

Vladimir Sorokin's Abject Bodies: Clones and the Crisis of Subjecthood

Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya

Олег: Как? Это ж запрещено. Недавно был какой-то международный конгресс. И запретили клонировать человека.

Володя: Ну, господа. Вы подзабыли, в какой мы стране живем. То, что у них запрещено, у нас разрешено.

Владимир Сорокин, 4¹

The abject is related to perversion.

Julia Kristeva²

Vladimir Sorokin's writings confront the reader with "shocking visions of violence, cannibalism and scatology"³ and "cloned monsters"⁴ to enact the function of the abject in subject formation. In his works, the body is often the site of encounters with the abject, as scenes of coprophagia, the ingestion of cloned meat, and cannibalism erode the boundary between

1 "Oleg: 'What? That's prohibited. Some international congress met not long ago, and they banned human cloning.' Volodia: My dear Sirs, you forget where we live. What is forbidden elsewhere is permitted here." Vladimir Sorokin, 4. Translations from published English versions are cited when available. All other translations are mine

2 Julia Kristeva, 1982, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, transl. L.S. Roudiez, New York, p. 15

3 Ellen Barry, 2011, "From a Novelist, Shock Treatment for Mother Russia," *The New York Times* 30 April 2011, Section C, p. 1.

4 Alexander Etkind & Mark Lipovetsky, 2010, "The Salamander's Return: The Soviet Catastrophe and the Post-Soviet Novel," *Russian Studies in Literature* 46 (4), pp. 6–48; p. 11. The original Russian text of the article may be found at Aleksander Etkind & Mark Lipovetskii, 2008, "Vozvrashchenie Tritona: sovetskaia katastrofa i postsovetskii roman," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 94, pp. 174–206.

the subject and that which is “neither subject nor object, but an intolerable threat against a not-yet formed subject.”⁵ Julia Kristeva identifies the emergence of subjecthood with the exclusion of the abject: one’s horror at the encounter with the corpse; “loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung”; “the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck.”⁶ Conversely, Sorokin’s work tends toward depictions of the body taking into itself that which “disturbs identity, system, order.”⁷ By assimilating, rather than rejecting, what must be “permanently thrust aside in order to live,”⁸ Sorokin’s bodies become figures of excess and provoke questions concerning the autonomous status of the subject.

In *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* Kristeva observes that abjection entails the simultaneous acts of affirming and subverting social order.⁹ In describing the subject’s separation from the maternal body, she writes: “I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*.” At the same time, the corpse, “the most sickening of wastes,” threatens identity as “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object.”¹⁰ Sorokin’s writing similarly unveils the function of the abject in drawing parallels between seemingly conflicting aims. In his fictional worlds there is horror in the act of abjecting oneself to affirm social order. There is horror in the absence of social order. In the absence of the Other and the proliferation of bodies that are neither subject nor object, the subject remains unresolved and in crisis.

The recurring figure of the clone in Sorokin’s work structures his exploration of non-differentiation and excess. In his novel *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999), in the opera libretto *Deti Rozentalia* (*Rosenthal’s Children*, 2005) and in the screenplay for the film *4* (*Four*, 2004), clones

5 Jon-Ove Steihaug, 1995, *Abject/Informe/Trauma—Discourses on the Body in American Art of the Nineties*, Oslo, p.14.

6 Kristeva, 1982, p. 2.

7 Kristeva, 1982, pp. 3–4.

8 Kristeva, 1982, p. 3.

9 Hal Foster notes: “A crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is the slippage between the operation to *abject* and the condition to *be abject*. For her the operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society, while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations.” Hal Foster, 1996, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October* 78, pp. 107–24; p. 114, emphasis in the original.

10 Kristeva, 1982, p. 4.

generate creative compositions. Their work, their bodies, and indeed, their very existence, are excess production. Sorokin has described the clone as хороша для литературы [...] Механизм реанимации времени, истории, той или иной личности. При помощи клонов можно многое сделать в литературе—стать Толстым, например.¹¹ To “become Tolstoy,” rather than merely replicating Tolstoyan language, and to generate new writings by Tolstoy as well as by multiple additional clones, is to demand the acceptance and assimilation of these creations or to call for the imposition of limits upon their assimilation. These two operations, depicted within Sorokin’s work, also organize its reception.

