

## From History as Language to the Language of History: Notes on *The Target*

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*'The Target' as historico-political comment on Russia in the 2010s*

THE American philosopher and literary theorist Fredrick Jameson once described utopia as a radical form of historicization of the present.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is obviously relevant for any utopia or anti-utopia, but it has a special significance when discussing *Mishen'* (*The Target*, 2011), a film by Aleksander Zel'dovich based on a script by Zel'dovich and Vladimir Sorokin and produced by Dmitrii Lesnevskii. The film problematizes the very historicization which serves as a basis for both utopian and anti-utopian imagination.

*The Target* was given a limited release in Moscow in September 2011. Before that, it was presented at international film festivals in Berlin and Moscow and won several prizes.<sup>2</sup> But the response to the film in Russian newspapers, electronic media and blogs was far from positive. The new film did not trigger any substantial analysis in the media: in rather superficial reviews, it was either heavily criticized or—more rarely—uncomprehendingly praised.

The scriptwriters were reproached for letting the action drag out (the film is almost three hours long), for constructing an illogical sequence of

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1 Fredric Jameson, 1982, "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?," *Science Fiction Studies* 9 (2), pp. 147–58.

2 The Russian *Belyi Slon* ("White Elephant") award, which is conferred by the Russian Guild of Film Critics, in the nominations "Best cameraman" (Aleksandr Il'khovskii), "Best production design" (Iurii Kharikov, Vladimir Rodimov) and "Best soundtrack" (Leonid Desiatnikov).

events, which cannot be comprehended by the audience, and, finally, for relating to their work too rationally: Впечатляющий, но все-таки проект—важного, фундаментального, очень своевременного произведения, по каким-то наверняка уважительным причинам оставшегося на стадии чертежей—as the well-known critic Roman Volobuev wrote (Stanislav Zel'venskii and Anton Dolin expressed broadly similar views in their reviews of *The Target*).<sup>3</sup>

In the more favourable reviews, the film's appeal rested with its large scale and the social significance of the problems touched upon—but almost nobody attempted to analyse it in detail. Most of the critics arrived at nothing more than general statements, such as:

«Мишень»—фильм, от которого нельзя просто отмахнуться, что в российском кино случается примерно раз в пятилетку; большая, важная работа. Ее интересно рассматривать—все два с половиной часа. В нее вложено много остроумия, таланта и на редкость трезвого взгляда на вещи, о которых в нашей стране принято говорить обтекаемо и с подвываниями.<sup>4</sup>

Film critics pointed out that the film focuses on many themes, which some regarded as a merit and others as a shortcoming:

Мишень работает примерно как хороший толстый роман—стремится рассказать обо всём сразу.<sup>5</sup> Футуристический прогноз в

3 “This project is impressive, but it is still a project—the project of an important, fundamental and very timely work, which for some no doubt honourable reasons remained in the draft stage.” Roman Volobuev, 2011, “Mishen' Aleksandra Zel'dovicha na Berlinskom festival: sniatsia li Andropovym elektroovtsy,” *Afisha*, 13 February, <http://www.afisha.ru/article/8631/>, accessed 11 September 2012. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

4 “*The Target* is a movie which simply cannot be ignored; something which happens in Russian cinema approximately once every five years; it is a big and important work. It is interesting to scrutinize—for the whole two and a half hours. It displays a great deal of wit and talent, and an unusually sober view of issues about which people in Russia usually talk vaguely and whine.” Stanislav Zel'venskii, 2011, “Mishen': antiutopiia po stsenarii Sorokina,” *Afisha*, 20 June, <http://www.afisha.ru/personal-page/191661/review/379830/>, accessed 11 September 2012.

5 “*The Target* functions rather like a good thick novel—it tries to tell everything all at once.” Sergei Mesenov, 2011, “Mishen',” *NewsLab.ru*, 4 July, <http://www.newsLab.ru/review/390763>, accessed 11 September 2012.

молоко... [...] не единственный недостаток картины, в которую автор, по обыкновению многих российских режиссеров, решил вложить все и сразу. И про политическую ситуацию рассказать, и про любовь, и про вечную мучительную мечту о бессмертии и о самой смерти.<sup>6</sup>

Paradoxically, critics recognize the film as a major endeavour, or, at least, as highly ambitious, but they have difficulties in defining its main idea.

Another telling point in the reception of the film is the almost demonstrative refusal by the critics to discuss its political connotations, although it is clearly a satirical depiction of the contemporary Russia's "upper class." According to Vladimir Sorokin, the society represented in the film is a kind of visualized dream of Russia's political elites.<sup>7</sup> The film was shown in cinemas in the autumn of 2011, a period of rapid politicization of Russian society or, at least, of the country's largest cities. This politicization found form in the mass demonstrations that ran from December 2011 to May 2012. The critics' reluctance to comment on the film's dissenting political views—such comments appeared not only in the media, but also in blogs—deserves further attention.

My own interpretation of the film, which constitutes the basis of this article, runs as follows: *The Target* portrays Russian society in the imminent future, e.g. in the year 2020, or, more exactly, contemporary society slightly masked as a future one; it is a society that is radically alienated from the historical process. The film's protagonists, being unaware of their situation, try to break out of this unhistorical state, but they have no psychological resources to help them live within history. In such a society, the historical process has nothing to which to return, there is no psychological and social room for it.

6 "A futurological prognosis which fails to hit the mark is not the movie's only shortcoming. Its director, like many of his Russian colleagues, decided to cover everything and all at once. The political situation, love, the eternal and distressing dream of immortality, and death itself." Mariia Kuvshinova, 2011, "Antiutopiia o poiskakh vechnoi molodosti: liubopytnaia, no slishkom dlinnaia i mnogoslownaia kartina pro Rossiju-2020," *Film.ru*, 29 June, <http://www.film.ru/article.asp?id=6522>, accessed 11 September 2012.

7 Vitalii Nuriev, 2011, "Podmorozhennaia Rossiia: Vladimir Sorokin o fil'me Aleksandra Zel'dovicha 'Mishen'" (an interview), *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 5 July 2011, [http://www.ng.ru/cinematograph/2011-07-05/7\\_mishen.html](http://www.ng.ru/cinematograph/2011-07-05/7_mishen.html), accessed 11 September 2012.

Such a concept of history is, as I will show, rather new for Vladimir Sorokin. Moreover, this deplorable diagnosis relates to some very painful aspects of the self-consciousness of contemporary Russian society. The social context of the winter of 2011 produced a new social optimism, and earlier pessimistic expectations suddenly seemed irrelevant and outdated. That is probably why the critics hesitated to discuss the political meaning of *The Target*. Both the novelty of the interpretation of history and its repression in criticism inspired me to look more attentively at the forms of historicization of the present situation in this film.

The semantic focus of the movie, which brings to the fore the motif of the impossible return of history, is the image of the *Target* itself. To explain its meanings we need briefly to comment on the plot.

*The plot of the film and its social and political parallels in the present*

The action in the film takes place in the 2020s. The protagonists are well-established, rich and well-respected. Viktor, Russian minister of natural resources (Maksim Sukhanov), sees himself as a brilliant example of a high-flyer; he is interviewed by a journalist, who is a representative of the media of the new superpower, China, and who wishes to write Viktor's biography. Viktor eats only healthy food, always looks after himself and uses fantastical technical devices—e.g., the glasses which are in fact a device that shows the precise correlation between good and evil in each focalized object (a thing or a human being). However, Viktor's wife, Zoia (Justine Waddell), as well-groomed as her husband, considers her life pointless despite the family's wealth.

The spouses learn that far away, in the Altai mountains, there is a "Target"—a scientific and technical facility built in the Soviet era to collect cosmic elementary particles. A person who spends only one night inside the Target will attain eternal or, at least, long-lasting youth, and will regain meaningfulness in his/her life. The spouses decide to make for the Target. They are accompanied by Nikolai (Vitalii Kishchenko), a customs officer and amateur sportsman, whose acquaintance Zoia first makes at the hippodrome, and by Mitia (Daniil Kozlovskii), Zoia's brother, a cheeky TV host, who comments on the races in which Nikolai competes as a jockey on TV.

After a long and difficult journey (by plane, helicopter and minibus), they all reach a half-deserted village located near the Target. The vil-

lage's inhabitants make a fortune out of this profitable neighbourhood: both the accommodation and meals cost an outrageous amount of money. In the only canteen in the village, they are waited on by Taia (Nina Loshchinina), a woman who looks 20, although she claims that she is 52—she spent a night in the Target when she was 19. They also meet another tourist from Moscow, Anna, an anchorwoman who provides the voice for a Chinese-language radio course. She has come there for the same purpose, and Mitia confesses that he fell in love with her voice long ago (00:25:01).

