of or comments on the Chinese (or Japanese) words found in Sorokin’s *Goluboe salo*, “Iu” and “The Concrete Ones,” so as not to create a deceptive illusion of immediate comprehensibility.

2 “[...] you must write badly, as badly as possible, and then you will attract attention. Of course it’s not so easy to learn to write badly because there is such a devil of a lot of competition, but it’s well worth the effort, and, if you really can learn to write lousily, worse than everybody else, then global fame is guaranteed.” Valentin Kataev, 1972, “Sviatoi kolodets,” *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, vol. 9, transl. R.C. Borden, Moscow, pp. 145–246; p. 223.

Sorokin who propose that, with his *Trilogiia (Ice Trilogy)* of 2002–2005, “Sorokin has exhausted his capabilities” (Сорокин исписался), or “has exhausted his invention” (испридумывался).<sup>3</sup> There is, however, one rather short period in his work, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when he wrote barely readable, “bad” literature.

How is it possible to justify delivering such a naive aesthetic judgement on one of the most anti-aesthetic and confrontational writers we have ever seen? And has Sorokin not been producing “bad texts” throughout his entire productive life? My argument will be that, indeed, if viewed from an ethical standpoint, while misunderstanding the non-ethical nature of his meta-aesthetical poetics and while reading his meta-discursive texts referentially, almost all works by Sorokin may be considered to be “bad.” But even from a rather conventional, classicist aestheticist perspective, most of his texts are in fact “good,” in terms of consistency and (deceptive) homogeneity.

Among the few works by Sorokin which are exempt from this observation are the novel *Goluboe salo (Blue Lard)*, 1999, and two short texts, “Iu” and “Сонкретные” (“The Concrete Ones”) included in the compilation *Pir (The Feast)*, 2000, all of them riddled with Chinese words. In the following, I will explore the poetics of bad “bad writing” inherent in these texts and contrast it with the good “bad writing” of Sorokin’s earlier and later works.<sup>4</sup>

What Richard C. Borden, with reference to Valentin Kataev, described as “mauvism” (from the French adjective *mauvais*, “bad”) and “the art of writing badly,”<sup>5</sup> and what Skoropanova called Sorokin’s *antikallizm* (from the Greek *kallós*, “beautiful”),<sup>6</sup> must thus be differentiated by drawing on the opposition between classicist homogeneity and modernist heterogeneity. My aim is a more precise typology of “bad writing” than the one provided by Borden, who stated:

3 Mikhail Zolotonosov, 1999, “Vladimir Sorokin. Goluboe salo: Roman,” *Novaia russkaia kniga* 1, pp. 18–19; p. 18.

4 Cf. paradoxical evaluations such as Dunia Smirnova, 1999, “Plokhii khoroshii Sorokin,” <http://www.guelman.ru/slava/writers/sor2.htm>, accessed 3 January 2013.

5 Kataev, 1972, p. 223.

6 “Antikallizm.” I.S. Skoropanova, 2002, *Russkaia postmodernistskaia literatura: novaia filosofiia, novyi iazyk*, St Petersburg, p. 192.

Classical definitions of good art which stress formal equilibrium, clarity, and wholeness clash with modernist expressions of contemporary existence and modern psychology by means of imbalance, fragmentation, ambiguity, and dissonance.<sup>7</sup>

I venture that, for the purpose of describing Sorokin's works, two modes of "bad writing," a classicist and a modernist one, should be distinguished.

*The scandal of 2002*

When talking about *Blue Lard*, one cannot but touch upon the scandal which erupted around this novel in 2002, triggered by a campaign against Sorokin and other avant-garde or post-modern writers by the pro-Putin youth movement *Idushchie vmeste* (*Walking Together*), with its very conventional aesthetical preferences. The campaign was crystallized in the accusation of "pornography." Sorokin eventually won the pornography case but lost his counterclaim against *Walking Together*, whom he accused of plagiarizing his works.<sup>8</sup> In both cases the court decided that the defendant had a different aim in mind: neither was the homosexual act between Khrushchev and Stalin, as depicted in the novel, meant to cause sexual excitement, nor did the reprinting of fragments from Sorokin's works by *Walking Together* serve a commercial goal.

Nevertheless, the case had a paradoxical commercial effect: thanks to the scandal, Sorokin ceased to be a writer known only to a small group of like-minded people, and instead became a well-known figure. It is, therefore, insufficient to regard the trial against Sorokin as an "echo of the famous show trials against writers," which should, therefore, according to Renate Lachmann, be seen in a "heritage relationship to Stalinism" (Erbeverhältnis zum Stalinismus).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Mikhail Ryklin's allegation that Sorokin and his publisher were tacitly in cahoots with *Walking Together*, and his interpretation of the scandal as a kind of sophisticated PR stunt arranged for Sorokin by the "polittechnologists" of

7 Richard C. Borden, 1999, *The Art of Writing Badly: Valentin Kataev's Mauvism and the Rebirth of Russian Modernism*, Evanston, Ill., p. 15.

8 Cf. Karlheinz Kasper, 2003, "Literatur und literarisches Leben in Rußland 2002," *Osteuropa* 1, pp. 94–111.

9 Renate Lachmann, 2004, "Der Bachtinsche Grotteskebegriff und die postsowjetische Literatur (das Beispiel Vladimir Sorokin)," *kultuRRévolution* 48 (2), pp. 44–51; p. 51.

the Kremlin, neglect the indissoluble tension between elitist and popular elements in the novel itself.<sup>10</sup>

The obvious divergence of the accusations quoted above says more about the cultural and political context of the early 2000s than it does about the poetics of the novel.<sup>11</sup> However, such diversity is, in a sense, symptomatic of the problem of heterogeneous literary texts. My focus on formal heterogeneity is agonistic to the aesthetic incriminations of Sorokin's adversaries. I endeavour an investigation of the linguistic features and the montage nature of *Blue Lard*—also touching upon comparable constellations in the short stories “The Concrete Ones” and “Iu”—in order to develop a specific meta-theory for a more precise differentiation of types of “bad writing.”

Although, obviously, the quality of “bad writing” cannot be solely discerned on the surface, the superficially most obvious feature of *Blue Lard* is its diverging time vectors—one into the future year 2068, another into the past of 1954. In this respect, the novel serves as a “hinge”<sup>12</sup> or “point de caption” in the sense intended by Jacques Lacan.<sup>13</sup> This is not only true of the two different narrated times in the novel, but also of the overlapping poetological paradigms of Sorokin's entire oeuvre.<sup>14</sup> As Igor Smirnov stated: Начиная с *Голубого сала*, Владимир Сорокин перековывает себя.<sup>15</sup> According to Mark Lipovetsky, it might even apply to the

10 Многие (и отнюдь не самые глупые) наблюдатели полагают, что политтехнологи используют издательство «Ад Маргинем» в своих целях, позволяя ему извлекать коммерческую выгоду из инсценировки политического преследования. “Many (and nowhere near the most stupid) observers assume that the polittechnologists make use of the publishing house Ad Marginem for their own purposes, allowing it to derive commercial gain from staging political persecution.” M.K. Ryklin, 2003, “Kto podzheg Reikhstag? (avgust 2002 g.),” *Vremia diagnoza*, Moscow, pp. 181–86; p. 183.