The excessive bodies that Sorokin’s writings depict, and the excessive nature of the texts themselves, generate responses that have been anticipated, and thus integrated into the works as an intrinsic part of their function. The inability to extricate reception from composition complements the motif of cloning as a strategy through which Sorokin’s writing explores the problem of non-differentiation and the crisis of the autonomy of the subject. In describing *Blue Lard*, Sorokin has claimed that он напоминает мне кубик Рубика: у разных людей самые разные претензии и предпочтения в этом романе.¹² The analogy is telling: the potential for diverse and multiple readings of this complex novel appears

11 “[Cloning] is beneficial for literature [...] a mechanism for the reanimation of time, history, or one or another personage. With the help of clones one can accomplish a great deal in literature—become Tolstoy, for example.” Elena Kutlovskaja, 2005, “Spiashchii v nochi,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 16 September, p. 13. In response to the question of whether Sorokin, like Lev Tolstoy, will become widely read in Russia and the West, Ekaterina Degot’ states: Сорокин, безусловно, уже стал Львом Толстым. “Sorokin has undoubtedly already become Lev Tolstoy.” Ekaterina Degot’, 2000, “Ekaterina Degot’ o Sorokine: retsept dekonstruktsii,” *Klinamen: allegorii chteniia*, 23 October, <http://dironweb.com/klinamen/read2.html>, accessed 25 July 2012.

12 “[*Blue Lard*] reminds me of a Rubik’s Cube: different people have the most varied opinions and approaches to this novel.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2010, “Klonirovanie po metodu professora Sorokina,” *Beta-press*, 16 January <http://beta-press.ru/article/87>, accessed 13 March 2013. See also Sorokin’s interview with Kristina Rotkirkh, when in response to the question of whether readers’ powerful emotional reactions to his work assist or detract from their interpretations, Sorokin responded: Я думаю, что они были рассчитаны на это. Потому что шок—это одна из их составляющих. Это не что-то побочное. Это нечто, что заложено в самом проекте. “I think that they are calculated to achieve this, because shock is one of their component elements. This isn’t some secondary effect. This is something that has been built into the work itself.” Kristina Rotkirkh, 2009, *Odinadtsat’ besed o sovremennoi russkoi proze*, Moscow, p. 93.

infinite, but is attenuated by the fact that every possible reading is already found within its construction. This points not only to the crisis of the autonomy of the subject, but raises questions about the relationship between abject art and politics in the post-Soviet context, particularly when readings of Sorokin identify an activist, dissident or otherwise empowering position with his work.

Human ingestion of cloned material, and clones' ingestion of non-cloned material, is thematized from the very start of *Blue Lard*. From the любимая моя, простая, как улыбка репликанта, сочная, как жизнь, — клон-индейка that the protagonist Boris Gloger eats at lunch, to the cloned carrier pigeons that attack and cannibalize pigeons found in the wild,¹³ the integration of cloned and non-cloned bodies comes to be represented in increasingly complex ways that test the boundaries of the body, text and reader. Aleksandr Shatalov notes that there were no indifferent readers; responses to the work were either favourable or hostile.¹⁴ Descriptions of *Blue Lard* range from “pornographic” and “repelling” to акт прежде всего поведенческий, с учетом все еще бытующей в России традиции почитания писателя как общественного лидера.¹⁵ Whether one associates transgression with antisocial or reformist tendencies, such divergent responses still indicate agreement on both sides that the novel represents the abject and functions as the abject in a challenge to normative values.¹⁶

13 “My favourite—simple, like the smile of a replicant, succulent, like life—clone-turkey.” Vladimir Sorokin, 1999, *Goluboe salo*, Moscow, p. 14.

14 Aleksandr Shatalov, 1999, “*Goluboe salo*: gurmanstvo ili kannibalizm? Vladimir Sorokin v poiskakh utrachenogo vremeni,” *Druzhiba narodov* 10, pp. 204–10; p. 204.