The Target is a huge (at least 1 km across) disk, covered with small metal plates; it is embedded in the soil of a mountain hollow. There is an aperture in the centre, which one must enter in order to experience rebirth. Here, the protagonists find a bottomless well and a concrete cell around it where they spend one night. The appearance of these people leaning on one another, their scared and irritated mood, a twilight, the whole atmosphere of mystery and unpredictability (0:37:59)—all this has obvious associations with Andrei Tarkovskii's film *Stalker* (1979) (the scene at the threshold of the room where dreams are fulfilled, 2:14:01); these associations are apparently induced by the authors' script.

In the morning, the protagonists resurface, and on their way back to Moscow they pick up Taia. They build strange relationships with her—not just adopting the “barbarian” girl, casting themselves as a collective Professor Doolittle, but also taking her with them as a talisman, evidence of the effectiveness of the Target. Soon it becomes clear that the Target has influenced the protagonists much more significantly than they had expected. They stop feeling shy—or, at least, they are no longer able to suppress their hatred towards the social conventions that they have come to find loathsome.

We need to mention that social and political life in the Russia of the film is a total *simulacrum*, presented in full accordance with the ideas contained in the text by the famous Russian sociologist Boris Dubin, “Simuliativnaia vlast' i tseremonial'naia politika” (“Simulative Power and Ceremonial Politics,” 2006), which analyses the features of contemporary Russian political culture:

Общезначимое (интегративно-символическое) [для российских граждан 2000-х] не соотносится с реальной повседневностью

и в этом смысловом контексте, можно сказать, не обладает «реальностью», тогда как реально происходящее все больше отделяется от области общих смыслов, т.е. как бы не имеет универсальной значимости. Символическая принадлежность к виртуальному «мы» в подобных ситуациях (телевидение, которому большинство россиян отдают практически все свободное время, не столько задает подобную позицию, сколько ее технически объективирует и регулярно поддерживает) не влечет за собой практическую включенность в повседневное взаимодействие и реальную связь с каким бы то ни было другим, с обобщенным Другим. [...] симулятивным языком публичной политики выступает язык «всех», монополизированный правящей верхушкой в собственных интересах сохранения власти, а его обратная сторона—агрессия по адресу любого, кто от подобного «большинства» отклоняется. [...] На данной [...] фазе [развития общества] обеспечение «общего» взяли на себя менеджеры масс-медиа, пиарщики и консультанты [...]<sup>8</sup>

The protagonists of *The Target* are oppressed not only by the social conventions of everyday life, but also by the necessity of taking part in the cynical rituals of political PR. For example, Mitia moderates a cooking-political TV show, where a supporter of the welfare state faces off against a conservative proponent of “ecological democracy.” They do not really argue but simply perform their political roles: answering

8 “[For Russian citizens in the 2000s] the generally valid (i.e. integrative and symbolic) does not correlate with real everyday life, and, in this semantic context, it could be said that it does not possess any ‘reality.’ Meanwhile, real events become more and more dissociated from the sphere of common meanings, that is to say, they are perceived as if they have no universal significance. In such situations the symbolic belonging to a virtual ‘us’ (television, to which the majority of Russian society devote all their spare time, not so much defines such a position as technically objectifies and continuously maintains it) does not in practical terms include people in everyday interaction with each other, and does not produce real ties with any kind of Other. [...] the ‘common’ language (of ‘everybody’), which is monopolized by the ruling class in order to maintain power, serves as the simulative language of public policy; aggression towards anybody who deviates from this ‘majority’ is the reverse side of such language. [...] At this [...] stage [in the development of society], the mass media, PR managers and consultants have monopolized the ‘generally valid’[...]” Boris Dubin, 2006, “Simuliativnaia vlast’ i tseremonial’naia politika: o politicheskoi kul’ture sovremennoi Rossii,” *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia* 1 (81), pp. 14–25; pp. 17–18.

Mitia's question of what freedom means for them, they unanimously proclaim: Свобода—это осознанная необходимость... того, что хочет государство.<sup>9</sup> According to Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu, such a transformation of world views in *simulacra* is specific to contemporary media representations of public policy in general,<sup>10</sup> but the plot of Sorokin and Zel'dovich's film directly associates the imitating of "public policy" with the situation in contemporary Russia. This can be seen in the fact that Daniil Kozlovskii, who plays Mitia, is an obvious parody of Andrei Malakhov, one of the most popular TV hosts in present-day Russia; and Aleksandr Zel'dovich has said in one of his interviews that Kozlovskii did this in accordance with the director's instructions.<sup>11</sup> In his TV show, with a skittish intonation Mitia quotes Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's *Vospominaniia* (*Hope against Hope*, 1970): Почему ты думаешь, что ты должна быть счастливой?<sup>12</sup>—as if ignoring the dark meaning of the quoted words. I agree with the implicit assumption of the authors of *The Target*: the degree of *imitativeness* of the public sphere in Russian TV representations is generally higher than in TV programmes broadcast in Western European countries.<sup>13</sup> All the scenes from everyday life which are inserted into the plot of *The Target*—meetings at work, public presentations or family holidays—are shown as more or less formal or hypocritical (with few significant exclusions). This mode of presentation should be understood on the basis of the Russian audience's background knowledge of the "public imitativeness" described by Dubin.

Total corruption is another important element of the social context. The customs officer Nikolai is regularly bribed by Chinese truckers crossing European Russia on the ultra-modern Guangzhou–Paris highway (this fictional highway is also mentioned in Vladimir Sorokin's novel *Den' oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006)), and arrests illegal Chinese migrant workers, whose masters have to buy them off from Nikolai. In

9 "Freedom is the consciousness of necessity... of what the state wants!" (2.11.11–2.11.31).

10 Jean Baudrillard, 1991, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu*, Paris; Pierre Bourdieu, 1996, *Sur la télévision*, Montréal.

11 Aleksandr Nechaev, 2011, "Rezhisser Aleksandr Zel'dovich: 'Doidem do Mishe-ni—kupim sebe schast'e?'," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 1 July, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/25712/912156/>, accessed 11 September 2012.

12 "'Why do you think you ought to be happy?'" Nadezhda Mandelstam, 1989, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, transl. M. Hayward, London, p. 56.

13 Cf., for example, Vera Zvereva, 2012, "Nastoiashchaia zhizn' v televizore: issledovaniia sovremennoi mediakul'tury, Moscow.

the scene depicting the “migrant hunting,” Russian officers tear across the steppe on motorbikes and throw nets shot from special handguns over the running men as if they are wild animals (1:14:57). The music accompanying this scene was written by Leonid Desiatnikov and refers to Richard Wagner’s *Walkürenritt* (*Ride of the Valkyries*, 1851/1854–56). The music, as well as the ethnical divergence of the characters—Europeans catch people with an Asian appearance—makes this scene an extended allusion to the “neo-colonialist” episode of the American helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village in Francis F. Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a scene also accompanied by *Walkürenritt*.

During a visit to the Bol’shoi Theatre, Taia tells the group that, thirty years before (i.e. in 1990), she had promised her boyfriend, who had also gone through the Target, to leave him for thirty years and meet him again in Moscow near the Bol’shoi Theatre. They separated “in order to become estranged from one another” and to recover their mutual attraction. Now she actually meets her boyfriend (Oleg Jagodin) at the promised time and in the promised place and disappears with him, vanishing from the rest of the story (1:44:54).

Upon their return, the protagonists begin to rebel against their seemingly unproblematic social status. Zoia and Nikolai become involved in a love affair, in what is the first of numerous allusions to the plot of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1873–77/78): Anna, the wife of a high-ranking official, falls in love with an officer competing in the races (unlike Tolstoy’s protagonists, Zoia and Nikolai date almost overtly). During the recording of his cooking programme, Mitia produces a monstrous performance: after their call “for new blood in Russian politics,” he invites his guests to taste his blood from huge goblets (a brutal materialization of metaphor – one of Sorokin’s most characteristic devices). This causes the TV authorities to expel Mitia from Moscow with few hours’ notice—and after asking his beloved Anna to wait for him for two decades and to meet him in front of the Bol’shoi Theatre, Mitia vanishes. While opening his ministry’s stand at an international exhibition, Viktor delivers a speech with a strange beginning and a politically dangerous continuation: at first, he suggests that only mineral products that contain (ethical) good and truth should be recovered—evidently, as seen through his electronic glasses—and then, answering a baffled journalist’s question about the meaning of “good mineral resources,” he goes on to expose the corrupt chains in his



“own” sphere (1:54:03–1:56:18). This scene refers to a problem which is very painful for contemporary Russia—corruption in oil and gas mining and transportation. Nikolai is insulted by a young but powerful Chinese Mafioso (maybe the son of a high-ranking bureaucrat or a gangster boss) and kills him. After this Nikolai has to leave Russia in a truck heading to the West (1:50:17; however, he makes a short stop in Moscow).

