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ARTICLE

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Embodying the spirit of the time: traumatic history in Vladimir Sharov's fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on two novels by Vladimir Sharov, *Staraia devochka* (The Old Girl) and *Voskreshenie Lazaria* (The Resurrection of Lazarus), that address the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s. Through analysis of these novels, the article examines two interrelated aspects of Sharov's works: their representation of traumatic history and their postmodernist style. The paper then examines the way these features of Sharov's prose relate to broader, current cultural trends. Sharov's novels contain a synthetic view of history that unites such incompatible elements as Orthodox Christianity, a variety of charismatic sects, Bolshevik ideology, and Stalinism. Despite Sharov's unconventional view of the Soviet past, the article argues that there are parallels between the official, contemporary view of Soviet history and that represented in Sharov's fiction. Both depict Russian history as unique, separated from global historical processes.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article porte sur deux romans de Vladimir Šarov qui abordent les répressions staliniennes des années 1930 : *Staraja devočka* (La vieille petite fille) et *Voskrešenie Lazarja* (La résurrection de Lazare). L'analyse de ces romans met en lumière la représentation du traumatisme historique et l'usage du style postmoderne, deux aspects étroitement liés de l'œuvre de Šarov qui s'inscrivent dans des courants culturels plus vastes. Les romans de Šarov présentent une vision synthétique de l'histoire qui combine des éléments aussi incompatibles que le christianisme orthodoxe, une variété de sectes charismatiques, l'idéologie bolchévique et le stalinisme. Cette vision peu conventionnelle du passé soviétique, néanmoins, rejoint à certains égards la vision officielle de l'histoire soviétique prônée par l'État russe, en ce qu'elle conçoit l'histoire russe comme proprement exceptionnelle, distincte des processus historiques mondiaux.

KEYWORDS
Vladimir Sharov; Soviet history; trauma; Russian postmodernism

Soviet history and its representation

In July 2017, before the centennial of the 1917 October Revolution, a curious video advertising a new line of watches appeared on the Internet. This video marketed Raketa, an iconic Soviet watch rebranded as an exclusive designer product in post-Soviet Russia. In the video, the factory's lead designer, Stanislav Romanov,

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a descendant of the Romanov family, introduces a new watch named Revolution, issued to mark the centennial. In a dramatic gesture, he cuts his finger and splashes blood onto the watch's black face. In the voice-over, he explains that, being stained with his blood, these watches represent a new understanding of the 1917 Revolution as an event to be commemorated, rather than celebrated. He claims that in the early Soviet era, each killer became a victim of the Revolution. He then repeats Vladimir Putin's statement that the centennial of the 1917 Revolution should become a source of national unity.[1]

The video is striking due to its unconventional engagement with the body, since the designer uses his own blood as a metaphor for Russia's difficult history. The dramatic gesture of self-cutting creates symbolic access to the traumatic past. Watches with a well-known Soviet pedigree and Romanov blood stand for opposing and clashing aspects of Russian history, yet they are reconciled in the new commemorative object. Despite its over-the-top branding, the video mirrors current cultural preoccupations and trends in its reliance on a postmodernist style that combines a pastiche of high and low culture, a fluid ideology, and a kind of pop history. Most conspicuously, the video confronts the problem of how to represent a traumatic national past.

The fiction of the prominent Russian author Vladimir Sharov admittedly belongs to a genre very different from that of this Raketa watch commercial, but the video illustrates an approach to Soviet history that has become prominent in contemporary Russian culture – a historical and ideological sensibility that, I argue, is shared by Sharov's novels. While representing incomparable cultural products, both this commercial and Sharov's fiction grapple with traumatic aspects of Russian history while relying on postmodernist style.[2] Like the video, Sharov's fiction downplays the differences between clashing ideological camps both past and present. Sharov's novels contain a synthetic view of history that unites such incompatible elements as Orthodox Christianity, a variety of charismatic sects, Bolshevik ideology, and Stalinism.[3] Despite the author's unconventional view of the Soviet past, I argue that there are parallels between the official, contemporary view of Soviet history and the historical narratives found in Sharov's fiction. Both depict Russian history as separated from global historical processes and present disparate historical periods as unified by the notion of the unique national past. This view presents both victims and perpetrators of the revolutionary, Stalinist terror as victims of traumatic historical forces, thus presenting a unified picture of the Soviet era. This article therefore pays special attention to two interrelated aspects of Sharov's fiction: his representation of the traumatic past and his use of postmodernist style.[4] By considering Sharov's approach to history as well as his style, the article contributes to ongoing debates on the author's novels. In addition, the article places these aspects of Sharov's prose in the broader context of Russian official culture's attempts to shape and control historical narratives. The article focuses on two of Sharov's novels: *Staraia devochka* (The Old Girl, published serially in 1998, republished in book form in 2011) and *Voskreshenie Lazaria* (The Resurrection of Lazarus, 2002). Like Sharov's other novels, these works address the most problematic and most traumatic period of Soviet history, namely the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. I will also refer to one of Sharov's subsequent novels, *Vozvrashchenie v Egipet* (The return to Egypt, 2013), which focuses on the events of the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War.