11 Cf. Brigitte Obermayr, 2005, “Man f... nur mit dem Herzen gut: Pornografien der Liebe bei Vladimir Sorokin,” *Porno-Pop: Sex in der Oberflächenwelt* (Film—Medium—Diskurs 8), ed. J. Metelmann, Würzburg, pp. 105–23; p. 107.

12 Obermayr, 2005, p. 114.

13 Jacques Lacan, 1966, “The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious,” *Yale French Studies* 36/37, pp. 112–47; p. 121.

14 Cf. Dirk Uffelmann, 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; pp. 112–13.

15 “Beginning with *Blue Lard*, Sorokin is reforging himself.” I.P. Smirnov, 2004, “Novyi Sorokin?,” *Mundus narratus: Festschrift für Dagmar Burkhart zum 65. Geburtstag*,

history of Russian postmodernism as a whole.<sup>16</sup> With its tension between the “futurist” poetics of the link-and-frame story and the various “passéist” stories within the story, *Blue Lard* can be described as an ostensive representation of a statement by Sorokin in an interview: Я много раз говорил: мы живем между прошлым и будущим.<sup>17</sup>

*The passéist poetics of the stories within the story*

For a reader familiar with Sorokin’s earlier works, it is the various stories within the story of *Blue Lard* and in “The Concrete Ones” which seem to continue his conceptualization of historical poetics, such as nineteenth-century realism and Socialist Realism. When reproducing a poetics of the past, the early Sorokin uses not the conventional devices of satirical mocking, but long emulations—sometimes hundreds of pages long—of certain styles which come with a cold but not antagonistic distance. A meta-poetic statement in *Blue Lard* seems to refer to this, alluding to Fedorov’s project of preserving and raising the fathers: Авгидор большой мастер по замораживанию чужих отцов.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to this, only a minority of the stories within the novel (such as the story of the swimmer or the Tolstoy emulation; GS 93–109, 137–44) are austere and coherent conceptualizations: the majority are rather obvious and simple parodies.<sup>19</sup>

The novel, however, deploys a new metaphor for conceptualist reproduction: cloning.<sup>20</sup> The first third of *Blue Lard*’s plot is built around the literary creations of seven writing clones: Tolstoy-4, Chekhov-3, Nabokov-7, Pasternak-1, Dostoevsky-2, Achmatova-2 and Platonov-3. Asked by Elena

eds. R. Hansen-Kokoruš & A. Richter, Frankfurt et al., pp. 177–82; p. 177.

16 Mark Lipovetskii, 2008, *Paralogii: transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov*, Moscow, p. 452.

17 “I’ve said it many times: we are living between the past and the future.” V.G. Sorokin & Sof’ia Shirokova, 2008, “Pisatel’ Vladimir Sorokin: moi ‘Den’ oprichnika’—eto kupanie avtorskogo krasnogo konia,” *Izvestia*, <http://izvestia.ru/news/316688>, accessed 3 January 2013.

18 “Avgidor is a great master in freezing others’ fathers.” GS 27. Italics in the original.

19 Cf. Aleksandr Shatalov, 1999, “Vladimir Sorokin v poiskakh utrachenного времени,” *Druzhba narodov* 10, pp. 204–07; p. 206.

20 Cloning as a poetological device can be found in Sorokin’s work as early as in the play *Iubilei (Anniversary)* from 1993. Cf. Sylvia Sasse, 2003, *Texte in Aktion: Sprech- und Sprachakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus* (Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste 102), Munich, p. 213, footnote 33.

Kutlovskaja why he so consistently elaborated the problem of cloning, Sorokin answered:

Она хороша для литературы. Я не верю, что можно клонировать человека. Но я верю, что художник может клонировать историю, например, или время. В данном случае клонирование—это щит, которым удобно прикрыть искусность такого хода. Потому что машины времени не существует, а клон—это очень удобная палочка-выручалочка. Механизм реанимации времени, истории, той или иной личности. При помощи клонов можно многое сделать в литературе—стать Толстым, например. (Смеется.)<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the reproductions of foreign styles seen in early Sorokin, the inner stories of *Blue Lard* are presented as the results of “biophilological” experiments. On the level of the plot, this experimental nature explains the imperfect reproduction of various poetics from the past. Does this “experimental” approach, this “easy joker,” attest, perhaps, to a loss of seriousness and literary perfectionism? In the literary creation of the Dostoevsky-clone, one finds traces of obvious technical problems, for example reiteration:

[...] двое простолюдинов, студент и пожилая дама остановились, как вкопанные в землю столбы, столбы, столбы столбы-с столбы, да, верстовые столбы, и с нескрываемым волнением проводили глазами удивительную пару до самого подъезда.<sup>22</sup>

21 “It is good for literature. I do not believe that you can clone a human being, but I do believe that an artist can clone history, for example, or a certain epoch.—In this case cloning is a shield which one can use to conveniently cover the artificiality of this sort of step, because time machines do not exist, and a clone is a very convenient auxiliary construction—the mechanism of the reanimation of time, of history, of one or the other person. In literature you can achieve a lot with the help of clones—become Tolstoy, for example. (Laughs)” V.G. Sorokin & E. Kutlovskaja, 2005, “Spiashchii v nochi: vol’nye zaplyvy Vladimira Sorokina,” *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 16 September, [http://www.ng.ru/saturday/2005-09-16/13\\_sorokin.html](http://www.ng.ru/saturday/2005-09-16/13_sorokin.html), accessed 3 January 2013.

22 “[...] two commoners, a student and an elderly woman, stood rooted to the ground like columns, columns, columns column-columns, indeed verst-columns, and their eyes followed the strange pair with unashamed excitement right up to the very entrance.” GS 33.