Viktor organizes a party for beggars, who are invited to his villa from the whole neighbourhood. At this party a group of homeless men rape Zoia, the government officer, who is sent to stop this strange “breach of order,” deals Viktor a fatal blow with a piece of metal pipe, and Viktor dies in his wife’s arms—reconciled with the world and spiritually enlightened. Despite its baroque artistic splendour, the “beggars’ ball” scene seemed absurd to some critics—they considered it to be unjustified. Nobody has noticed that the events in this scene are very precisely prefigured at the beginning of the film: the sexually unsatisfied wife Zoia tells Viktor a dream where she is raped by several men. After having sex with her Viktor says that he would be happy if she fell in love with him if he were a beggar, and could have died peacefully. But the protagonists do not remember these predictions when they become reality.

After Viktor’s death Zoia commits suicide, throwing herself from a bridge under a train, the last allusion to *Anna Karenina*. The film ends with an episode where calm Anna is looking at the Target from the mountain: she has replaced Taia in her job in the village canteen. She is probably hiding from Mitia’s enemies and waiting for him in the same way Taia had been waiting for her boyfriend. In this film, as the only person who ends up safe, Anna becomes the surprising counterpart of Tolstoy’s Levin.

Sorokin and Zel’dovich show a revolt in the work of political and media elites—a transformation which became a central topic of political discussions only during late spring 2012. Such a revolt is presented as a *failure*. Maybe after the mass protests which started in December 2011, Sorokin and Zel’dovich would have depicted such a revolt in another way, but the reasons that seemed important to the authors in 2005, when the script of this film was written, are worth further study.

The protagonists do not know exactly for which concrete purposes they are rebelling against social conventions. The Target has obviously inspired in them a yearning for a new experience of life and for fulfilment “here and now,” but has not helped them to clarify the meaning of their existence.

Why does this clarification remain impossible for all of them? Zel'dovich answered this question in one of his interviews when he said that the slogan of the film could be the phrase Бог—не супермаркет! (“God is not a supermarket!”<sup>14</sup>). The protagonists make use of a miracle as if it were an expensive medical service. The film begins with a telling allusion: Viktor is going to work by car and performing a long soliloquy about what he is doing to preserve his health: for example, he does not drink any stimulant beverages, not even green tea—only warm and filtered water. This scene is an unfolding allusion to the famous beginning of Mary Harron’s film version of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (2000), where the main protagonist, who is later recognized as a cold serial killer, is attending to his morning toilet and speaking at the same time about his preferences in men’s cosmetics.

Yet the interpretation provided by Zel'dovich in his interview remains insufficient: we still do not know why an object built in the Soviet era, an era which has been constantly criticized by Sorokin in previous interviews, now becomes a place of rebirth for the protagonists. In the following analysis of the film’s cultural traditions and contexts, I consider it to be of great importance that this place of rebirth was built in the Soviet era, and that there is a large chronological distance between the construction of the object and the action in the film.

*Autocontexts: Another “Target” by Sorokin*

The critic Mikhail Osokin, in an otherwise rather superficial article on the film *The Target*, noticed an important fact: the film has the same title as a short story written by Sorokin *in the same year as the script*, but with a totally different plot.<sup>15</sup> Aleksandr Zel'dovich commented on this coincidence in the following way:

[...] название пришло не из рассказа—это технический термин. Причем, когда мы [с Сорокиным] начали писать сценарий, мишени тоже не было и в помине. Были персонажи, и было ощу-

14 Valerii Kichin, 2009, “Kogda vremia techet vspiat’: Aleksandr Zel’dovich i Vladimir Sorokin zakanchivaiut fantasticheskii fil’m,” *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 15 July, <http://www.rg.ru/2009/07/15/zeldovitch.html>, accessed 27 January 2013.

15 Mikhail Osokin, 2011, “Misheni Vladimira Sorokina,” *Polit.ru*, 27 June, <http://www.polit.ru/article/2011/06/27/targets/>, accessed 11 September 2012.

щение, что все они должны куда-то поехать. И там должно быть Нечто. И это Нечто должно с ними что-то сделать. Мы стали думать, что это, собственно, может быть. И в итоге возникла Мишень.<sup>16</sup>

Neither Osokin nor Zel'dovich mentions two aspects of this short story: it is dedicated to the film director Ivan Dykhovichnyi, who had previously made a film based on Sorokin's script *Kopeika* (*Kopeck*, 2001); and in 2010 this story was included in Sorokin's collection *Monoklon*. Both aspects are substantial. The dedication to Dykhovichnyi points to the connection of this short story with the cinematographic context. The *Monoklon* collection consists of texts (short stories and a play) previously published in mass media or on the Internet and chosen for this book on the basis of two criteria: the works included in this book demonstrate the ways in which the Soviet past invades post-Soviet "peaceful" life, providing evidence of its traumatic "erosion," or, less often, this past reveals a catastrophic background without any connection to the present day. The short story "The Target," which in the *Monoklon* collection has another title—"Putem krysy" ("The Way of a Rat"<sup>17</sup>)—belongs to that second category.<sup>18</sup>

The action in the story takes place in 1949. The main character, Goshka Sinaev, alias Skeleton, is a teenager whose father returns with a hip wound,<sup>19</sup> and commits suicide by throwing himself into the fireplace.

16 "[...] the title did not come from the short story—it's a technical term. When we [Zel'dovich and Sorokin] began work on the script, there was no target at all. There were protagonists, and there was a feeling that they should all go somewhere. And in that Somewhere there should be Something. And this Something should do something with them. We started thinking about what this Something could be. And the result was *The Target*." Valerii Kichin, 2011, "Sekrety ikh molodosti [Interview with Aleksandr Zel'dovich]," Rossiiskaia gazeta, 23 June, <http://www.rg.ru/2011/06/23/mishen—site.html>, accessed 11 September 2012.

17 With obvious reference to Vladislav Khodasevich's short poem "Putem zerna" ("The Way of All Grass," 1917), also based on the plot of rebirth.

18 If this interpretation is plausible, the key to the collection is the short story "Kukhniia" ("A Kitchen"). Unlike Sorokin's other stories, this text has no plot, but describes—in a cool way and in detail, in an Alain Robbe-Grillet style—the typical Soviet kitchen of the 1970s. It ends with the conclusion that on the opposite side of the yard, there is an identical house with an identical kitchen, and a boy standing in the window of one of these kitchens sees "us"—i.e. the narrator and reader, who are both localized in the Soviet era and in the present day at the same time.

19 The Russian blogger donor\_darom (see <http://organ-bank.livejournal.com/249025.html>, 11 September 2012) noted that this fragment contains a reference to the Book

This is an allusion to Empedocles of Agrigentum, who threw himself into the crater of Mt Etna. The father leaves behind a note with a single word on it: отбойхромой! (lightsoutthelame!). A “volcanic” motif can also be found in the film: since his childhood, Viktor has dreamt of becoming a volcanologist, and has received the appropriate education.

Gosha has a dream in which he tries in vain to save his father from suicide, and wakes up feeling gloomy. One day after school, he meets three of his classmates, young hooligans who are catching rats in order to burn them on a fire. He exchanges a rat for a glass ball, and his rat guides him along the way but then disappears into the bushes. Gosha finds himself in a glade where beggars are eating (cf. the “beggars’ ball” in the film). They share with him their meal, which consists of scraps picked up somewhere. The beggars insist that Gosha eat a piece of refined sugar, and, when he attempts to do so, a thunderstorm begins and the boy sees his dead father, but then immediately understands that it is not his father but a shooting mark, a Target (*mishen*). It has a hole in its chest (which means it has no heart). Gosha puts his hand into the hole and cries to the shooting mark’s “face”: “lightsoutthelame!”