Sharov's reception and legacy

Russian history, especially the history of the first half of the twentieth century, was a central preoccupation of Sharov's fiction, beginning with his first novel, *Sled v sled* (In Their Footsteps, 1991).[5] Vladimir Sharov (1952–2018) was a historian and archivist by training, and he held a PhD in Russian history with a focus on the early seventeenth century. Since abandoning the academic path in the early 1980s, he dedicated himself fully to fiction and became the author of nine novels. He also published two collections of essays, *Iskushenie revoliutsiei* (The Temptation of Revolution, 2009) and *Perekrestnoe opylenie* (Cross-Pollination, 2018). Sharov's fiction blends family history, commonly accepted historical facts, and grotesque and fantastic elements.[6] In his novels, radically transformed historical personalities mingle with imaginary characters. According to Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler's *History of Russian Literature*, "Sharov invented a new form of writing about the past. He rejects the categorizations of both historical prose and alternative history, and his plots explicitly deviate from documented facts while remaining within a general historical framework." The authors of the volume place Sharov within the neo-baroque trend in post-Soviet postmodernism, alongside Victor Pelevin and Mikhail Shishkin, among others.[7] Sharov's fiction has occasioned controversy among literary critics, especially in the early 1990s, but his reputation among Russian authors and critics now seems well established.[8] In 2014, his eighth novel, *The Return to Egypt*, won both the Russian Booker Prize and the Student Booker, while also receiving third prize in the *Bol'shaia kniga* (Big Book) awards. Owing to the limited number of his translated works, Sharov is still not very well known among Anglophone readers. During the last decade, however, two of Sharov's early novels, *Before & During* (2014; *Do i vo vremia*, 1993) and *The Rehearsals* (2018; *Repititsii*, 1992), have been translated into English by Oliver Ready and published by Daedalus Books in the UK.

Approaches to Soviet trauma

In his *Warped Mourning*, Alexander Etkind argues that both Russian official culture and post-Soviet fiction often become a quest to give meaning to the past.[9] Even if these meanings are vastly distinct, these interpretations provide a way to come to terms with difficult history. Sharov's works are especially representative of this trend. In his essays and interviews, Sharov makes a connection between the traumatic past of the Revolution and Stalinist terror and the story of his family. He describes his childhood spent among former Gulag prisoners, and he explains that his grandparents were both involved in and ultimately destroyed by the 1917 Revolution: "I was born into a family that was closely connected with the revolution, which was making it with considerable zeal and, since the revolution always and everywhere devours its children, my family also perished from it."[10] Sharov's fiction appears remarkably consistent in its preoccupations and themes. Each subsequent novel can be seen as yet another attempt to come to terms with the traumatic past through a reinterpretation of early Soviet history.

History plays a central role in contemporary Russian culture. According to Etkind, "political opponents in Russia differ most dramatically not in their understanding of economic reforms or international relations, but in their interpretations of history."[11] Such events as the 1917 Revolution and Stalinist repressions remain the most divisive.[12]