Nabokov-7 begins with Tolstoy—an inversion of the famous opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*: Все счастливые семьи несчастны одинаково, каждая несчастливая семья счастлива по-своему.<sup>23</sup> In the textual creations by Akhmatova-2 (GS 49–57), Nabokov-7 (GS 81–89) and Pasternak-1 (GS 90–92), the reader is confronted with vulgarisms untypical of these authors. The brutality inherent in Platonov’s plots is reflected in the burning of body parts in a steam engine in the text by Platonov-3 (GS 58–69), and suppressed aggression erupts in Chekhov-3 (GS 79). For the biopunk framework plot, these texts are no more than by-products of a biochemical process of lard secretion, “the production waste” (отходы производства) which does not play any role in the plot.<sup>24</sup>

In the course of the plot, the device of cloning writers, which dominates the first 100 pages of the novel, turns out to have no essential narrative function. Several other internal stories are embedded in the various, rather heterogeneous parts of the framework plot. The most obvious, perfectly conceptualist example is the swimmer story “Zaplyv” (“Swimming in”), written in the traditional manner of Socialist Realism (GS 137–44). Still embedded in the future setting of the year 2068 is the inner story “Siniaia Tabletki” (“Blue Pill”) (GS 160–67). This short story depicts the Bol’shoi Theatre as a futurist purification plant (GS 163) and culminates in the beaming of the blue lard from 2068 back to 1954—it is beamed into the historic theatre during a stage performance attended by leading members of the Central Committee. The song Piatoi sings during this performance (GS 176–80) was originally an autonomous text entitled “Kontsert” (“The Concert”), discussed by Susi Frank before the publication of *Blue Lard*.<sup>25</sup> A piece of avant-garde “bad writing” about a blood-drinking couple called “Stakan russkoi krovi. P’esa v chetyrekh deistviakh” (“A Glass of Russian Blood: a Play in Four Acts”; GS 277–87) and ascribed to K.[onstantin] Simonov is read aloud by Nadezhda Allilueva as she flies to Germany in the company of the entire Stalin family and Khrushchev.

23 “All happy families are unhappy in the same manner, every unhappy family is happy in its own way.” GS 81.

24 Aleksandr Genis, 1999, “Strashnyi son,” <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/genis.shtml>, accessed 3 January 2013.

25 Cf. Susi Frank, 1999, “What the Fuck is Konzert...” *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 229–38.

The same meta-literary principle of construction, only with much shorter stories within the story, can be found in “The Concrete Ones.” Here we are presented with computer-animated novels (голографическая модель романа<sup>26</sup>) by Herman Melville, James Chase, Peppershtein/Anufriev and Tolstoy (p 88–95), providing a “Litera-trip” for the adolescent protagonists which they appreciate as “неговнеро, concretные когеру.”<sup>27</sup> The motif of literary trips points back to Sorokin’s *Dostoevsky-trip* from 1997, another meta-literary play where drug addicts consume pills that are named after authors and trigger trips into the fictitious worlds of these authors’ texts. *Dostoevsky-trip* contains an inner story reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s *Idiot* (*The Idiot* 1868/69),<sup>28</sup> which proves to be lethal for its consumers.<sup>29</sup>

In *Blue Lard*, it is not only the various inner stories that take the reader back to the settings of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. The same is also true of part of the framework plot, the retrograde ideology of the sect of *zemleeb*y (literally: earth-fuckers), who, in 2068, practise their veneration of Damp Mother Earth by masturbating into earth holes. This is a satirical materialization of the late Slavophile cult of the Russian soil known as *pochvennichestvo* and represented by Dostoevsky, among others. Though retrograde in their ideology, the earth-fuckers’ communication with each other contains “futurist” macaronisms.

This contamination provides a kind of transition for the historical flashback, with the help of a so-called воронка времени which sends a piece of the enigmatic blue lard into the Bol’shoi Theatre on 1 March 1954 (GS 169).<sup>30</sup> The setting of 1954 seems historical only at first glance. Sorokin accumulates fantastical anachronisms: Stalin and Hitler are still alive, they have won the war together, Stalin has two transvestite sons (GS 187), is addicted to drugs, mixes German exclamations (GS 205) and English vulgarisms into his discourse (GS 213) and, as if to complete these anachronisms, is the lover of Khrushchev, who has already been removed from office and appears as a decadent aristocrat (GS 272) remi-

26 “A holographic model of the novel” V.G. Sorokin, 2001, *Pir*, Moscow, p. 87. Italics in the original, abbreviation p.

27 “That’s no shitero, this litera-trip, concretные когеру.” p 97.

28 V.G. Sorokin, 1997, *Dostoevsky-Trip*, Moscow, pp. 14–39

29 Sorokin, 1997, p. 58.

30 “Time cone” GS 159.



niscent of de Sade. Together, Stalin and Khrushchev eat a cannibalistic fondue consisting of a young man tortured by Khrushchev (GS 245–47), perform a homosexual act which appears as the materialization of the metaphor *Khrushchev vyeб Stalina* (Khrushchev called Stalin to account; literally: Khrushchev fucked Stalin)<sup>31</sup> and discuss a cynical travesty of Solzhenitsyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, 1962) about the Soviet Union's luxury LOVELAGs (GS 260).

When Stalin informs Khrushchev of the blue lard he has received from the *zemleby*, the plot turns towards German-Soviet relations, one of Sorokin's favourite topics, which he "enriches" with banal intercultural psychopathology.<sup>32</sup> The Soviet leaders head on to an idyllic meeting between the families of Stalin and Hitler, who have been good friends since the beginning of German-Soviet friendship and the creation of a new world order at the conference of Potsdam (GS 302), on the Obersalzberg. This fantastic alternative history is, however, not yet the climax of the trivialization of the two dictatorships in the novel: after engaging in an intellectual discussion of the reasons for the weak representation of philosophy in Russia (GS 314), Stalin utters a sentence which, if not embedded in a fictional text and countermanded two pages later (GS 318–19), would in Germany be regarded as a chargeable act of Holocaust denial: *Американцы уничтожили 6 миллионов евреев.*<sup>33</sup> After Himmler turns out to be an accomplice of the Soviets, Stalin eventually manages to inject the blue lard into his own brain (GS 336), which subsequently expands to the size of the universe.

From this last twist of the spiral of historical fantasy, we suddenly return to the framework plot set in 2068. Here the elderly Stalin wakes up as the butler of a certain F who receives letters from Boris Gloger. The future setting is once again marked by Chinese exclamations: *Ну что там, рипс лаовай?*<sup>34</sup> After this, the novel ends with a literal realization of Hegel's bad infinity, i.e. by repeating the 2 January 2068 letter from Gloger with which the novel started (GS 342–43).

31 Cf. Uffelmann, 2006.

32 This can, for example, be seen in *Mesiats v Dakhau* (*A Month in Dachau*, 1990) or *Hochzeitsreise* (1994–95). Cf. V.G. Sorokin & Natascha Drubek-Meyer, 1995, "Russland und Deutschland: Eine missglückte Romanze," *Via Regia* 26/27, pp. 67–71.

33 "The Americans killed 6 million Jews." GS 316.

34 "What's there, then, rips laovai?" GS 340.