15 “Sorokin’s text is primarily a behavioural act, and it accepts a tradition that still persists in Russia, which regards writers as leading public figures.” Marina Adamovich, 2001/02, “Judith with the Head of Holofernes: Pseudoclassicism in Russian Literature during the 1990s,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 38 (1), pp. 85–99; p. 93. The original Russian text of the article can be found at “Iudif s golovoi Oloferna: psevdoklassika v russkoi literature 90-kh,” 2001, *Novyi mir* 7, pp. 165–74.

16 Hal Foster cites the example of Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ” to note that the abject artist may “call out for an evangelical senator [...], who then completes the work” by publically denouncing it. “[A]s left and right may agree on the social representatives of the abject, they may shore each other up in a public exchange of disgust, and this spectacle may inadvertently support the normativity of image-screen and symbolic order alike.” Foster, 1996, p. 116.

As “an attempt to make the Other *pronounce* the law,”¹⁷ *Blue Lard* disavows limit; in turn, it becomes a site for the articulation of law and limit in response to its excess. In this way, it may be said to represent “the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation [...]”¹⁸ Sorokin’s depiction of Khrushchev’s “long, uneven penis” entering Stalin’s “spittle-smearred anus” was bound to provoke reactionary groups such as *Idushchie vmeste* (*Walking Together*) into advancing their own notions of normativity by seeking to incarcerate the author and impose limits upon the distribution of his novel.¹⁹ Ellen Rutten’s analysis of *Blue Lard* incorporates the novel’s “repelling physical-pornographic details,” including the infamous scene cited above, to propose that the novel is “an unsettling experience for the reader” that “invalidates [the Soviet legacy] through fantasy, the grotesque and through horror, in the same way that traumatized persons sometimes cope with their traumas by imagining their offenders in the most horrible poses and situations thinkable.”²⁰ But by identifying the abject in the novel (Rutten describes particular features as “nauseatingly extensive,” “grotesque,” “semi-pornographic,” “repelling,” “disquieting,” “unpleasant”) with a movement toward establishing normativity, Rutten’s study illustrates that *Blue Lard* continually enacts the relationship between the abject and its tendency toward regulation.

Blue Lard’s excess, together with its often-cited appropriation of existing literary and institutional discourses, orchestrates its own reception, which itself seeks purpose in reproducing and organizing these discourses. Philological studies propose to order the “what” of the novel, but, in doing so, replicate and systematize its “how.” Ekaterina Degot’ describes this phenomenon when accounting for how writings about Sorokin’s work appropriate multiple texts into themselves in an attempt to impose order:

Его творчество высокотеретично, он оперирует уже готовыми моделями, теоретическими и литературными, он привык к огромному количеству цитат, в том числе и литературоведческих, поэтому его тексты—рай для исследователя, для теоретика

17 Bruce Fink, 1997, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*, Cambridge, p. 174, emphasis in the original.

18 Foster, 1996, p. 116.

19 Sorokin, 1999, p. 258.

20 Ellen Rutten, 2009, “Art as Therapy: Sorokin’s Strife with the Soviet Trauma across Media,” *Russian Literature* 65 (4), pp. 539–59; pp. 548, 552.

литературы и рай для интертекстуальности. Ориентированные на философию докладчики получили возможность сравнивать его с Кантом, а литературно ориентированные могли найти литературные примеры.²¹

Sorokin himself has commented on the perverse elements of *Blue Lard* that subsume a wider readership, noting that it создает вокруг себя какой-то странный привкус коллективного бреда, в него многие и охотно втягиваются.²² Responses to the novel may alternately challenge its distribution, validate the social function of the author, or reproduce the work of the novel's "biophilologist"-hero, replicating existing discursive structures as the novel does itself.

The actual replication of *Blue Lard*, when a scanned copy of the entire novel was uploaded to the internet without the permission of the publishing house Ad Marginem or the author, probed the question of whether the tendency of the abject toward regulation could itself be disrupted. Andrei Chernov, who linked to the text of the novel from his personal website, defended his right to disseminate the work by critiquing what he determined to be social regulation, rather than legal precept: Со своими цивилизованными нормами идите в цивилизованную жопу и стройте там себе отдельную цивилизованную сеть.²³ After a week of heated public correspondence and continued pressure from readers, crit-