The lack of social consensus makes historical narratives a sensitive and important topic for artistic expression and political debates. In the context of contemporary Russian culture and politics, history becomes a central sphere of governmental manipulation and control. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the government has become more involved in attempts to control culture whenever representations of national history play a central role. In the 2010s, the official history promoted by the state borrowed from both sides of the liberal and conservative divide in order to create a new historical narrative that could constitute the basis for a shared understanding of the Russian and Soviet past. Richard Sakwa sees the attempt to reconcile various interpretations of Russian history as one of the central features of Putin's politics of stability.[13] The government treats consensus on history as a goal, which, if achieved, would lead to greater social cohesion.[14] Yet this attempt to connect incompatible views of the past has resulted in contradictory and fluid historical narratives.[15] In particular, official, consensual history represents imperial Russia, the Soviet era, and the present as a seamless continuity.[16] The official account does not completely deny the difficult aspects of Russian history, but it downplays them. For instance, the official historical narrative does not fully embrace Stalinism, yet its authors refuse to denounce Stalin, and indeed they praise his role in World War II.[17] They have created a kind of "pop history" that focuses on the cultural and scientific achievements of Russia and the Soviet Union while de-emphasizing ruptures and discontinuities.[18] Additionally, the official narrative attributes Russia's greatness to the central role of the state, which it presents as an essential part of Russian national identity. As a result, the state acquires "a spiritual, sacred quality as the distillation of Russia's 'collective will.'"[19]

Sharov's fictional history differs from the normalizing and statist history dominant in official discourses. Specifically, he finds the roots of Russia's specificity through his interpretation of two historical periods, defined by *oprichnina* and *raskol*. Oprichnina was a paramilitary group instituted by Tsar Ivan IV, the Terrible, and it also refers to the seven-year reign of terror (1565–72) that he instigated with the help of this group. Raskol was the seventeenth-century schism of the Russian Orthodox Church that divided the faithful into Old and New Believers. For Sharov, both periods were connected to a national religious mentality – a particular sectarian revisionism of Orthodox Christianity. According to this worldview, Ivan the Terrible created the Oprichnina as a perverse military monastic order.[20] Later, the seventeenth-century schism originated the Russian people's longstanding apocalyptic mentality.[21] Sharov interprets the 1917 Revolution and Stalinist terror as an extension of this religious and eschatological worldview. Sharov's fiction creates a picture of the Soviet Union where both new authorities and representatives of the intelligentsia lived according to a variety of sectarian beliefs. Etkind suggests that contemporary Russian writers seem to be especially interested in religion and history, "which they combine in rich and shocking ways."[22] This assessment appears to be especially applicable to Sharov, whose novels always return to some combination of these themes. In his depiction of religious messianism in Russian history, his works make frequent use of the grotesque – both grotesque images of the body and grotesque transformations of religious and Soviet ideology.

Drawing on Freudian theory, Etkind interprets grotesque and monstrous allegories as a symptom of post-Soviet melancholia. Owing to improper mourning, uncommemorated victims of Stalinist repression continue to haunt Russian contemporary culture. The fantastic imagery of contemporary Russian writers represents the return of the repressed – the improperly addressed trauma of Soviet experience.[23] However, whereas Etkind sees this fiction as a symptom of what he calls "warped mourning," we can also interpret it as an alternative way to address trauma – a way that is rooted in the particularity of Soviet experience.[24] Jehanne Gheith has emphasized paying attention to non-narrative forms of self-expression in order better to understand trauma in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Following the temporary and limited liberalization of Khrushchev's thaw, Stalinist repressions became surrounded by silence. Gheith suggests that this officially sanctioned silence led to alternative ways of addressing traumatic experiences that did not depend on narrative.[25] Instead, dramatic gestures and symbolic embodiment became ways of working through one's past traumas.[26] Extrapolating from Gheith's conclusions about the representation of personal traumas and the artistic representation of collective trauma, we may interpret contemporary authors' use of grotesque embodiment as a way to address the difficult past.[27]

Grotesque embodiment plays an important role in Sharov's representation of Russian history. Human bodies and their dramatic acts serve as cultural and historical metaphors, functioning as a shortcut that provides access to past traumatic experiences. While this representation might be an effective way to address trauma, one should still question the ideological implications of Sharov's historical vision. Do the ever-changing grotesque metaphors and all-inclusive religious matrix provide a useful interpretation of the Soviet past? One can accuse Sharov of an unnecessary essentializing of Soviet and even Russian experience that leads to a sense of hopelessness and historical determinism. Rooted in an eschatological and religious worldview, Russia is destined to relive repeated crises.