Sorokin’s film script unites two motifs from the story: Sinaev, who throws himself into the fireplace, returns forever (on a symbolic level) to the womb (highlighted in the description of Gosha’s dream) and, in the end, an inanimate shooting mark is mistaken for the resurrected Sinaev Sr. In the script, a technological (and inanimate) object is called мишень (Target), and the protagonists enter its chamber through a small hole as if they were going through the birth canal into the uterus—not a living one but one made of reinforced concrete. This transitional stage in their journey is analogous to the so-called *rite de passage*, when a person enters the womb and is born for a second time, as described in the works of Vladimir Propp (*The Historical Roots of the Magic Tale*, 1946).<sup>20</sup>

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of Genesis [Be-reshit]: the main protagonist’s father was wounded in the hip and his tendon was cut—just as Biblical Jacob was wounded in his fight with an Angel (Gen 32, 24–32). However, the blogger did not mention that the family name of the protagonist, Sinaev, is also “Biblical”—it is derived from the name of Mount Sinai; similar names were often given to students of Russian Orthodox seminaries.

20 Vladimir Propp, 1998, *Sobranie trudov 2* (Morfologija “volshebnoi” skazki: istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki), eds. E. Meletinskii, A. Rafeeva & I. Peshkov, Moscow, p. 427.

There is an infinitely deep well in that “uterus.” I suppose that this image may refer to Thomas Mann’s novel *Joseph und seine Brüder* (*Joseph and his Brothers*, 1943):

Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit. Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?

Dies nämlich dann sogar und vielleicht eben dann, wenn nur und allein das Menschenwesen es ist, dessen Vergangenheit in Rede und Frage steht: dies Rätselwesen, das unser eigenes natürlich-lusthaftes und übernatürlich-elendes Dasein in sich schließt und dessen Geheimnis sehr begreiflicherweise das A und das O all unseres Redens und Fragens bildet [...].<sup>21</sup>

The short story and the script have two coinciding motifs: the first one is the vague role of the past which returns to the present: in the short story the unsettled soul of the father becomes a messenger from the past, and in the script the Target has the function of a comparable messenger. The second motif is the indication of a cosmic or transcendental level in the events. For Sorokin, a past which makes no exact reference to the present may be similar to irrational forces, both cosmic and hidden in the depth of the human psyche.

### *Hochzeitsreise*

This theatre play was written by Sorokin in 1994–95. One of its characters, a former psychiatrist called Mark who emigrated from the USSR to West Germany (later a protagonist with the same name and occupation appears in Sorokin’s script of the film *Moskva* (*Moscow*, 1997)), delivers a monologue:

Я об одном жалею. [...] Что я не состоялся в Германии как психиатр. Маша, какой здесь материал! После русских шизоидов, которыми я объелся, которыми я сыт по горло,—немецкие невротики! Это... как устрицы после борща! Здесь все пропитано неврозом—политика, искусство, спорт. Это разлито в воздухе, на площадях, в университетах, в пивных...<sup>22</sup>

21 Thomas Mann, 2005, *Joseph und seine Brüder*, Frankfurt/M., p. 9.

22 “I have only one regret. [...] That I didn’t establish myself as a psychiatrist in Germany.

Discussing this play, Mikhail Ryklin interpreted “borshch” as a metaphor for Russia and at the same time as a metaphor for the irrational, “spiritualist-medium-like” artistic method of early Sorokin, and “oysters” as a metaphor for Western Europe, and at the same time as an embodied principle of personal planning.<sup>23</sup> The philosopher supposed that Sorokin’s plots in the 1990s (his article was written before *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999)) gradually became more rational and manageable, in the spirit of Western literature, and that this transformation threatened to eliminate the unpredictability and suggestibility that had earlier been characteristic of the writer’s works. Ryklin continues with culinary metaphors: Устрицы угрожают борщу, хрустальный поросенок — холодцу.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Target* Sorokin (who obviously read Ryklin’s article before writing his script<sup>25</sup>) picks up and even reinforces this interpretation: in his cooking programme Mitiia invites a female tennis star living mostly outside of Russia to cook borshch, and a deputy of the Russian State Duma (parliament) to cook the cosmopolitan lobster soufflé. After the cooking he mixes both meals together in a big bath, despite the perplexity and discontent of his guests, and declares that the future of Russia will be based on the mixture of autochthonous and Western cultural traditions. It is evident that the mixture is inedible or at least very unappealing.

“Borshch and lobster soufflé” is a clear self-citation. But there are deeper and more important parallels between the film and the play. The play is the story of a sadomasochistic erotic relationship between a Jewish Moscow intellectual called Masha Rubinstein, a daughter of a Stalinist investigator, Rosa Gal’perina, and a German, Günther von Nebeldorf, the

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Masha, what material I could find here! I’ve gorged on Russian schizoids, I’m fed up to the back teeth with them—imagine replacing them with German neurotics! It’s like... eating oysters after borshch! Everything—politics, art, sport—is saturated with neurosis here! It is diffused in the air, in squares, universities, pubs...” Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, “Hochzeitsreise,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, Moscow, p. 618.

23 Mikhail Ryklin, 1999, “Borshch posle ustrits (Archeologia viny v ‘Hochzeitreise’ V. Sorokina),” *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 179–86.

24 “The oysters threaten borshch, the crystal pig kholodets [jellied minced meat]” Ryklin, 1999, p. 186.

25 The main ideas in this article were taken from Ryklin’s essay “Medium i avtor” published as an afterword to the two-volume collection of Sorokin’s selected works (see Mikhail Ryklin, 1998, “Medium i avtor,” in Vladimir Sorokin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, pp. 737–51).

son of an SS officer. Günther insists that Masha whip him, punishing him for the guilt of his father in relation to the Jews. According to Mark the psychiatrist's plan, to heal von Nebeldorf's sexual complexes, Masha has to don the uniform of an НКВД (Soviet secret police) officer, Günther has to don the uniform of an SS officer, and then they have sexual intercourse in these clothes in a place formerly occupied by Hitler's residence (the Berghof Castle on the Obersalzberg Mountain). This is also where, long ago, Günther's father committed suicide. This plan works but only temporarily—after a catastrophic incident,<sup>26</sup> Nebeldorf the younger is again incapable of having “normal” sex. On a deeper level, however, the reason for Günther's return to masochistic neurosis is his desire to come back to his patrimonial traditions in a non-critical way. Just after the temporary healing, a young aristocrat tells Masha that they have to marry in the patrimonial chapel of the Nebeldorf family, where, in keeping with an old custom, a bridegroom must pronounce: *Свяжи свою жизнь с Туманом* (“Tie yourself with Fog!”), and the bride shall answer: *Твой дом не будет пуст!* (“Your house will not be empty!”).<sup>27</sup> On the way to the chapel, the protagonists are involved in a car accident.

The play has a surrealist ending. Two couples in wedding suits and dresses come up on stage: Günther and Masha, and the two torturers from the totalitarian past: von Nebeldorf, the elder, and Rosa Gal'perina. Mysterious creatures “without any signs of gender” proclaim: “Tie yourself with Fog!” and all four protagonists reply: “Your house will not be empty!”

This parable play has a fairly clear meaning. It is impossible to free oneself from the traumatic past only with the aid of psychoanalytic “acting out”—this is the way Mark proposes. Every descendant of a totalitarian past must understand the correlation between himself or herself and

26 Günther, who asks Masha to call him “marble” due to his sexual coldness, collides on the road with a truck with the inscription “Rosa Absatz and Fabian Haken. The marble pigs.” Rosa was the name of Masha's mother, and one of the meanings of the German word “der Absatz” is “a heel” (during the interrogations, Rosa crushed the genitals of men under investigation with her high heel—it is known that female НКВД investigators tortured people in this way, a technique that is mentioned in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *GULAG Archipelago*). Fabian was the name of Günther's father; “der Haken” means “a hook”; an SS officer hanged anti-Nazi partisans on an iron hook.

27 The protagonist's name—Nebeldorf—in a literal translation from the German means “a village of fog” or “a foggy village.” Its genesis is explained in the family legend which Günther tells Masha (see Sorokin, 1998, “Hochzeitsreise,” pp. 627–28).

this past, so as to make his or her biography part of a steady, uninterrupted, continuous history, based on permanent analysis of the connection with previous generations. But Günther cannot understand this type of connection (that is why he tries to return uncritically to the pre-Nazi traditions of his family), and Masha does not want to understand it, as she does not feel guilty for her mother (the psychological difference between how the two protagonists see their parents' guilt is explicitly analysed in Ryklin's article).

The castle built on the ruins of Hitler's Berghof, where the protagonists are taking drugs and having sex, has a similar function to the Target; it is the locus of a magic transformation. But the Target is the most literal image of rebirth in all of Sorokin's works.