21 "His work is highly theoretical. He works with ready-made theoretical and literary models, and he is accustomed to working with an enormous quantity of citations, including citations from literary criticism. His texts, therefore, are a paradise for the researcher, the literary theoretician, and for intertextuality. Those contributors working in philosophy were able to compare him with Kant, and those working in literature were able to find literary examples." Degot' further illustrates this phenomenon thus: энциклопедически образованный в литературе Игорь Смирнов [...] *просто не мог остановиться*, указывая на параллели то с Константином Леонтьевым, то с Соловьевым, то с Андреем Белым... "Igor' Smirnov, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of literature, *was simply unable to stop* indicating parallels with Konstantin Leont'ev, Solov'ev, Andrei Belyi..." Degot', 2000, <http://dironweb.com/klinamen/read2.html>, accessed 25 July 2012, my emphasis.

22 "[*Blue Lard*] creates a strange sort of smack of collective hysteria around itself, and many people enter into it, even willingly." Evgenii Gornyi, 1999, "Problema kopiraita v russkoi Seti: bitva za Goluboe salo," <http://www.zhurnal.ru/staff/gornyi/texts/salo.html>, accessed 25 July 2012.

23 "Shove your civilized standards up your civilized assholes and build yourselves your own civilized Internet over there." Quoted in Gornyi, 1999.

ics, and the publishing house, the discussion culminated with a letter from the editor-in-chief of *Ad Marginem*, thanking Chernov for his participation in an advertising campaign timed to coincide with the launch of the second edition of *Blue Lard*. The letter went on to apologize for not informing him initially of his role in the advertising campaign, which, the editor-in-chief was careful to note, was planned in advance and successfully realized, thanks in no small measure to the “uncompromising and sincere” position Chernov took in the online debates.²⁴ Whether or not *Ad Marginem*’s campaign was indeed premeditated, the regulating structures of the novel that move others towards pronouncing the law, “the better to deny them” completion and to compel them to do it again,²⁵ worked together with the institutional power of Sorokin’s publisher and the market to appropriate Chernov’s cloned copy of the novel and Chernov’s own assertions of its independence to eventually legitimate the primacy of the print edition.

In articulating the relationship between the abject and perversion, Kristeva notes that Bataille was first to link the production of the abject to the “poverty of prohibition,” “the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding.”²⁶ By disavowing limit, *Blue Lard* functions as a perverse text that moves subjects toward articulating order or other forms of restriction upon its excess, only to negate these attempts by subsuming them as replications of the work’s own structures. Responses to the work function as illustrations of the various ways that the reader’s unfailingly anticipated performance “completes the work [...]”²⁷

This approach to *Blue Lard* can close off the potential for referential readings that view the novel as illustrating a body of theory that exists outside the work itself. While referential readings generally run the risk of positing literature as a secondary order of expression in the service of fundamental ideas articulated in criticism, in the case of *Blue Lard* they create problematic metatextual relationships between the bodies manufactured in Sorokin’s novel and the texts generated outside of it.

24 Gornyi, 1999, <http://www.zhurnal.ru/staff/gornyi/texts/salo.html>, accessed 25 July 2012.

25 Kristeva, 1982, p. 15.

26 Kristeva, 1982, p. 64.

27 Foster, 1996, p. 116.

The argument that если вы читали любой другой роман Сорокина [...] то «Голубое сало» вы можете спокойно не читать,²⁸ reflects the superfluous excess of literary works as they are depicted in *Blue Lard*, where the cloned texts by Dostoevsky-2, Chekhov-3, Nabokov-7 and others are presented as curious by-products. Metatextual readings may also posit relationships between the bodies depicted in Sorokin's writing and the writer himself, whether construing him as a figure of abjection (порнограф, говноед),²⁹ or measuring his value not in terms of his writing, but his body's ability to generate the "blue lard" that gives his writing its purpose. This may be measured quantitatively, for example in terms of the number of copies sold, or by attributing political power to the author as a figure of transgression. More cynically, the body and texts of the author might be construed as means to a paraliterary end, obtaining value in literary criticism, which sees itself as playing a constitutive role in the formation of the author and reader as subjects.