*The Chinese future of Russian*

Apart from the figure of Stalin and the traditional genre of the epistolary novel,<sup>35</sup> there is not very much in the framework plot which calls to mind the conceptualist *passéism* of Sorokin's earlier works. The framework story rather follows the generic rules of science fiction by introducing invented technological vocabulary:

Здесь же нет даже сенсор-радио. Verbotten: весь медиальный плюс-гемайн. Вся аппаратура на сверхпроводниках третьего поколения. Которые? Да. Не оставляют S-трэшей в магнитных полях.<sup>36</sup>

Most of the invented terms refer to the fantastical research field of “biophilology,” with clones producing blue lard while writing. Of the clone Akhmatova-2 we learn the following: Инкубирована в ГЕНРОСМОБе. Первая попытка—51% соответствия, вторая—88%. [...] М-баланс 28. Поведение беспокойное, автоматизм, PSY-GRO, яндяньфын.<sup>37</sup> The glossary of related terms in the novel (GS 348–50) does not clarify these but adds even more enigmatic explanations: Спросить в LOB—совершить акт dis-вопроса, способный нарушить М-баланс.<sup>38</sup> No better understanding is forthcoming from the technical (pseudo-)instruction for the use of the blue lard at the end of the novel (GS 339–40). A similar biopunk “newspeak”<sup>39</sup> can be found in the “scientific” data on the clone Iu in the story of the same title:

Ю был зачат в полдень.

*Идея зачатия:* Евсей ААбер + F-совет Масаи Оиши.

35 The framework plot of the novel is presented by 14 letters, a traditional literary device of the eighteenth century (see B.V. Sokolov, 2005, *Moia kniga o Vladimire Sorokine*, Moscow, p. 110).

36 “There’s not even a sensor-radio here. Verbotten: all this media plus-gemein. All the equipment uses third-generation superconductors. Which...? Right, which do not leave S-trash in the magnetic fields.” GS 9, sic.

37 “Incubated at GENROSMOB. First trial—51% correspondence, second – 88%. [...] M-balance. Quiet behaviour, automatism, PSY-GRO, iandian’fyn.” GS 19.

38 “Ask the LOB—commit an act of dis-question which might disturb the M-balance.” GS 350. Cf. also M.P. Marusenkov, 2012, *Absurdopediia russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina: zaum’, grotesk i absurd*, St Petersburg, pp. 125–26.

39 Zolotonosov, 1999, p. 19; Marusenkov, 2012, p. 130.

Необходимость: 76,6  
 Своевременность: PRODOMO.  
 Предсказуемость: NNY  
 Чистота RUO–полей: normal + +.  
 Зависимость: 00000781  
 Предел: TON TIEN HONG  
 Целостность: 512  
 Эстетика: violet-civil.<sup>40</sup>

The “biophilological” terms contribute to the dominant impression of macaronization. The very beginning of *Blue Lard* reads:

2 января.

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.<sup>41</sup>

In the Chinese twenty-first century proclaimed in the novel (GS 115), the second source of new words in Russian is the Asiatic language. Chinese is so omnipresent in the first third of the novel that it renders some of the epistolary parts of *Blue Lard* almost unreadable. This is in stark contrast, for example, with Sorokin’s later novels *Den’ oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006) and *Sakharnyi Kreml’* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008), or with Aleksandr Zel’dovich’s film *Mishen’* (*The Target*, 2011), based on a script by Sorokin, where it is used only occasionally.<sup>42</sup>

40 “Iu was conceived at noon./Idea of conception: Evsei AABer + F-advice by Masai Oishi./ Necessity: 76,6/Timeliness: PRODOMO./ Predictability: NNY/Purity of the RUO-fields: normal\* + +./Dependency: 00000781/ Limit: TON TIENG HONG/Totality: 512/Estekhazi: violet-civil\*.” p 205–06. The asterisks indicate English words in the Russian original.

41 “2 January/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.” GS 7, emphasis in the original.

42 See Dirk Uffelmann, 2009, “The Compliance with and Imposition of Social and Linguistic Norms in Sorokin’s *Norma* and *Den’ oprichnika*,” *From Poets to Padonki: Linguistic Authority and Norm Negotiation in Modern Russian Culture* (Slavica Bergensia 9), eds. I. Lunde & M. Paulsen, Bergen, pp. 143–67.

Whereas vulgar Russian language (Русмат)<sup>43</sup> is a taboo in the novel's society, some "Russian" sentences consist exclusively of Chinese words used as cursing: Бэйбиди сяотоу, кэйчиди лянмяньпай, чоуди сяочжу, кэбиди хуайдань, рипс нимада табень!<sup>44</sup> Maksim Marusenkov associates this with phonetic *zaum'*.<sup>45</sup> Chinese names even serve as an act of linguistic violence in a Kafkaesque, literal sense: [...] я тебя выверну наизнанку и на каждом твоём внутреннем органе черной японской тушью напишу по-русски его китайское название./Думай, рипс хушо бадао.<sup>46</sup> Although Gloger himself uses this mixture of Russian, Chinese and other languages, he complains: [...] опять китайщина, рипс лаовай, никуда от нее теперь не денешься.<sup>47</sup> This hypocritical resistance against Chinese domination hints at Russian purists of the late twentieth century.<sup>48</sup>

Both *Blue Lard* (GS 345–47) and "The Concrete Ones" (P 98) are appended with Chinese glossaries (whereas in "Tu," *Day of the Oprichnik* and *Sugar Kremlin*, footnotes with asterisks provide the necessary translation on the same page).<sup>49</sup> For readers, using the glossary means leafing through the book, which complicates, or at least delays, their comprehension. After a while, most readers will stop leafing because semantically it hardly helps.

Although Sylvia Sasse is wrong to assume that Chinese in "The Concrete Ones" is "fiktives Chinesisch,"<sup>50</sup> she correctly diagnoses the uselessness of the glossaries:

43 "Rusmat" GS 23, 92.

44 "Beibidi siaotou, keichidi lianmian'pai, choudi siaochzhu, kebidi khuidan', rips nimada taben'!" GS 17.

45 Marusenkov, 2012, p. 127.

46 "I will turn you inside out and write on each of your inner organs its Chinese name in Russian with Japanese black Indian ink. Don't forget this, rips khusho badao." GS 109.

47 "[...] again this damn Chinese, rips laovai, nowadays you can't get away from it." GS 14.

48 Cf. Sokolov, 2005, pp. 110–11. The new discourse on Chinese influence as manifested on the Internet (cf. Natalia Rulyova & Taras Zabigalov, 2012, "Blogging the Other: Construction of National Identities in the Blogosphere," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64 (8), pp. 1524–45), transforms both the tradition of conjuring up an alleged "yellow danger," which dates back to Vladimir Solov'ev, and the "Chinese thread" in Russian literature, as represented by Sergei Tret'iakov.