#### *The "Chinese" cycle*

*The Target* is part of Sorokin's futurologist cycle; the main feature of the works that belong to this cycle is the depiction of a Sinocentric world. In this imagined reality, China is the international leader, with influence comparable to that of the US in the second half of the twentieth century: there are numerous acquisitions from Chinese in Sorokin's Russian language; China is the place where technological trends, culinary fashion and communicative styles originate, etc. *Blue Lard* may be considered the first representative novel of this cycle. It was followed by a short story, "Конкретные" ("The Concrete Ones" from the collection *Pir (The Feast, 2000)*), which obviously was split off from this novel, the novel *Day of the Oprichnik* and the short story collection *Sakharnyi Kreml'* (*Sugar Kremlin, 2008*).

The texts in this cycle represent a bright example of the evolution of China's image in Sorokin's works in the late 1990s and 2000s. In *Blue Lard* and "The Concrete Ones" this country is represented as a technocratic utopia, although depicted ironically. In *Day of the Oprichnik* Russia is portrayed as an economic dependent of China; it is a transport adjunct of its eastern neighbour, and Russian members of the *siloviki* (the military and the law-enforcement agencies) are constantly demanding bribes from Chinese businessmen. There is also a hint of the repressive nature of the Chinese political regime: the narrator of *Day of the Oprichnik*, the oprichnik Komiaga, mentions that in China he would be sentenced to death for practising fish "injections," which have a narcotic effect.



This shift could easily be explained as a move from representation of one media myth to another. In the late 1990s economists and political analysts from different countries forecast that China would be the superpower of the twenty-first century.<sup>28</sup> In the 2000s, Russian opposition media developed the idea that, by exporting oil to China, Russia would become its raw material adjunct and, moreover, Russia would become dependent on its neighbour. In other words, China in Sorokin's works of the 2000s resembles not an imaginary future, but contemporary scenarios that have not yet come true to the extent that Sorokin predicts.

The script of the film was written before *Day of the Oprichnik*, but the film itself was released after the novel's publication. In *The Target*, the image of China is even more controversial: China is still a leader in technology (some episodes of the most fantastic urban views were shot in Shanghai), but it is at the same time a country which is connected to Russia through transnational crime and serves as a provider of illegal migrant workers. So it could be described as a functional equivalent of contemporary Tajikistan for Russia. The elites represented in the film are dependent on China, but their consciousness is both colonialist and full of disdain towards any "plebeians." In the episode of "hunting for illegal immigrants," Nikolai allows Zoia to shoot a handgun that throws a net over the people who are running away. She shoots with pleasure and then immediately wants to have sex with Nikolai; they copulate in the tractor trailer that transports bound immigrants, without feeling any unease, as if surrounded by animals. Just before this hunting episode, there is a scene where Viktor opens a secret underground factory which uses milled Runius—a rare and very expensive imagined metal. When he is shown three tiny bars of Runius, he snatches them and responds with irony to a question from the astonished laboratory supervisor: «Виктор Петрович... а как я отчитаюсь?» with «Передо мной уже

28 Conservative Russian analysts and journalists argued that this would be possible because China had started to reform its socialist system in the "right" way, i.e. without ideological change. They implied that in the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev had attempted to implement ideological reform which had had bad consequences, but, had he not chosen that way but instead reformed only the Soviet economy, the USSR could have been where China is today. Conservatives persistently "forget," however, that the oil dependence of the Soviet/Russian economy, which fundamentally distinguishes it from the Chinese situation, did not begin in the post-Soviet period but during the Soviet epoch itself—after the worldwide rise in oil prices in 1973 (see Archie Brown, 2009, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, New York, p. 415).

отчитался»<sup>29</sup> (1:08:35). The protagonists treat people around them both as colonizers (towards the conquered population) and as serf-owners (towards their own peasants as well as to those belonging to someone else, cf. the Chinese illegals).

*The transformation of history in Sorokin's works*

In the early period of Sorokin's literary career, *history* was represented in his works above all as a simulacrum, a totalitarian myth generated by Socialist Realist discourses. Thus, the collection-collage *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83) includes a short story cycle in which all the texts are based on the same technique: the literal implementation of a metaphor which serves as the ideological dominant of a Soviet song or a slogan. Mockeries of metaphorical clichés from the “Stalinist,” Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras coexist here in a “peaceful neighbourhood.” There seems to be only one exception: the anti-totalitarian short story “Padezh” (“Cattle Plague”). It is included in the collection as the work of an unknown author written in 1948—the year when Orwell wrote the novel *1984*. It is significant that the protagonists of *The Norm*, who find the manuscript of this short story, immediately try to forget it because they regard it as a nightmare.

History as *reality* does not appear in Sorokin's works until the post-Soviet period, and first in the texts of the “German” cycle—*Mesiats v Dachau* (*A Month in Dachau*, 1990) and especially in *Hochzeitsreise*. And this reality is obviously traumatic.

Mikhail Ryklin tried to explain this transition in his articles from 1997–98: he suggested that it occurred when Sorokin's “mediumistic” and postmodernist authorship was replaced by a “common,” modernist, rationally planning one. I suggest that another observation is equally relevant: Sorokin's early works (written in the Soviet period) are based on a logical structuring of narrative time, the post-Soviet works on a mimetic one.

The logical structuring of narrative time means that time is an epiphenomenon originating from a sequence of transformations of discourse from authoritative and non-problematic to “wild” and aggressive. In some ways, Sorokin's early works are deprived of time, and their events are simultaneous. The mimetic structuring means that, in the post-Soviet texts, the narrative time in some way corresponds to extra-textual time.

29 “But how will I report for that?,” “You have already reported to me!”

In the first period, Sorokin organized his works as a destruction or as an explicit transformation of a normative authoritative discourse—the Socialist Realist one, the discourse of Russian classical literature of the nineteenth century, the discourse of European classics or of psychiatry (the latter two meet in an explicit conflict in the play *Dismorfomaniia* (*Dismorphomania*, 1989)). All of the aforementioned discourses conceal violence, connections with sexuality and/or with archaic rituals associated with corporality, first of all with the sacrifice ritual (cf. the short story “Zasedanie zavkoma” (“The Factory Committee Meeting,” from the collection *Pervyi subbotnik* (*The First Saturday Workday*, 1979–84)). There was no place for history in such a style of writing.

In the post-Soviet period, Sorokin transfers the agenda of the collective historical trauma developed in West Germany in the second half of the twentieth century to the Russian context. Thus, in *Hochzeitsreise* Mark retells it to Masha as a popular lecture, but does so in a mocking, affectedly cynical tone, defiantly eliminating the ethical questions posed by Karl Jaspers in his book *Die Schuldfrage* (*The Question of Guilt*, 1946):

Современная Германия напоминает мне человека, впервые пережившего состояние аффекта. [...] Аффектированный человек совершает странные и страшные вещи, а потом ничего не помнит. Так вот. Жил такой культурный, добропорядочный господин, ходил по будням в свою контору, по воскресеньям—в кирху. Ходил, ходил, а потом вдруг в один прекрасный день выскочил на улицу, стал бить витрины, собак, людей. Поджег чего-нибудь. Кричал. А потом насрал себе в штаны и заснул. А когда проснулся, ему подробно рассказали, что он делал. Дали каких-то пилюль, прописали водные процедуры. И вроде все прошло. Но. Стал он с тех пор всего бояться: витрин, людей, собак. У него закурить спросят, а он спичку зажечь не может—ему поджог мерещится. Но с Германией-то обошлись круче, нежели с этим господином. Ей не пилюли прописали, а плеть. И высекли всем миром. Да так, как никого никогда не секли.<sup>30</sup>

30 “Modern Germany reminds me of a person who has gone through an affective state for the first time in their life. [...] An affected person performs strange and horrible acts and does not remember anything afterwards. So there... Once upon a time there lived a cultured, respectable gentleman who went to his office on weekdays and to his Protestant church on Sundays. And so it went on until one fine day he burst out into

Surprisingly, Sorokin was one of the first Russian writers after Vasilii Grossman (despite the obvious difference between the poetics of these two authors) to return to the explicit discussion of the following question: if Nazism and Stalinist socialism had so much in common on an ethical and aesthetical level, does this really mean that they can and must have similar forms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (as in West Germany), or are these two types of totalitarian consciousness?