Less cynical approaches to novels about cloning view these works as ways of expanding definitions of selfhood or developing new approaches to ethics and art as technology changes our ideas about what it means to be human. As a novel about cloning that simultaneously complicates the question of genre, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) has been described as "quasi-science-fiction" with a "mannered," "inhuman style"³⁰ that challenges conventional narratives about the "realization that clones are humans, just like us" to propose "the darker realization that art, along with the empathy it provokes, needs to escape the traditional concept

28 "If you have read any novel by Sorokin [...] you can rest assured that you don't need to read *Blue Lard*." Dunia Smirnova, 2001, "Retsenziia: *Goluboe сало*," *Afisha*, 1 January, <http://www.afisha.ru/book/254/>, accessed 25 July 2012.

29 "Pornographer," "shit-eater." These common terms of abuse, used by those hostile to Sorokin and his work, have been appropriated by some of his reviewers. In his review of Sorokin's *Put' Bro*, for example, Igor' Smirnov posits that *Put' Bro* destroys the institution of literature by compelling the reader to read what he has already read: Автор заставляет читателя пережевать то, что тот уже раз проглотил. В некотором смысле роль «говноеда» отводится реципиенту. "The author forces the reader to chew again that which he has already swallowed. In a way, the role of 'shit-eater' is assigned to the recipient." Igor' Smirnov, 2004, "Vladimir Sorokin: *Put' Bro* [retsenziia]," *Kriticheskaia massa* 4, <http://magazines.russ.ru/km/2004/4/smi34.html>, accessed 25 July 2012.

30 Louis Menand, 2005, "Something about Kathy," *The New Yorker*, 28 March, p. 78; Shameem Black, 2009, "Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 55 (4), pp. 785–807; p. 805 fn 13 and p. 786.

of the human.”³¹ Sorokin’s screenplay *Four* also obscures conventional genre categories, but with an intent to efface the distinction between narratives by and about clones. If Ishiguro values “the unoriginality of art” because it generates “uniqueness of a different kind: the uniqueness of a translation, the uniqueness of a cassette tape, the uniqueness of an allegory about political appeasement,”³² in *Four* Sorokin depicts a crisis in which identification with the clone is replicated at the level of form, the level of physiology, and more troublingly, in the operations of the abject.

Oleg, Volodia and Marina, the protagonists of *Four*, are introduced as storytellers. While Marina is ontologically distinct from the men in that she is a clone, they are all indistinguishable from one another in their roles as narrators. They invent identities and professions, and, as proxies for the reader, listen attentively to each other until they leave the Moscow bar where they met. The piano tuner Volodia, who claims to be a geneticist at a state laboratory engaged in cloning humans, is mistaken by the police for a murderer who shares his exact likeness. He is eventually sent to a labour camp, then to a military staging base. Oleg, a meat distributor, lives in a sterile household with his father, who obsessively cleans with steam and isopropyl alcohol. Oleg becomes consumed with finding the source for a cloned breed of round piglet recommended to him in a Moscow restaurant. Marina travels to her home village for the funeral of one of her clone-sisters. It is here that identification with the clone begins to coincide with the representation of the abject and its attendant operations.

The village is marked by the proliferation of bodies that serve as the site of the abject. When the path to the outhouse is muddy and impassable, Marina and her sisters simply squat and urinate on the ground. The death of Marina’s sister prompts Marina’s return, the widower of the deceased clone hangs himself, and the naked bodies of drunk, elderly peasant women figure in orgiastic scenes of chewing bread and spitting it into bowls. Before her death Marina’s sister sculpted the chewed bread into faces to create dolls with an individual expression. Her artistry in creating the dolls’ faces suggests a narrative of individuation, but her death and the inadvertent destruction of the dolls curtail development of this

31 Black, 2009, p. 786.

32 Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 2007, “Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature,” *Novel* 40 (3), pp. 216–39; p. 228, 235.

theme. When her widower takes over, making a mask of his own face to mechanize the dolls' production, we see "a terrifying shot of dolls with a uniform face—[...]"³³ Marina is so revolted by this image of uniformity that she burns all of the dolls on her sister's grave.