49 P 213, 215, 218, 220, 226–27, 238; V.G. Sorokin, 2006, *Den' oprichnika*, Moscow, pp. 106, 125–28, 142 (5 times), 160, 179; V.G. Sorokin 2008, *Sakharnyi Kreml'*, Moscow, pp. 14, 38 (2 times), 56, 57 (2 times), 62, 120, 127, 140, 142, 144, 150, 182, 225 (2 times), 270.

50 Sasse, 2003, p. 225.

Nun arbeitet Sorokin mit den ‚Anzeigern‘ der Verständlichkeit, mit dem Versuch einer Übersetzung, die letztlich aber nicht dabei hilft, den Sinnzusammenhang der Erzählung, der Figurenhandlung oder einzelner Aussagen zu verstehen. Auch wenn die einzelnen Wörter verständlich werden, gilt das für das Sujet, die Komposition oder den Zusammenhang der Sätze nicht.<sup>51</sup>

It might be helpful, for the purpose of my bad writing typology, to use the story “Iu” as a contrast: here Chinese names in titles are reproduced in quotation marks (p 233), and Chinese hieroglyphs are represented by capital Cyrillic letters:

китайские иероглифы:  
 ЧТО МОЖЕТ БЫТЬ  
 ПРЕКРАСНЕЙ НОВОЙ ПИЩИ?  
 ТОЛЬКО ЛЕГКАЯ СМЕРТЬ!<sup>52</sup>

Chinese and Japanese calques are less frequent; they do not occur in almost every sentence, as in *Blue Lard* and “The Concrete Ones.” From this one can conclude that, whereas in “Iu,” Chinese serves as colouring and is functional for the reader’s comprehension, the role of Chinese in *Blue Lard* and “The Concrete Ones” is one of dysfunctionality and incomprehensibility.

### *Heterogeneity*

This obvious contrast in the function of Chinese elements challenges Bogdanova’s relativization that *Blue Lard* is only one in a series of Sorokin’s various “polystylistically constructed texts” (полистилистически построенные тексты).<sup>53</sup> My thesis is that, in the case of *Blue Lard* and “The Concrete Ones,” quantity changes quality. Whereas Bogdanova holds that “in practical terms, this approach does not bring anything

51 Sasse, 2003, p. 225.

52 “Chinese hieroglyphs:/WHAT CAN BE/MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN NEW FOOD?/ ONLY AN EASY DEATH!” p 212, emphasis in the original.

53 O.V. Bogdanova, 2005, *Kontseptualist, pisatel’ i khudozhnik Vladimir Sorokin: uchebno-metodicheskoe posobie*, St Petersburg, p. 41.

new,”<sup>54</sup> I venture that it is precisely the incomprehensibility of large parts of these texts which make them innovative.

How does Sorokin arrive at this degree of incomprehensibility? I will argue that—at least in *Blue Lard* and “The Concrete Ones”—incomprehensibility goes back to various dimensions of heterogeneity. Since Kataev stresses that “mauvism” has to focus on formal issues,<sup>55</sup> it seems to be appropriate to approach Sorokin’s heterogeneous “bad writing” by beginning with aspects of formal heterogeneity in the texts in question.

At the outset of his review article on *Blue Lard*, Sorokin’s sworn enemy Andrei Nemzer complains: В новом романе Владимира Сорокина очень много слов. Русских, китайских, французских, немецких. Терминообразных, придуманных, сленговых, матерных.<sup>56</sup> To this list we may add anglicisms such as пропозировать.<sup>57</sup> Nemzer does not reflect on an aspect inherent in his enumeration: with Chinese and Western European languages, there are also alphabets other than Cyrillic involved. Sorokin makes ample use of foreign alphabets for the sake of estrangement. *Blue Lard* includes complete German sentences written in the Latin alphabet, for example Hitler’s question to Allilueva: “Ich bin so glücklich, meine bezaubende Freunde! Macht es Ihnen nichts aus, dass Sie hier in den Bergen für einen Augenblick den Boden unter den Füßen verlieren?” (GS 302, sic). In “The Concrete Ones,” the Latin alphabet even involves the following (semi-)Russian expression: «BLACK LARD» не govnero, yebi vashu!<sup>58</sup> In contrast to Western languages, Chinese is almost exclusively reproduced in Cyrillic,<sup>59</sup> e.g. the trivial question in “The Concrete Ones”: Ни цзяо шэньмэ?, translated in the glossary as: как вас зовут?<sup>60</sup> The blending of alphabets culminates in contaminations within one sentence, where it affects the Slavic flexion: Я понимаю

54 Bogdanova, 2005, p. 41.

55 Cf. Borden, 1999, pp. 25–26.

56 “There are very many words in Vladimir Sorokin’s new novel—Russian, Chinese, French and German words. Terminological, invented, slang and vulgar words.” A.S. Nemzer, 2003, “Ne vse to vzdor, chego ne znaet Mitrofanushka,” *Zamechatel’noe desiatiletie russkoi literatury*, Moscow, pp. 397–99; p. 397.

57 “Proposize” p 80.

58 “BLACK LARD\* is no shitero, fuck yours!” p 80, sic.

59 There are very few exceptions, such as “TON TIEN HONG” in note 40, see above.

60 “Ni tsiao shen’me”, “What’s your name?” p 80, 98.

vodka,<sup>61</sup> within one syntagma (police абтайлунг<sup>62</sup>) or within one single word (maleчик<sup>63</sup>—a contamination known from Anthony Burgess’s novel *Clockwork Orange*, 1962, adapted for film by Stanley Kubrick in 1971).

The typography of classical literary texts is also disturbed by the excessive use of capital letters (“BLUT UND BODEN,” GS 300) or mathematical symbols. The short story “Iu,” where Chinese has a less estranging effect, applies similar typographical methods of rendering the text incomprehensible by using a mathematized language: Мильй сердцу MUO MUO беспокоится, потому что + + хочет. А нужно— хотеть. Тогда все будет gold.<sup>64</sup> *Blue Lard* operates instead through primitive sexual symbols in bold (partially Latin) letters such as **olo** у всех (кроме Ахматовой-2) встают.<sup>65</sup> Particular attention should be paid to the enigmatic use of italics, which is typical of many different works by Sorokin (we find something comparable in *Day of the Oprichnik*, too), giving the action or entity in question an esoteric quality, such as in the episode where Hitler touches his dog (*трогал*, GS 305; Sorokin’s italics deserve a separate investigation).<sup>66</sup>

Where these various devices are combined, as is the case in some of Gloger’s letters, the fragments turn into “veritable transrational language” (подлинная заумь),<sup>67</sup> which goes beyond the futurist devices or transrational poetry, forming a Сорокинская «новозаумь».<sup>68</sup> From what I have said about lexicology, alphabets and typography, one could draw the conclusion that, in the texts he wrote around the year 2000, Sorokin, the protagonist and precursor of the literary landslide of norms,<sup>69</sup> mimics the linguistic landslide.