The national body in *The Old Girl*

Like Sharov's previous novels, *The Old Girl* centres on the early Soviet era, specifically the Stalinist repressions. The novel's protagonist, Vera Radostina, is a devoted Communist and Stalinist whose husband is executed during the purges. Because of this traumatic event, she makes a decision to turn her life backwards: she stops aging and proceeds to grow younger until she turns into a baby. Vera's meticulous diary serves as a guide during this process, allowing her to relive every day of her earlier life. Vera's transforming body then becomes linked to a historical archive, being connected to both personal and national history. In this symbolic treatment of the novel's protagonist, Sharov participates in the long tradition of using women as metaphors for the nation. Indeed, the novel's other characters see Vera as a stand-in for Russia. Gendered representations play a prominent role in Russian culture and literature, which maintain a particularly "strong tradition of veneration of Mother Russia."[28] The novel, therefore, develops a rather conservative, if eccentric, vision of the nation rooted in an image of the body – specifically the female body as represented by Vera.[29] This national body undergoes a physical and symbolic transformation.

Another expression of national history is Vera's own understanding of the past. Before her personal tragedy, Vera aspires to write contemporary fairy tales that would bring together pre-revolutionary and Soviet history.

> The revolution was built on contrast, where everything old was rejected all at once, but Vera understood that this was because of their youth, and in order to enter into real power, they must change their mindset; they must go back and inscribe the revolution into the history of Russia. To inscribe it in such a way that no one doubts that it is the revolution that is the true heir of the past, that it is the revolution that is anointed by God and is not some kind of impostor.[30]

In her fairy tales, Vera wants to reconnect Russian religious traditions to post-revolutionary ideology. Her project creates a continuity between Russia's imperial and Soviet past; therefore, it parallels but also revises Stalinist-era rewritings of Russian imperial history. Sharov's revision of Russian history in the novel similarly mirrors the preoccupation of the novel's protagonist, where Vera's own life story becomes a part of this historical revision.

The protagonist's decision to reverse her life acquires national significance and ideological meaning. Vera's actions lead to an ideological split within both the Communist Party Central Committee and the NKVD (*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del*, 1934–46). Initially, the authorities interpret her temporal regression as an anti-revolutionary act. They think that other citizens unhappy with the Soviet government will follow her into the past, erasing the achievements of the Soviet era. Other members of the NKVD and the Central Committee believe that Vera wants to return to one of her previous admirers, one of whom is Stalin. This second interpretation of Vera's actions eventually prevails, since Stalin himself favours it; Stalin actually waits for Vera's return.

Owing to Sharov's unconventional depiction of Russian history, the introductory note on *The Old Girl*'s cover describes the author as the "master of literary mystification." However, Sharov himself refutes the notion that his fiction belongs to the genre of "alternative history." Responding to Dmitrii Bykov, who praised Sharov as "the father of Russian alternative history," Sharov stated:

> I don't have anything to do with alternative history in the strict sense of the word. I have already said several times that the most interesting things about history are its dead ends, not its highways. Side branches that have not gone on to develop for some reason. I absorb myself in these side branches, trying to understand why this or that thing did not happen.[31]

This explanation seems to suggest that the author takes his approach to history very seriously as an attempt to understand the past and to find its deeper meaning.

Because of this appearance of a deeper, hidden meaning, Sharov's novels combine a whimsical representation of the past with elaborate conspiratorial plots, with the most prominent role often given to the security forces. In this respect, his writing is perfectly in touch with a moment when conspiracies have become one of the most prominent features of contemporary Russian cultural and political discourses.[32] The fabrication of elaborate conspiracies is a prominent strategy in the Russian media's repertoire of post-modernist techniques.[33] Conspiracies are also a regular feature in the plots of such popular writers as Viktor Pelevin, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Ol'ga Slavnikova, and Vladimir Sorokin.[34] Despite their ideological differences, these authors are all preoccupied with secret organizations and alternative interpretations of events, and this shared aspect of contemporary prose underscores the pervasiveness of conspiratorial thinking in contemporary Russian culture.