After *Hochzeitsreise* Sorokin continued his experiments with images from history. In the novel *Blue Lard* and in the libretto of the opera *Deti Rozentalia* (*Rosenthal's Children*, 2005), history is represented as a sort of degradation: the classics are replaced by their clones, who live dog's lives (*Rosenthal's Children*) or are used as farm animals that provide a powerful narcotic—the enigmatic blue lard. Apparently, nobody has tried to compare this fictional model of the historical process with Walter Benjamin's historiosophy, as represented in his work *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936): the representation of history and culture based on technical reproduction is more depersonalized and “displaced” than the “authentic” – i.e. non-reproducible – forms of representation which were characteristic of previous eras.<sup>31</sup> In other words, Sorokin experiments with different types of historiosophy, and any historiosophy has several presuppositions: first, history does not amount to a discourse, and, second, history has its own sense or, at least, content.

The literary critic Martyn Ganin discussed the mimetic nature of time in Sorokin's new works in his analysis of the collection *Monoklon*:

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the street and started breaking shop windows and beating up dogs and men. Then he set fire to something. He screamed. He shat his pants and fell asleep. When he woke up he received a detailed account of what he had been doing. He was given some pills and hydrotherapeutic procedures and apparently it all went away. However... from that point on he became afraid of everything: shop windows, men and dogs. He is asked for a light and he cannot strike a match—he is seeing arson. But Germany received much rougher treatment than that gentleman. It was prescribed not pills but lashes, and it was whipped by the whole world as no one has ever been whipped before.” Sorokin, 1998, “Hochzeitsreise,” p. 617; I am grateful to Elena Mikhailik for the translation of this fragment.

31 An important difference between the ideas of Sorokin and Benjamin must be mentioned: in his “imaginary experiments” Sorokin considers not only works of art but also their *authors* as technically reproducible.

И в «Моноклоне», и в «Заносе», и в «Тимке», где также сохраняется двухчастная (в последнем случае более сложная) структура,—там, где раньше находилась железобетонная конструкция идеологического или литературного (или обоих) дискурса, теперь находится более или менее реальная жизнь, чуть утрированная. Шествие тысяч молодых людей, переодетых космонавтами, по Ленинскому проспекту—почти из новостей. Милиционер, убивающий посетителей супермаркета [...]—это просто из новостей. Бизнесмен, которому снится кошмар о том, как он приносит жертву идолу Медвепута,—тоже, кажется, ничего из ряда вон выходящего.<sup>32</sup>

There is a background to the introduction of mimetic time in Sorokin's works. The very idea of authoritative discourse has vanished from post-Soviet culture; there are only discourses which pretend to be authoritative. A true conceptualist writer has to define or picture a certain discourse as potentially authoritative. This particular aesthetic vision was characteristic not only for Sorokin, but also for Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov (1940–2007). Nevertheless, in the works of these two writers the “behaviour” of the “ambitious” discourses is represented in different types of plot structures. In Sorokin's works, the discourse which lays claim to supremacy is personalized and identified with a person or a group of people. The person/people enter/s into a conflict with some irrational force, and the result of this conflict is always unpredictable. Moreover, in Sorokin's post-Soviet works, the discourses or human self-consciousness are often represented as a conjugation of principles that cannot be joined—the catachresis incarnate which can dissociate into

32 “In “Monoklon,” as well as in “Zanos” and “Timka,” where a two-part structure (of a more complicated kind in the latter work) is also retained, the reinforced concrete construction of ideological or literary discourse (or both) is replaced by a kind of “real life,” albeit a little exaggerated. A procession involving thousands of young people in cosmonaut's suits along Lenin Prospect is almost like everyday TV news. A policeman killing customers in a supermarket comes directly from that news [a reference to a crime committed by police officer Denis Evsikov, who killed two customers in a Moscow supermarket on 27 April 2009]. A businessman who has a nightmare where he is bringing a sacrifice to the idol Medveput [Medvedev+Putin] also does not seem anything special.” Martyn Ganin, 2010, “Vladimir Sorokin. Monoklon,” *Openspace.ru*, 30 September, <http://os.colta.ru/literature/events/details/18052/>, accessed 14 December 2012.

separate parts. It is no coincidence that Masha from *Hochzeitsreise* is “in some cases”<sup>33</sup> dissociated into Masha-1 and Masha-2.

In the texts of the *Monoklon* collection, this catachresis is based on a trauma, which is always revealed by a reference to Soviet history; in “Zanos” (“Kickback”), for example, it is the story of a shocking accident at a GULAG camp, where guards kill a man who later turns out to be a woman with a man’s appearance; moreover, they find a small ivory ball with a Chinese (!) inscription in her vagina. Within the framework of the play this inscription can be interpreted as prophetic.

The test and failure of a discourse are elements of “normal” public life and public discussions, but in the post-Soviet situation there are no preliminary rules for such conflicts. This is exactly what Sorokin depicts, understanding the lack of rules as the impact of irrational and transcendental forces. His short stories and plays often demonstrate how a ready-made discourse or an inner life that is somehow regulated enters into conflict with an unpredictable, cruel force and turns out to be helpless—or has to mutate or acquire some other form. The destruction of a discourse in the post-Soviet period corresponds not only to the possibility of deconstruction or violent transgression as mental operations, but also to similar events in the “real” world. Thanks to the detection of this correspondence a new, mimetic time appears in Sorokin’s works, and an idea of history that goes beyond the discourse can be formulated.

*Allocontexts: ‘The Target’ on the crossing of historical and cultural traditions*  
The image of the Target in Sorokin and Zel’dovich’s film can be analysed in the context of three important trends in contemporary Russian culture. As it turns out, the image enters into a polemic relationship with each of these trends.

1. The Target is the result of Soviet research and development, and obviously a secret one. In contemporary mass culture secret research from the Soviet period is associated with a secret knowledge which is at the same time demonic and beneficial. Soviet science is represented in this mass culture as a kind of magical practice. The most direct representation of this association can be found in the Russian blockbuster *Chernaia Molnaia* (*The Black Lightning*, 2009) by Aleksandr Voitinskii

33 This is a stage direction from the *dramatis personae* (Sorokin, 1998, “Hochzeitsreise,” p. 599).

and Dmitrii Kiselev. The protagonist of this film—a young man—has a “Volga” (Gas-24) car, which has been refined in a secret Soviet laboratory and turned into a retro-version of James Bond’s car. With the aid of this marvellous device, he punishes villains and saves a whole Moscow district from their crafty designs. But in Sorokin’s and Zel’dovich’s script, the miracles performed by the Target do not make people happy.

Sorokin’s first text to represent a secret scientific facility was *Blue Lard*: there we have a laboratory which grows writers’ clones. The drug produced in this laboratory does not bring happiness or salvation to anybody—except for a pretty (but morally rather miserable) boy with whom a fantastically transformed Stalin and the scientist Boris Gloger have fallen in love. Attending an Easter Ball, this boy puts on a fashionable mantle made from the finest slices of blue lard.<sup>34</sup>

2. The Target is an archaic (from the protagonists’ point of view) facility, situated in a remote place and connecting a person with the universe. In this description, the Target has much in common with Arkaim—the ruins of an ancient settlement, built approximately in the eighteenth–seventeenth centuries BC and circular (!) in plain view. The excavation in Arkaim began in 1987, i.e. at the very end of the Soviet period. This settlement is situated in the steppe zone of the South Urals in the Cheliabinsk region, and particularly attracts followers of some (but not all) Russian versions of New Age religions. These people consider Arkaim to be a place where cosmic energy can easily be felt. In the 2000s, this settlement became a popular place for an esoteric tourism which very much resembles the pilgrimage of *The Target*’s protagonists, but the former is much more popular.<sup>35</sup> Sorokin and Zel’dovich’s film evidently establishes a polemic relation to the Arkaim mythology: the Target in the film has no connection with ancient cults (as pilgrims believe Arkaim to have); it is a very secular construction, although it has a miraculous effect on people.