The manifold expressions of heterogeneity at the level of the framework plot of *Blue Lard* and the various stories within the story can once

61 “I am going to have vodka\*.” P 83.

62 “Police\* abteilung” P 85.

63 “Male\*boy” P 80.

64 “Dearest MUO MUO is concerned because he + + desires. But he should— desire. Then everything will be gold\*.” P 224.

65 “Everybody’s **olo** (apart from Akhmatova’s) becomes erected.” GS 89.

66 Cf. some first considerations in Marusenkov, 2012, pp. 130, 135–36 and 139.

67 “Veritable transrational language” Marusenkov, 2012, p. 130.

68 “Sorokinian ‘neo-zaum’” Marusenkov, 2012, p. 140.

69 Cf. Ingunn Lunde & Tine Roesen (eds), 2006, *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), Bergen.

again be illustrated by quoting an unfriendly enumeration by Andrei Nemzer:

В романе наличествуют: апокалиптическая футурология, альтернативная версия истории XX века, гомосексуализм, каннибальство, квазирелигиозное изуверство, пародии [...] на русских классиков и новейших сочинителей, педофилия, изощренные пытки, раскавыченная цитата из Солженицына, наркомания, простатит, стрельба, вселенские катаклизмы, залитый фекалиями зал Большого театра, клонирование, сюрреалистические видения, КГБ и очень много разнообразной жратвы.<sup>70</sup>

If this did not ignore the dialectics of “writing badly,” one has to agree that Sorokin packed too much into the plot and did not take enough care to connect the parts, which, according to Elena Petrovskaia, are “not a novel” but an “accumulation of static scenes” (набор of сцены статичные).<sup>71</sup> At the level of the framework plot, the scenes often follow each other in line with what one could describe as the domino principle. Nevertheless, the encounters of Iosif Stalin and Anna Andreevna Akhmatova (GS 221–23, 262–65) or the visit by Stalin’s daughter to the Museum of the Revolution (GS 266–72) could be erased without damaging the framework plot. In respect of the inner stories, even the loose domino principle fails to work; the transitions between frame story and stories within the story are highly arbitrary. Only towards the end of the novel, as in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), is there a timid attempt to arrive at a circle structure: the last letter by Boris Gloger dates from 2 January 2068—like the first one (GS 7, 342).

The poorly connected parts not only depict highly different contexts but also display a huge degree of poetological heterogeneity. Norbert

<sup>70</sup> “In the novel we find: apocalyptic futurology, an alternative version of the history of the twentieth century, homosexuality, cannibalism, quasi-religious fanaticism, parodies ([...]) of Russian classical and recent authors, paedophilia, sophisticated tortures, a quotation from Solzhenitsyn without quotation marks, drug addiction, prostatitis, shooting, global catastrophes, the Bol’shoi Theatre filled with excrement, cloning, surrealist visions, the КГБ and a huge amount of various grubs.” Nemzer, 2003, p. 397.

<sup>71</sup> “No novel” but “a collection” of “static scenes” E. Petrovskaia, 2000, “Golubaia vata,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 41, pp. 417–20; pp. 416–17.



Wehr finds himself reminded of divergent film scenarios: “Sorokins böse Phantasie beginnt sich zu überschlagen, er entführt seine Figuren in Hitchcock- und James-Bond-Szenarien, in Riefenstahl- oder Eizenstejn- oder Chaplin-Filme, in Räume und Kulissen, die von Dali, Komar & Melamid, von japanischen Manga-Zeichnern oder von Arno Breker entworfen sein könnten.”<sup>72</sup> Even vague poetological labels such as cyberpunk or biopunk manage to capture only some aspects of the framework plot (such as a sinister future world, the blending of history and science on the one hand and fiction and materialized metaphors on the other). They do not encompass the entire framework plot, let alone the inner stories.

### *Frequency matters*

Since an immanent description of the heterogeneity of *Blue Lard* cannot provide any insight other than the diagnosis of heterogeneity itself, I propose a comparison of the different expressions of homogeneity and heterogeneity in various texts by Sorokin. In his early oeuvre one can even find highly homogeneous texts, such as *Ochered’* (*The Queue*, 1983), which depict a social situation by unusual (phonetical) means but without any excess. One single decisive moment of excess can be found in texts such as *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1985–89) or *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny* (*Marina’s Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84). This is the only type of “bad writing” Borden comments upon when referring to Sorokin:

The often brilliant, deeply disturbing Sorokin, [...] likes to begin his stories by re-creating with a completely straight face the clichés and pieties of official Soviet culture—[...]—and then to explode them with startling, often surreal plot twists involving sexual degradation, ritual mutilation, necrophilia, and coprophagy.<sup>73</sup>

The next category covers texts which do not “derail” following a turning point but combine two categorically different but consistent textual worlds, one framework plot and one inner story. An example is

72 Norbert Wehr, 2000, “Sorokin ist Sorokin ist Sorokin ist... .. der himmelblaue Speck ist Russlands erster Klon-Roman,” <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/wehr.shtml>, accessed 3 January 2013.

73 Borden, 1999, p. 263.

*Dostoevsky-Trip*. More than two different settings are combined in a third sort of text, consisting of several different parts which are loosely linked but internally more or less consistent, such as *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83) and *The Feast*. The latter, however, contains the least comprehensible and lexically most heterogeneous short text, “The Concrete Ones.” As far as entire novels are concerned, *Serdtza chetyrekh* (*Four Stout Hearts*, 1991) plays with the mysterious biochemical endeavour of the “four” but preserves the same characters throughout the whole text. By far the most heterogeneous longer text, both in respect of plot and language, is *Blue Lard*.

There can be no doubt that all these constellations of homogeneity and heterogeneity belong to deliberate “bad writing.” Is this the point where literary studies have exhausted their potential for discrimination? Mark Lipovetsky holds for the opposite and praises Sorokin for inflicting heterogeneity on homogeneous, “harmonious” textual worlds which, according to Lipovetsky, he evokes better than anything else:

Фокус сорокинского стиля состоит именно в том, что ему подвластно именно то письмо, которое основано на концепции гармонии человека с миром (органичной, как у Толстого или Пастернака, или насильственной, как в соцреализме). Его ход состоит в том, что он вплетает в эту гармоническую структуру архетипы дисгармонии и хаоса—насилие, эксcrementы, каннибализм и т.п.,—создавая тем самым сугубо постмодернистский эффект взаимопроникновения хаоса и гармонии, гармонии хаоса, хаотизированного порядка, «хаосмоса».<sup>74</sup>

By stressing Sorokin’s capacities for conceptualizing “harmonious” writers, Lipovetsky implicitly criticizes his emulations of modernist authors in the clones’ texts of *Blue Lard*. In 1999, Lipovetsky positively associates

74 “The focus of Sorokin’s style is the very fact that he masters a writing which is based on the concept of harmony of man and world (an organic harmony as in Tolstoy or Pasternak, or a violent one as in Sots-Realism). His trick is to inflict into this harmonious structure archetypes of disharmony and chaos—violence, faeces, cannibalism etc.,—thus creating a highly postmodernist effect of mutual overlapping of chaos and harmony, of the harmony of chaos, of a chaoticized order or ‘chaosmos’.” Mark Lipovetskii, 1999, “Goluboe salo pokoleniia, ili Dva mifa ob odnom krizise,” *Znamia* 11, pp. 207–15; p. 209.