The scenes in Moscow initially seem characterized by a strict regime of law and control. The sexual competition between Volodia and Oleg for Marina's attention and the symmetry of Oleg's apartment emblemize this condition vividly, but so do the protagonists' professions, both imagined and "real," which establish their position within a symbolic order.³⁴ As the case of mistaken identity that leads to Volodia's arrest and inevitable death reveals, however, this order is unstable and in crisis. Later, Oleg, who repeatedly claims never to deal in ground meat (Я не торгую фаршем.), is killed in a car accident while engaged in a transaction to sell canned emergency rations of ground meat that have been held in storage (А кто тебе сказал, что я фаршем не торгую?).³⁵ The gradually revealed instability of the symbolic order constructed by the narrative around the men and the city contrasts with Marina's function in the village, which is devoid of all restrictions. The length of the passages devoted to the village scenes relative to the city episodes reflects this absence of limit at the level of form. These episodes, however, are mediated by Marina's regulating response to the abject. Her disgust depicts what Kristeva calls "food loathing," "perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection,"³⁶ and is illustrated in her response to the production of clay-like chewed bread and her vomit upon drinking the cloudy homemade liquor brewed by the old women. She is repulsed by a dream in which she converses and interacts with her dead sister. These passages finally culminate in her destruction of the mass-produced dolls, and, by extension, the mode of (re)production that sustains the economy of the village, and finally, the conclusion of the village scenes themselves.

Marina's function as a proxy for the viewer (the long distance she must travel to the remote village, the interminable length of the vil-

33 Mark Lipovetsky, 2005, "Of Clones and Crones: Il'ia Khrzhanovskii's 4," *Kinokultura* 9, <http://www.kinokultura.com/reviews/R10-05chetyre-1.html>, accessed 25 July 2012.

34 The arrangement of objects in groups of four in the opening establishing shot of the film adaptation of *Four* achieves this visually (four dogs, four excavator jackhammers, four passing snowploughs, and four mannequins framed in a shop window).

35 "I don't sell ground meat."; "Who told you that I don't sell ground meat?"

36 Kristeva, 1982, pp. 2–3.

lage scenes) was effectively captured in Mark Lipovetsky's *Kinokultura* review of the film adaptation of *Four*. After "too many long shots, too many lengthy walks, and too little action" the "lack of catharsis is in a way logical: if the characters are deprived of it, why should the viewers have the experience?"³⁷ Marina's replication of the viewer's response to the abject was also reciprocated in online discussions about the film adaptation. "Anna" states: Лично у меня многие сцены вызывали отвращение; "Irina P" adds: Мне действительно просто стало плохо, [...]³⁸ The suggestion of a shared subject position between the viewer and the abject figure of the clone may also account for these responses. The depiction of the limiting agent simultaneously as a figure of abjection reveals a crisis in the regulating function of the abject. Of everyone in the village, Marina alone acknowledges excess and gestures toward limit. She is also the epitome of the abject body: both a clone and an abject maternal body, skin rotting on the outside, scarred and suffering from sepsis, her stillborn child having been cut out from her womb in pieces. In the city her body is normativized, overwritten by paternal law. In the village her abject body subverts her function; her regulating gestures do not effect the emergence of the subject or the difficult pleasures of perversion, but a profound ambivalence suspended between the impossible figures of the clone and the abject mother.

Responses to the film included attempts to call upon the limiting power of the law. The relatively limited availability of the film for screening in Russia and the delay in receiving permission to release the film on DVD have been interpreted by some as an attempt on the part of Russia's Ministry of Culture to restrict its distribution.³⁹ While Khrzhanovskii believes the delayed release of the film was the result of a mutual misunderstanding,⁴⁰ his description of the response to *Four* at the

37 Lipovetsky, 2005.

38 "Personally, several scenes made me nauseous." (Anna); "I truly felt sick." (Irina P.); 4 (*Chetyre*), <http://ruskino.ru/mov/forum/2160>, accessed 25 July 2012.

39 Alena Karas', 2005, "Il'ia Khrzhanovskii: 'Eto byli zvuki ada': interv'iu s obladatelem glavnogo priza kinofestivalia v Rotterdame," *Polit.ru* 18 February, <http://www.polit.ru/article/2005/02/18/hrzh/>, accessed 25 July 2012. See also Dmitrii Volchek, 2005, "Il'ia Khrzhanovskii: 'Moi fil'm zagadochno zapretili i zagadochno razreshili,'" *Radio svoboda*, 14 February, <http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/article/105350.html>, accessed 25 July 2012.