Alternative history, a very popular subgenre of contemporary fiction and even historiography, is itself a subset of conspiratorial thought. According to Marlene Laruelle, "the conjunction between conspiracy theory and the rewriting of history makes up one of the main instruments for disseminating nationalist theories in today's Russia, theories based on a kind of postmodern, paranoid cultural imaginary."[35] While Sharov's fiction does not subscribe to nationalist ideology, his novels contain a conspiratorial understanding of sectarian beliefs as a hidden guiding principle of both Russian and Soviet history. The pervasiveness of the security forces gives the novels an even more conspiratorial flavour. Sharov's novels, therefore, essentialize Russian history as predetermined by hidden forces. In Sharov's representation of history, religious interpretations provide a key to Stalinist repression and the labour camps.

Security forces play a central role in *The Old Girl*; trying to prevent the nation from returning to the past, they conduct a series of elaborate interrogations of Vera's admirers. The majority of the novel is written from the point of view of an NKVD officer, Eroshkin, who is put in charge of Vera's case. The actions of Soviet authorities blend Marxist and Christian mystical views. For example, Eroshkin's interrogations of Vera's lovers and his participation in Vera's case lead to the creation of a kind of religious community centred on the protagonist. Vera herself is a devoted Communist who calls Stalin a living god. As a result of the interrogations, many of Vera's lovers (not including Stalin) have been gathered in a camp, which they learn to love because it brings them closer to Vera. In the course of the novel, however, it becomes clear that Vera is not returning to her lovers, whom she meets at various times as she rereads her diary; instead, it turns out that she is returning to the period when her faith in God was the most pure, where childhood represents the utmost purity.[36]

The novel's protagonist serves as a double metaphor for religious faith and Russia. Owing to Vera's name, which literally means "faith" in Russian, she interchangeably represents belief and nation to her lovers, who form a community in the camp and continue to live together even after their release. It is in the camp that Vera's arrested brother-in-law forms the idea of their pseudo-religious community.

> He was so persuasive when he said that Vera/Faith is one, that all of them need the whole Vera, Vera in its entirety, and such Vera is possible only if they unite, come together, because each of them has only a part of her. She is like a cipher, where everyone knows one number, and if they do not agree, they will never be able to open the lock.[37]

Standing for both faith and Russia, Vera unites this community of prisoners. For them, her life serves as an example of sacred history. It is Eroshkin and the security forces who, through their extensive interrogations, hold the key to the entire history of Vera and, by extension, of the nation.

At the same time, the novel ironically undermines its own mythology. Contrary to what Soviet authorities anticipated, the millions of discontented Soviet citizens do not follow Vera. Instead, her influence is limited to a small group of lovers, even though they include Stalin. Therefore, the figure of Vera simultaneously represents a grand national idea and ironically contests the possibility of realizing such an idea in a real life.

Mark Lipovetsky suggests that "ironic laughter and grotesque absurdity constantly manifest themselves in the plots and style of Sharov's prose."[38] According to Lipovetsky, this irony appears in the way Sharov's plots undermine the millenarian metanarratives, and in the way that Soviet bureaucratic language contests religious and apocalyptic ideas.[39] However, this irony overlaps with the notion of history's deeper meaning. Therefore, the novel's irony coexists with the author's deeper beliefs in religious and millenarian ideas as the guiding principles of Russian history, even though the ideals are never realized.

Similarly paradoxical is the novel's symbolic treatment of the past. Vera's return to the past has a contradictory function, as she both recovers the past by rereading her diary and erases the past by trying to reverse her life's progression. Moreover, if Vera symbolizes Russia, her refusal to progress according to a regular course of life and her decision to relive her past are symbolic of a foreclosed future. In the novel, the past overwhelms the present and the future and acquires an outsized significance.

This approach to history is prevalent in Sharov's fiction. *The Old Girl*'s treatment of the past as well as its foreclosing of the future are further developed in Sharov's subsequent novel, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*. If Vera symbolizes millenarian expectations and religious beliefs in *The Old Girl*, these topics are even more explicitly present in the later novel. There, security forces play an even more prominent role in Russian history and its millenarian interpretation.

Utopian ideology in *The Resurrection of Lazarus*

The Resurrection of Lazarus takes a broad view of the Soviet past, covering the entire Soviet era; however, similar to *The Old Girl*, it focuses on the period following the 1917 Revolution up to the 1930s and the Stalinist purges. Whereas the recreation of the past in *The Old Girl* draws on a personal diary, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* consists of loosely related letters and documents passed on to the narrator by his deceased relatives. In turn, the narrator retells and reproduces diverse letters in his own correspondence with his daughter, who lives in the US. Thus, Russian history is refracted through a series of unreliable narrators, each of them trying to make sense of the past. In this way, the novel constitutes an eccentric archive. It offers an alternative view of Soviet history rooted in a utopian vision.