*Blue Lard* with Bakhtinian “polyglossia” (многоязычие),<sup>75</sup> but makes the opposite point in his 2008 monograph *Paralogii* (*Paralogues*):

История получения фантастического «голубого сала» разворачивается в «тоталитарных» декорациях невразумительно, судорожно, без какой-либо рефлексии: [...] Практически каждый сюжетный поворот, связанный с голубым салом, в этой части романа Сорокина выглядит необъяснимым, как перипетии дурного боевика.<sup>76</sup>

Lipovetsky speaks of *Blue Lard* as a monstrously heterogeneous,<sup>77</sup> *негремучая смесь*.<sup>78</sup>

In summing up what I have said about heterogeneity, I propose a quantifying approach to heterogeneity, homogeneity and bad writing. From this sort of slightly objectivistic, formalist perspective, the main criterion for distinguishing between different kinds of “bad writing” is the *frequency* of fissures. The question here is the extent to which estrangement can still serve as a positive criterion for art, including “bad writing,” as Kataev argues.<sup>79</sup> To what degree does excess, this key characteristic in Kataev’s concept of “mauvism,”<sup>80</sup> provide a fresh view, and when does it start kicking the reader out of the text?

It seems appropriate to approach this from the extremes: one unexpected outburst of violence in 700 pages, such as in *Roman/A Novel*, does not destroy the “good continuation” (a term from cognitive psychology introduced into literary hermeneutics by Wolfgang Iser<sup>81</sup>), but focuses the reader’s attention in a cognitively productive way. A limited amount of excess renders a seemingly “harmonious” text an intriguing example of

75 Lipovetskii, 1999, p. 215.

76 “The plot of producing the fantastic blue lard unfolds in ‘total’ decorations, in an unintelligible, convulsive way, without any reflection: [...] Practically every plot turn which is connected with the blue lard looks inexplicable in this part of the novel, like the twists and turns in a bad action movie.” Lipovetskii, 2008, p. 426.

77 Lipovetskii, 2008, p. 444.

78 “A *non-roaring* mixture” Lipovetskii, 2008, p. 441, emphasis in the original.

79 Cf. Borden, 1999, pp. 34–35.

80 See Borden, 1999, pp. 44–45.

81 Wolfgang Iser, 1976, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, Munich, pp. 287–88.

“bad writing.” At the other end of the scale, five or more incomprehensible words in many sentences in “The Concrete Ones” destroy almost every attempt to comprehend this text. The accumulation of moments of estrangement, excess and fissures in *Blue Lard* leaves the reader unfocused and disoriented.

Drawing on the aforementioned differences in frequency, I propose differentiating the category of “bad writing” as introduced by Valentin Kataev and described by Richard Borden between focused or homogeneous and unfocused or heterogeneous “bad writing.” *Blue Lard* can serve as a prime example of heterogeneous or unfocused “bad writing.”

#### *Homogeneous and heterogeneous “bad writing”*

Unfocused “bad writing” does not necessarily mean “failure.” But under which circumstances can “unfocused bad writing” be functional? And do these circumstances apply to *Blue Lard*? The novel contains only very few examples of focused “bad writing” in the internal narratives. In this respect, Elena proves to be right that Sorokin, as *автор приема*,<sup>82</sup> produced more consistent short stories than novels: [...] удачны его рассказы, где действие однотипно шокирующего приема совпадает со скорой концовкой.<sup>83</sup> From this point of view, the focused but abundant *Roman/A Novel* is a long short story.

I share Evgenii Iz’s opinion that, in *Blue Lard*, the most convincing and consistent inner stories are the Tolstoy emulation and the swimmer story “Swimming in.”<sup>84</sup> Much of the framework plot, especially the letters written by Gloger, are unreadable in a different sense than, for example, *Roman/A Novel*, where you can easily read and appreciate (meta-aesthetically) every sentence and are only likely to leaf through when you have understood the device. In “The Concrete Ones” this might still be possible, but not in *Blue Lard*. With regard to Gloger’s letters, I cannot agree with Aleksandr Genis and Evgenii Iz, who say they have experienced the reading of this novel as hypnotic.<sup>85</sup> The reader might display interest in the fantastic plot when it comes to the last 60% of the novel

82 “An author of one literary device” Petrovskaia, 1999, p. 415, emphasis in the original.

83 “[...] his stories, in which the function of the uniformly shocking device coincides with the near final, are successful.” Petrovskaia, 1999, p. 415.

84 Evgenii Iz, 1999, “Fyntsikhua: goluboi Sorokin?,” <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/iz.shtml>, accessed 3 January 2013.

85 Genis, 1999; Iz, 1999.

*Blue Lard* (the 1954 part), but there is definitely no hypnotic effect in the first 40 % (set in the year 2068; GS 7–160).

If unappreciable as proper reading, even from the point of view of syntactical aesthetics, the novel might, however, be understood at another level. What could the expelling heterogeneity of *Blue Lard* be allegorical of? Genis states that *Blue Lard* is structured in keeping with the logic of dreams, withholding all relevant information and connecting the parts solely with the enigmatic blue lard, a mesmerizing material with zero entropy and inexhaustible energy (GS 120–21):

Не следует ждать от него последовательности, повествовательной логики, художественной равноценности или хотя бы связности. С бессмысленной, чисто сновидческой, щедростью книга навязывает избыточное, ненужное, безработное содержание. Лишнее тут заменяет необходимое. Мы знаем все, кроме того, что нам нужно. Различна и степень внятности того, что нам показывают. Отдельные куски, пародирующие самые разные стили и жанры, с трудом лепятся к друг другу.<sup>86</sup>

This kind of reading moves the attention onto a meta-level, and sublimates the unreadability to a mimetic quality: “bad writing” as psychomimesis of dreaming. Meta-aesthetic sublimation is an absolutely standard device for all Sorokin scholarship; it works with virtually all texts by Sorokin and can work with *Blue Lard* as well. The main difference is that, in most of the other texts, the sublimation works while reading, but in the few texts in question here, written around 2000, this is possible only after reading or when putting away the book. The reader finds her/himself a victim of a mechanism which Borden described by referring to Kataev and of a writing “deliberately disorienting and often exasperating a readership weaned on the safe, familiar forms of socialist realism.”<sup>87</sup> In the case of Sorokin, one could reformulate this: the author himself

86 “You cannot expect from it consistency, narrative logic, artistic evenness or at least coherence. With a senseless, purely dreamlike generosity, the book forces a superfluous, unnecessary and functionless content upon the reader. We know everything except for what we need to know. The degree of comprehensibility of what we are shown varies. Single pieces which parody the most divergent styles and genres are stuck together with effort.” Genis, 1999.