3. In *The Target* the transformation of human corporeality takes place in an abandoned empty space. The nearest equivalent of such a space, as

34 Vladimir Sorokin, 1999, *Goluboe salo*, Moscow, pp. 340–44.

35 The myths triggered by Arkaim are discussed in articles by the anthropologist Viktor Shnirel’man (see Viktor Shnirel’man, 2001, “Strasti po Arkaimu: ariiskaia ideia i natsionalizm,” *Iazyk i etnicheskii konflikt*, eds. M.B. Olcott & I. Semenova, Moscow, pp. 58–85. V. Shnirel’man, 2011, “Arkaim: arkheologiya, ezotericheskii turizm i natsional’naia ideia,” *Antropologicheskii forum* 14, [http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/014/14\\_shnirelman.pdf](http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/014/14_shnirelman.pdf), accessed 12 September 2012.

mentioned above, is the “Zone Room” in Tarkovskii’s *Stalker*. This room is situated on the threshold of mysterious areas that allow human beings to fulfil all their desires. The parallels between *The Target* and *Stalker* have been discussed many times by critics, since *The Target*’s first festival release in Berlin. Ol’ga Sobolevskaia argued that Sorokin and Zel’dovich’s film does not shed any new light on Tarkovskii’s films *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979). Sobolevskaia describes the main idea of these two classical works as human helplessness in relation to the displaced psychical forces hidden in his/her unconscious.<sup>36</sup> But in comparison to Tarkovskii’s works, *The Target* actually has one important novelty: the Target as an object has not only a transcendental but also a historical nature.<sup>37</sup>

The function of the Target in the film can be defined as a quasi-sacral space or a secular model of a sacred space. The most productive way to interpret the Target’s function in the film is to use the conception of “image-paradigm” introduced by the contemporary art historian Aleksei Lidov. The “image-paradigm” is visible and recognizable as a resemblance between various pictures, or buildings, or performance scenes—suggests Lidov—although this resemblance is not formalized as a figurative scheme and cannot be reduced to an illustration of one or other statement. From this point of view the image-paradigm is similar to a metaphor which loses its meaning when separated into its parts.<sup>38</sup>

Originally, Lidov suggested his model for the analysis of hierotopies. According to his definition, this term means 1) the process of the creation of sacred spaces that plays an important part in the ritual and architectural practices of the world’s religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism etc.; 2) the academic study of such spaces. However, the visual and spatial traditions represented in the image of the Target are not connected to any specific religious practices, but to their transformation in the history of secularization. These are the image-paradigms of ruins

36 Ol’ga Sobolevskaia, 2011, “Zel’dovich i Sorokin streliali v smyslovuiu ‘Mishen’,” *RIA Novosti*, 23 June, <http://ria.ru/analytics/20110623/392039584.html>, accessed 12 September 2012.

37 In terms of parallels between the plots of *The Target* and *Solaris*, it would be more exact to say that those parallels are recognizable, but they are not as trivial as Sobolevskaia suggests; below I will compare the plots of *The Target* and the pretext of Tarkovskii’s film—Stanisław Lem’s novel *Solaris* [1961].

38 A.M. Lidov, 2009, *Ierotopii: prostranstvennye ikony i obrazy-paradigmy v vizantii-skoi kul’ture*, Moscow, p. 293.



and of “bewitched place.” Sorokin and Zel’dovich bring them together without making a direct connection with their primary traditions, and identify them with the image of a womb.

The pre-Romantic cult of ruins has been thoroughly studied in cultural history. It is well known that images of ruins functioned in the art of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a material reflection of the destructive march of time. Andreas Schönle points out that a ruin expresses a presence and an absence at the same time; it is the trace of a whole, the sliver of a lost entity: Руина несет двойную смысловую нагрузку, вызывая парадоксальную мысль одновременно об утрате и о сохранении прошлого.<sup>39</sup> The Target functions in accordance with this interpretation: it is a technogenic ruin testifying to the presence of the past in the present. Typically for a ruin, the Target is associated with irrational forces. In the Western European and Russian traditions, as mentioned above, such forces have been identified with the eroding effect of time and the unavoidability of death. In the film they are identified with the soul- and body-transforming effect of cosmic radiation.

The image-paradigm of the bewitched place has been studied less than the image-paradigm of ruins. The most vivid example of such an image can be found in Nikolai Gogol’s short story “Zakoldovannoe mesto” (“The Bewitched Place,” from the collection *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan’ki* (*Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, 1831/32)). In his discussion of this work, Mikhail Vaiskopf explains that place’s typological similarity with other descriptions by Gogol’ of the spaces where the devils hide their hoards of gold.<sup>40</sup> While looking for the hoard, the protagonist sees frightening visions, and the seeds sown in that place have not brought “[...] anything good [...]. They may sow it properly, but there’s no saying what it is that comes up: not a melon—not a pumpkin—not a cucumber,

39 “A ruin carries a double message: it provokes a paradoxical thought about the loss and the preservation of the past at the same time.” Andreas Schönle, 2009, “Apologija ruiny v filosofii istorii: providentsializm i ego raspad,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 95, pp. 24–38; p. 24. On the pre-Romantic and Romantic cult of ruins see also: Mikhail Iampol’skii, 2001, *O blizkom*, Moscow, pp. 124–46; Andreas Schönle, 2003, “Mezhdú ‘drevnei’ i ‘novoi’ Rossiei: ruiny u rannego Karamzina kak mesto modernity,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 59, pp. 125–41; Tatiana Smoliarova, 2010, *Derzhavin: zrimaia lirika*, Moscow, pp. 520–31.

40 Mikhail Vaiskopf, 2004, *Siuzhet Gogolia: morfologija—ideologija—kontekst*, Moscow, pp. 180–83.

the devil only knows what to make of it.”<sup>41</sup> The Target is also a demonic and “mutagenous” place: it has an effect on the psyche and the body.

In one of the periods of cultural history that followed Romanticism, we find an image-paradigm which is very important for the interpretation of the image of the Target: it is a secular model of space of hierophany (in Aleksei Lidov’s terms), i.e. a manifestation of the Divine action in the world. The image-paradigm of “hierophanic space” is represented in culturally constitutive texts, for example, in the scene of Moses’s meeting with the Burning Bush (The Book of Exodus (Shmot): Ex 3,2). But in the twentieth century this image-paradigm reappeared in sci-fi literature and cinema, which are secular in spirit. It is exactly sci-fi where the specific, marked, aesthetically shaped space of human beings meets with forces that are transcendental to human reason; it has become a permanent image-paradigm. This force may be represented, for example, in the figures of extra-terrestrials, in the unpredictably changing world of nature, or in reviving traumatic remembrances, which cannot be controlled by consciousness. Their reanimation, however, is also usually a result of extra-terrestrial activity. This kind of plot is developed in Stanisław Lem’s novel *Solaris* (1961), in which the thinking ocean of the planet Solaris acquires the features of a quasi-sacral space.

The next stage in the development of this image-paradigm was shown in the underrated Soviet sci-fi film *Tainstvennaia stena* (*A Mysterious Wall*, 1967; script by Aleksander Chervinskii and Mikhail Sadovskii, directed by Irina Povolotskaia), which had probably been influenced by the novel *Solaris*. The protagonists of this film find a wall in the Siberian taiga that one cannot climb or surmount in any way. People who approach the wall meet with their reviving remembrances.

Variations on this image-paradigm can also be found in Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii’s novels *Ulitka na slone* (*The Snail on the Slope*, 1965) (the image of the Forest) and *Piknik na obochine* (*Roadside Picnic*, 1972) (the image of the Zone), as well as in Tarkovskii’s *Stalker*. The latter is based on a script by the Strugatskii brothers and a free adaptation of the second of the mentioned novels. The Zone is represented as a post-apocalyptic and post-historical space. In all these cases the quasi-sacral spaces—like the bewitched places, but unlike the ruins—have one quality in

41 Nikolai Gogol, 1985, “A Bewitched Place,” *The Complete Tales*, transl. C. Garnett, ed. L.J. Kent, London, Chicago, pp. 198–206; p. 206.

common, which Lidov attributes to the sacred (“hierotopic”) spaces: endless mutability. Иеротопические проекты предполагали находящееся в движении и постоянно меняющееся пространство.<sup>42</sup> But unlike traditional sacral spaces, the changeability of the quasi-sacral spaces is chaotic: there is no comprehensible plan, in fact, no plan at all. This changeability seems a puzzle which must be solved but cannot.

The Target is depicted as totally unchangeable, and this is underlined by the final scene of the film.<sup>43</sup> But it is important that this object contains a very deep well—a kind of rudiment of the changeability and unpredictability specific to image-paradigms of meeting with a secular *other*.

So far, I have pointed out two historically different semantic levels of the Target image. The first one dates back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the ruins of pre-Romanticism and Romantic “bewitched places.” The second is the “spaces of unpredictability” in Soviet sci-fi of the 1960s–70s.