Sharov's representation of utopian ideology is radically different from Soviet utopian thought, which was oriented toward social reform. His reading of Soviet utopia is less concerned with the reorganization of society than with religious apocalypse and renewal. Sharov turns all early Soviet utopian ideologies into religious ones. In this respect, he depicts early Soviet ideas as similar to those of the Russian symbolists and early twentieth-century philosophers with their millenarian and apocalyptic expectations. Mikhail Epshtein connects Sharov's eschatology to that of Aleksandr Blok and Andrei Belyi; according to this eschatological worldview, "Bolsheviks are leading the red warriors to the struggle against the world for its salvation."[40] Like Blok and Belyi, Sharov combines irony with eschatological ideas. Belyi's ironic representation of revolutionaries and apocalyptic expectations in his novel *Petersburg* is especially close to Sharov's.[41] Like the symbolists, Sharov combines irony with the notion of a hidden reality and a deeper meaning.[42] However, whereas the symbolists projected their eschatological expectations to the future, Sharov's millenarianism remains in the past.

Continuing the turn-of-the-century references, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* draws on the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov, a Christian Orthodox and utopian philosopher, whose ideas combined scientific transformation of nature with the belief in immortality and resurrection of all human ancestors. Sharov's novel builds on Fedorov's belief in "the common cause," or the sons' cause of resurrecting their dead fathers. Fedorov's insistence on physical resurrection connects history to the body – an idea that is grotesquely realized in Sharov's novel. On the personal level, the novel's narrator tries to resurrect his father, Lazar', a Soviet writer who died in the 1990s. To accomplish this goal, the narrator takes up residence near the cemetery where his father is buried. He finds himself in the centre of a small movement of similarly engaged enthusiasts of Fedorov's ideas who are carrying on his project of resurrection in post-Soviet Russia. Their work involves a study of their relatives' past, inspired by Fedorov's call to create cemetery-archives and cemetery-libraries. Here Sharov captures Fedorov's paradoxical connection between the future and the past, where the recovery of the past leads to the fullness of the future. The process of resurrection depends on one's memory and one's ability to recreate lived experiences. Therefore, the resurrection of one's ancestors requires the recovery of individual and national history.

In his representation of the post-revolutionary era, Sharov combines Fedorov's philosophy with other messianic and millenarian beliefs. Whereas in *The Old Girl*, Vera represents faith and Russia, in the latter novel these millenarian ideas are embodied in the Kulbarsov brothers. The brothers are forever divided by their plans for the future salvation of Russia: one brother wants to unite the Russian people by taking a pilgrimage to the Far East; the other brother wants to revive the Russian Orthodox Church through holy foolishness. Finally, Soviet security forces, the OGPU (*Ob"edinennoe gossudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*, 1923–34), serve as a punishment from God, as a purifying force, and as central actors in the future Fedorovian resurrection. All of these messianic projects link Fedorovian ideas of personal resurrection to the national unification of a Russia divided by the Civil War and the Revolution.

Security forces again play the central role in this ideological battle and contribute to the millenarian and Christian interpretation of the past. The secret leader of the mission to reunite the Russian nation is the OGPU's deputy, Spirin, who engineers a variety of spiritual plans and manipulates the Kulbarsov brothers in their spiritual exploits. Ironically, the brothers fail to accomplish any of their projects for Russia's spiritual transformation. Thus, one brother, Nikolai, never begins his journey to the Far East to unite Russia; nevertheless, he continues to write letters to his wife, Nata, pretending that the letters are being sent from different places in Russia. Similarly, the other brother, Fedor (Father Feognost), fails in his quest to become a holy fool. The OGPU's project of national resurrection also turns out to be a deception. To demonstrate the process of resurrection to the Soviet people, Spirin uses the Commissar for Railways, Lazar' Kaganovich, whom he had previously arrested. Spirin releases Kaganovich and declares him the first resurrected victim of Stalinist repressions. The "resurrected" commissar, as well as his doubles, then travel all over the USSR on an open train during a week of national celebration.