40 Karas', 2005.

Kinotavr Film Festival reveals deeper anxieties about the film's perceived threat:

Помните, на «Кинотавре» был шуточный суд над фильмом, который в контексте участников того действия оказался не таким уж безобидным. И юмористический выбор: что лучше—убить меня или повесить, выглядел не таким уж смешным.⁴¹

Despite the violence inherent in this statement, Khrzhanovskii, like Sorokin, had anticipated such views. In a statement that recalls Sorokin's description of *Blue Lard* as a Rubik's Cube, Khrzhanovskii has claimed of *Four* that в самой структуре картины закладывалась возможность разного на нее отклика. Вы реагируете на нее в зависимости от того, какая вы. Это ваши проблемы, а не фильма.⁴² In contrast to *Blue Lard*, however, *Four* does not incorporate bodies from outside of the text into itself, but seeks to establish a relationship of reciprocity to suggest that one can replace the other. This relationship of correspondence then becomes debilitated when the ambivalent relation to the not-Other is unveiled. To paraphrase Hal Foster's formulation, *Four* represents "the condition of abjection [...], in order to disturb the operation of abjection."⁴³ Khrzhanovskii's statement above might thus be rephrased as, "you'll respond to the film regardless of what you're made of." The response to the abject, like the impulse to narrate, is particular to humans but does not distinguish human subjects as individuals.

Reading *Blue Lard* and *Four* as representations of the abject that also function as the abject helps to reconcile conflicting tendencies that view Sorokin's work as either self-referential literature about literature or as transgressive calls to social engagement. The abject exposes the fantasy of stability, the desire for order and limit that organizes both reading

41 "You will recall that at Kinotavr the film was put on mock trial, which, given the participants involved, turned out to be not so innocuous. And the choice, intended as a joke, of whether it would be better to kill me or hang me, did not seem so funny in the end." Larisa Maliukova, 2005, "Четверка с плюсами и минусами: rezhissera fil'ma '4' Il'iu Khrzhanovskogo za granitsej nagradili, a v Rossii khoteli povесit'," *Novaia gazeta* 63, 29 August, p. 23.

42 "The potential for multiple responses was built into the very structure of the film. How you respond to it depends on what you are made of. Those are your problems, not the film's." Maliukova, 2005, p. 23.

43 Foster, 1996, p. 115, emphasis in the original.

practices. In a universe of stable values, Sorokin's writing is a compilation of traceable literary allusions, or a threat to established regimes of meaning associated with the body, the nation, and other constructions of social identity. To view his work as transgressive is to similarly assume the stability of meaning; the writer "breaks the law" when his fiction "crosses the line." When Oleg in *Four* turns to his father in their sterile apartment and commands, дай мне сказки,⁴⁴ he makes the goals of such reading practices explicit. Oleg's body is inscribed within a system of values—heterosexual, professional, principled—that he has imagined for himself and that organizes his relationships with others. With the intrusion of the cloned round piglets he shows no further interest in pursuing women and begins selling what he earlier on principle refused to sell. Zinovy Zinik asks, "What is left of the human being in Sorokin's universe when he tries to divest himself of his collective ideological clothing?"⁴⁵ Of equal interest is why Sorokin's protagonists cling so tightly to this clothing, as Oleg does when he demands to have familiar stories to read. When confronted with the abject, the subject becomes unmoored, appropriated into the body of the text or faced with a clone that is neither self nor Other.

The regulating function of the abject, however, is not exclusively concerned with compromising stability. It can encourage critical engagement with seemingly irreconcilable reading and writing practices, forcing a process of negotiation that demands thinking through. To return to the opposition of self-referentiality and social engagement, we can consider how Sorokin negotiated his shift from "constantly trying to suppress the responsible citizen in me" to his claim that "now the citizen in me has come to life."⁴⁶ It is difficult to make claims upon the intention or biography of the writer, particularly when *Blue Lard* critiqued such practices (Сталин: «Есть интересные писатели?»—Хрущев: «Есть. Но нет интересных книг.»).⁴⁷ Given this, we might look to the fact that the

44 "Give me fairy tales."