One more type of quasi-sacral space which has obviously had a strong impact on shaping the image of the Target can be found in the “zones” of the Moscow conceptualists’ performances, with their prescription to perceive the events’ participants as strange and unpredictable creatures. Conceptualists worked with two types of *loci*: forest glades and “places of power” in the Soviet ideology, most often represented by the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy (VDNKh) in Moscow. The forest glades were used for numerous ritual-like performances by the group “Collective actions”; very soon after those one-off events evolved into the performance art cycle *Poezdki za gorod* (*Trips to the Countryside*, mostly conducted in 1976–89).<sup>44</sup> Sorokin was well aware of these events

42 “The hierotopical projects presumed space to be permanently moving and changing.” A.M. Lidov, 2011, “Vrashchaiushchiisia khram: ikonicheskoe kak performativnoe v prostranstvennykh ikonakh Vizantii,” *Prostranstvennye ikony: performativnoe v Vizantii i Drevnii Rusi*, ed. A.M. Lidov, Moscow, pp. 27–51; p. 27.

43 After a long-distance shot with tiny Anna on the horizon, the screen goes white and the word *mishen* (“Target”) appears once again—just as in the opening credits. But at the beginning of the film, this word seems to expand letter by letter out of a strange hieroglyph resembling a Chinese word, and in the end it again forms the initial hieroglyph. That symmetry, and the distance shot with a motionless object, accentuate the “extratemporality” and invariability of the film’s central image.

44 See the documentation and interpretation of their events and art performances: Andrei Monastyrskii et al., 1998, *Poezdki za gorod*, Moscow; Andrei Monastyrskii et al., 2009, *Poezdki za gorod*, vols. 6–11 [in one book], Vologda.

and took part in some of them. VDNKh became a stage for the performances of Dmitrii A. Prigov and Andrei Monastyrskii, the leader of the *Kollektivnye deistviia* (“Collective Actions” group). VDNKh also became a literary locus in Monastyrskii’s essay “VDNKh – stolitsa mira. Shizoanaliz” (“VDNKh as a World Capital. Schizoanalysis”).<sup>45</sup>

Sorokin’s Target is located in the mountains (i.e. far away from any town) and has a Soviet origin and ambitious original purpose. It combines the characteristics of the two types of conceptualists’ spaces described above. The Target is thus an instrument of historicization (cf. the experience of contemplating the ruins). This historicization is implemented as a kind of magic quasi-ritual practice (like the romantic bewitched place or conceptualists’ spaces of performances), and imitates passage through the birth canal (as in rites of initiation).

*“The birth trauma” of post-Soviet elites*

The protagonists of *The Target* almost do not mention Soviet times. They are all (except Taia) between 25 and 45 years old. If the action takes place in 2020, we can infer that they were born in the last years of the Soviet era or soon after it had finished. For them the Target turns out to be an instrument of historicization and rebirth, but neither the object itself, nor any other circumstances, evoke any remembrances of the past (e.g. Taia separated with her boyfriend in 1990; it is no accident that Sorokin, who is very attentive to such details, mentions a thirty-year term for his heroine’s solitude). It is probable that the Soviet era has disappeared from the consciousness of the protagonists, even though they are historically connected with it, just as, in the doctrines of the psychoanalysts Otto Rank and his follower Stanislav Grof, the birth trauma is displaced from human consciousness.<sup>46</sup>

45 The essay was published several times; the most recent publication is Monastyrskii, 2009, pp. 7–20. For the Internet republication see: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Andrey-Monastyrsky-VDNH.html>, accessed 12 September 2012. It is worth mentioning that, according to Lidov, the transformation of the space in contemporary multimedia performance is the equivalent of the temple hierotopy (Lidov, 2009, p. 292).

46 Rank considers the separation from the mother’s body the most painful event in human life, while Grof highlights the moment when you pass through the birth canal. See Otto Rank, 2007, *Das Trauma der Geburt und seine Bedeutung für die Psychoanalyse*, Gießen; Stanislav Grof, 1985, *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*, Albany, N.Y.

The promise of eternal youth is an important but still secondary aspect of the film's plot. More important, although less evident, is the grotesque depiction of the essential socio-psychological trait of the political and media elites of post-Soviet Russia, caused by their refusal to scrutinize elements of the "Soviet" in their own consciousness and to notice the historicity of their social genesis. This leads to their inability to transform their consciousness, to insert it into the changing history. The film's protagonists belong to these elites, and, due to their exclusion from history, they become incapable of orientating themselves, even if, like Viktor, they possess a device that makes it possible to distinguish between good and evil in quantitative terms.

*The Target* may suggest that the most catastrophic event in Russia's transition from Soviet to post-Soviet was members of the elites (in other words, the ones whose words and actions have an impact on a great number of people) not recalling their "birth trauma." This "forgetfulness of the elites" is especially dangerous, and their irresponsibility may explain why the dénouement of the plot is much safer for Anna and former vil-lager Taia, who do not occupy a high position in the social hierarchy.

The concept of human historicity developed in the film may, moreover, have been influenced by the ideas of the famous Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili. He has discussed the phenomenology of biographical and historical reflection in detail in two cycles of lectures about Marcel Proust and in many other talks.<sup>47</sup> In an interview with *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, Zel'dovich said that, during his work on the script of *The Target*, he reread his own synopsis of Mamardashvili's lectures, which he had attended while studying at the Psychological Faculty of Moscow State University.<sup>48</sup> The philosopher often returned to the idea that introspection, the base of the construction of the self, is an ethical duty for every person. This duty emerges because the self is too separated from previous states of consciousness, both from its own and those of others, to become aware of him-/herself as an actor in the present; it is therefore necessary to reconstruct a critical understanding of the link between these states.

47 Merab Mamardashvili, 1995, *Lektsii o Pruste*, Moscow; Merab Mamardashvili, 1997, *Psikhologicheskaiia topologiia puti*, St Petersburg.

48 Valerii Kichin, 2011, "Sekrety ikh molodosti: na Moskovskom festivale proshla gala-prem'era fil'ma *Mishen'*," *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 27 June, <http://www.rg.ru/2011/06/23/mishen-site.html> (accessed 14 December 2013).

As Mamardashvili acknowledged, this idea was important for him under the conditions of the unreasonable oblivion of the Great Terror, which was supported by Soviet censorship.

*Conclusion: from Leo Tolstoy's plot to contemporary Russian society*

As mentioned above, Sorokin's film is full of references to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. One of that novel's most important aims was to show that its protagonists are incapable of dealing with their biographies because they cannot establish control over their current passions in the contemporary world. The specific characteristic of this world is the pace with which towns and regions that were previously unaware of each other become strongly connected. The most essential images in the novel are trains and railways. Directly after the description of Anna's suicide, a scene follows where Koznyshv and Vronskii meet in the train to go to the Russian-Turkish War (1877–78) as volunteers. Levin does not agree with them, since he believes that even a religious war is contrary to human nature. He is one of the few protagonists in the novel who almost never travels by train and, consequently, is only loosely bounded to the newer, faster world. He is almost the only protagonist in the novel who can permanently comprehend principles of good in a world of high speeds.

The scriptwriters Sorokin and Zel'dovich live in a world characterized by liberal (not Tolstoyan) attitudes to sexuality, by high speed and immediate connections. Thus, it is characteristic that Zoia throws herself under the train *after having left the car*. The central image of the film—the Target—is not ultramodern, like the train in Tolstoy's novel, but demonstratively anachronistic.

Political scientists, sociologists and bloggers have often noticed that the present Russian regime and Russian society as a whole have a very narrow and permanently diminishing horizon of the future. The protagonists of *The Target* demonstrate the consequences of such a “narrowing of the horizon”: the characters cannot establish control over their passions because they cannot find themselves in history. Planning to live peacefully in the future, they imagine it as similar to the present or the recent past. One of the scenes in the film demonstrates their self-assuredness and blindness with the clarity of a parable. After having left her husband for Nikolai, Zoia encounters his incomprehension and coldness, and discomposedly says: “What shall happen in fifty years? In eighty years?”

And Nikolai, tiredly waving her aside, answers: “What eighty years? Wait for me, I’ll be back soon...” (1:47:51)—and departs for his meeting with the Chinese businessman/Mafioso, i.e. forever.

Sorokin and Zel’dovich point out that the basis of this narrow-minded planning is not only a fear of the future, but also a displaced trauma, which blocks historical self-consciousness. Within the logic of the film, even if one were to become free from authoritarian pressure, this would not bring “healing.”

In *Day of the Oprichnik* and in *Sugar Kremlin*, Sorokin took the position of an acrimonious satirist, and his readers were happy to follow. In *Hochzeitsreise* and in the script of *The Target*, he changed his role in order to diagnose the public consciousness, but nobody noticed—at least in Russia.<sup>49, 50</sup>

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49 It is significant that *Hochzeitsreise* was staged in Austria and Germany (by Andreas Marent and Frank Castorf, resp.) earlier than in Russia (director Eduard Boiakov).

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