87 Borden, 1999, p. 2.

educated a “readership weaned on the safe, familiar forms of Moscow Conceptualism.” Thus, the sublimation effect on the meta-level does not work *within* Sorokin’s “Chinese” texts because the reader is expelled from the texts by hundreds of contaminations on the level of single sentences and even words.

Could this evaluation be in danger of applying classicist measures and of excluding modernist ways of writing? After all, as we remember, according to Borden, “bad writing” *is* modernist and anti-classicist. Why should it not also apply to *Blue Lard* that “[...] good ‘bad’ art incorporates materials and strategies that are, in fact, classically bad”?<sup>88</sup> This might be due to the fact that we were trained by Sorokin’s earlier (and later) books to read him as a conservator (консерватор).<sup>89</sup> In reproducing the poetics of Socialist Realism, Moscow Conceptualism is participating in the classicist legacy of Socialist Realism.<sup>90</sup> Sorokin’s conceptualist works apply “bad writing” by emulating the bad writing of Socialist Realism: “Soviet socialist realism at its worst was utterly predictable in plot, character, language, literary device, and narrative form, and thus, by Lotman’s definition, utterly trivial and bad.”<sup>91</sup> In this light, the early Sorokin was also a “classicist.” The classicist’s flirtation with modernist unpredictability (in *Blue Lard*) produced cognitive dissonance. The traditional reader of the “classicist” Sorokin would subscribe without hesitation to these meta-poetical words from Sorokin’s novel:

Просто я не большой любитель cocktails... я пробирую чистые продукты. А из cocktails—только классику... да и то...—он М-убого почесался,—в основном один-единственный mix. Старый как... как... не знаю что.<sup>92</sup>

88 Borden, 1999, p. 16.

89 Petr Vail’, 1995, “Konservator Sorokin v kontse veka,” *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 1 February, p. 4.

90 Cf. Abram Terts (Andrei Siniavskii), 1967. “Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realism,” *Fantasticheskie povesti*, New York, pp. 401–46.

91 Borden, 1999, p. 24.

92 “I am simply no friend of cocktails... I try pure products. And among cocktails—only classics—and from them—he scratched himself in a M-mediocre way—in general one single mix, an old one like... like... I don’t know what.” GS 111.

The opposite is true of the scandal of 2002: only because the book was so heterogeneous in a popular manner could it be recognized by a broader public. Many among this popular, “modernist” public, however, disliked the book for the “traditional” elements of excessive “bad writing” in the sense of Kataev and Borden, above all for the bed scene involving Khrushchev and Stalin.

*Conceptualization of popular heterogeneity*

The affinity of a broader public to *Blue Lard* has not come by chance. Arguing for continuity in Sorokin’s oeuvre, I venture that in this novel we are confronted with the conceptualization of esoteric, occultist and utopian discourses and the poetics of pulp action thrillers.<sup>93</sup> The object of conceptualization has changed—from “classicist” Socialist Realism to “modernist” popular genres. The emulative poetics, Sorokin’s “device of positioning oneself as ‘not me...’” (прием позиционирования себя как «я не...»),<sup>94</sup> has remained the same, however. As far as occultism is concerned, Birgit Menzel argues in a similar way for Sorokin’s *Ice Trilogy* of 2002–2005:

As to the uses of occult topics and their function in these novels, I see Sorokin’s novels as a parody of post-Soviet political occult ideologies and at the same time as a Gnostic tale in popular disguise.<sup>95</sup>

Sorokin has not, as Menzel concludes, “broken with his poetics of monstrosity”<sup>96</sup> but:

[...] continues to utilize his strategy of subversion by affirmation, a ritualizing depiction of a dominating ideology, which is adopted

93 Sorokin himself pursues a wide understanding of conceptualism when he extends the term for Akunin: Я с большим уважением отношусь к его [Акунина] прозе. Это серьезный, концептуальный проект. “I have great respect for his [Akunin’s] prose. This is a serious, conceptual project.” V.G. Sorokin & Dmitrii Baviľskii, 2005, “Komu by Sorokin Nobelevskuiiu premiiu dal...,” *Topos*, 11 March, <http://www.topos.ru/article/3358>, accessed 3 January 2013.

94 Bogdanova, 2005, p. 42.

95 Birgit Menzel, 2007, “The Occult Revival in Russia Today and Its Impact on Literature,” *The Harriman Review* 16 (4), pp. 64–77; p. 76.

96 Menzel, 2007, p. 77.

through mimicry, e.g., Socialist Realism in his Sots-Art prose and now the popular metaphysical discourse of the occult.<sup>97</sup>

In accordance with Menzel's observation of the interrelation between the esoteric discourse and Sorokin's *Ice Trilogy*, I would argue that this is already true of *Blue Lard*. It is the inconsistency and heterogeneity of contemporary discourses such as esotericism, occultism and pulp genres like action thrillers etc. which render their conceptualization by Sorokin in *Blue Lard* inconsistent and heterogeneous as well. Their inconsistency and heterogeneity make them mimetically adequate and adequately unreadable. Lipovetsky's diagnosis of "the collapse of collective discursive bodies" (распад коллективных тел-дискурсов<sup>98</sup>) in the late 1990s is mimetically reproduced by Sorokin in an adequately heterogeneous way.<sup>99</sup>

While in his "classicist" conceptualist works (for example, *Four Stout Hearts*) Sorokin staged apparent coherence and deceptive comprehensibility, in *Blue Lard*, "The Concrete Ones" and "Tu" he effectively performs incomprehensibility at all levels. All works by Sorokin can be read meta-hermeneutically, including *Blue Lard* and "The Concrete Ones," where the protagonists clone, inject and eat "literature." Thus the incomprehensibility effects of Sorokin's "Chinese texts," which reflect the irritation caused by the transformation process, are cognitively opposite to but no less meta-hermeneutic than his previous meta-literary approach to Socialist Realism.

97 Menzel, 2007, p. 77.

98 Lipovetskii, 2008, p. 420.

99 Cf. also Marusenkov, 2012, pp. 131, 200–201.