45 Zinovy Zinik, 2009, "Step in Line: Vladimir Sorokin's Vision of *homo sovieticus*," *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 May, pp. 19–20; p. 20.

46 Martin Doerry and Matthias Schepp, 2007, "Die finstere Energie unseres Landes," *Der Spiegel*, 29 January, p. 106. Available in English as "Russia Is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire," transl. C. Sultan, 2 February 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,463860,00.html>, accessed 25 July 2012.

47 "Stalin: 'Are there any interesting writers?'—Khrushchev: 'Yes. But there are no inter-

author structured this shift as an opposition. Benjamin Buchloh points out that Judith Butler sets up a seemingly oppositional structure when she theorizes “heterosexuality as a principle that needs to position homosexuality in the abject in order to constitute itself.”⁴⁸ Creating this opposition is not Butler’s final aim; rather “one has to recognize there is a stake in her argument” as a means of processing what happens in-between, the “unconscious formation called homophobia, its origins and functions,” including its role in organizing social behaviour.⁴⁹ Buchloh emphasizes that, for Butler, the processes of “differentiation and identification” that emerge from positioning homosexuality against heterosexuality do not “take place within language or the semiotic system alone”: they play a role in “the enacting of homophobia, in the material reality of day-to-day social behavior.”⁵⁰

There is a stake in understanding Sorokin’s engagement with the abject as well. Rather than seek structural oppositions in Sorokin’s biography, we can look to two stories that share the title “Ochered” (“The Queue”). The first, written in 1983 and published in 1985, established Sorokin as a writer of note; the second was published in 2008 in the collection *Sakharnyi Kreml’* (*Sugar Kremlin*). Despite their shared title, the stories are not interchangeable clones, but reveal substantive differences that reflect developments in Sorokin’s literary method. The earlier story makes no mention of why people are lining up or what is being sold. This does not matter: the queue is Sorokin’s primary concern, particularly the language and activity of the people in it. In an afterword written especially for a 2008 reprint of this work, Sorokin describes the “ritual phrases” of the Soviet-era queue “like semiprecious stones polished by time.”⁵¹ Today’s young people, Sorokin has said, regard this culturally specific language, as it is captured in his early works, with a curiosity bordering on reverence.⁵² In the later story, the queue is “set in a clerical,

esting books.” Sorokin, 1999, p. 260.

48 Benjamin Buchloh in Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier & Helen Molesworth, 1994, “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the ‘Informe’ and the Abject,” *October* 67, pp. 3–21; p. 5.

49 Buchloh, 1994, p. 6.

50 Buchloh, 1994, p. 6.

51 Vladimir Sorokin, 2008, “Afterword,” *The Queue*, transl. S. Laird, New York, p. 259.

52 Sorokin discussed this topic at length during a talk on 30 April 2011 at the PEN American Center in New York. A video of his remarks is available at <http://www.pen>.

pious, authoritarian and xenophobic Russia,” with those in line waiting for a chance to get a coveted piece of “sugar Kremlin.”⁵³ Historical differences can account for the dissimilarity between the two stories. But the differences also cohere, in part, in Sorokin’s announced break with conceptualism.⁵⁴ Experiments with form often draw attention to form. But Sorokin’s post-conceptualist work, while creating an opposition between form and content that is likely not his exclusive intent, draws attention to the processes that mediate between form and content—just as the qualitative length of the village episodes in *Four* establishes Marina as a proxy for the reader before she is revealed as the abject mother—and lead toward discussions of what the more recent works achieve. The opposition of regulation and assimilation in *Blue Lard* likewise entails understanding the relationship that mediates between these two dynamics, and the political and social consequences of that relationship for the emergence of the subject. The abject does not force the transgression or acceptance of accepted norms, but puts into motion processes of regulation and assimilation, forcing a confrontation between them and the reader.

org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5682/prmID/1502, accessed 25 July 2012. His observations on the current nostalgia for language evocative of Soviet life can be heard at 21:36–23:11.

53 Zinik, 2009, p. 20.

54 Aleksandr Neverov, 2002, “Proshchai, kontseptualizm!,” *Itogi* 11, 28 March, p. 499.