To further develop these ideas, Spirin claims that through the process of investigation and even torture, the security forces acquire archival knowledge of the arrested; therefore, they are best positioned to resurrect their victims. He explains that torture, executions, and camps serve a central role in the "common cause" of future resurrection:

> We tortured not because we are sadists, not because we liked to watch the accused in their own blood and vomit crawl at our feet, and not because we liked to trample them; we demanded that the arrested literally turn himself inside out, tell who, where, why – forced him to sell and betray all whom he had ever known, with whom he was friendly or working together – and only then did we allow him to die. Before we allowed him to expire, it was our

> duty to understand to the last drop all his deep secrets, we had to know the arrested better than his mother and nurse, wife and mistress. Without this, we would never be able to resurrect those executed as they existed. Millions of folders of investigative files, which are stored in our archive like the apple of our eye, became the most detailed topographical map of a man – each ravine and source, every hillock and path is indicated on it, and the task is on us, the Chekists, to use this map, in safety and in security, most importantly to resurrect each defendant in the fullness of his experience for a new life.[43]

Paradoxically, torture and even the eventual destruction of the body will lead to physical resurrection. In this grotesque conception of the security forces, the Chekists' "common cause" is to mend the nation broken by the divisions of the Civil War and the Revolution. Physical torture appears as the best way to preserve the essence of each individual for the future resurrected nation. Spirin organizes a national day of repentance by local OGPU members. It is during this day of repentance that the Soviet people learn the OGPU's higher purpose as future saviours of the nation.

In addition to Fedorov's thought, Sharov's representation of early Soviet history appears to invoke the ideas of another early twentieth-century Russian philosopher, Nikolai Berdiaev. Berdiaev located the roots of the Russian Revolution in pre-revolutionary messianic and millenarian traditions. For example, in his *Russian Revolution*, Berdiaev writes:

> In accordance with the Russian spiritual type, it was not so much the scientific as the messianic elements of Marxism that dominated in Russian Communism: the idea of the proletariat as the liberator and organizer of mankind, the bearer of a higher truth and a higher justice.[44]

Berdiaev comes to this conclusion through his analysis of Russian spiritual traditions, yet his interpretations attribute essentialist qualities to the Russian national character. By depicting Soviet authorities espousing a variety of religious and eschatological views, Sharov takes this idea much further than Berdiaev's original interpretation of the Revolution. In an interview for *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Sharov stated:

> It seems to me that Russian civilization, Russian culture was born in anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ. It was ready for anything, just to bring the coming closer, speed it up. The culture believed that the cup filled up a long time ago. And then, since Christ was not coming and the suffering only multiplied, it decided that waiting for Him was a waste of work, it had to bring on the coming.[45]

The Resurrection of Lazarus combines Fedorov's philosophy with a number of biblical motifs, such as the Tree of Knowledge, the Tower of Babel, Cain and Abel, the resurrection of Lazarus, and the destiny of the Jewish people. It turns Bolsheviks into fervent believers in a variety of millenarian and sectarian ideas. For example, the members of the OGPU expect the end of the world when they learn that the Virgin Mary is now visiting the Soviet Union and is spending her time in one of the camps. While some Soviet authorities want to stop this event, others are trying to bring on the Second Coming.

Fedorov's philosophy plays a central role in the novel's plot, and other utopian and millenarian ideas appear in the text's background. For example, the novel alludes to the early twentieth-century fascination with the transformation of nature represented by such thinkers as Konstantin Tsiolkovskii and Ivan Michurin. Sharov connects these early twentieth-century ideas to the Bible; thus, in the novel, Christian resurrection turns into a literal resurrection of one's ancestors, as posited by Fedorov. A disciple of Michurin tries to grow a tree of knowledge that would reverse the original sin of Adam and Eve, thereby preventing millennia of human suffering. The end of the novel illustrates the realization of these dreams, even though the event is likely imagined by one of the narrators and does not appear to take place in reality, which again ironically undermines the novel's millenarian plot. *The Resurrection of Lazarus* ends with a letter written by Khabibulin, Michurin's disciple, who paints a picture of security forces placed at the centre of an apocalyptic vision. He communicates with the narrator's father about growing the biblical Tree of Knowledge in the Altai region. The letter combines the achievement of Khabibulin's aspirations with the eschatological role of the Soviet security forces:

> Then the Chekists began to sing. They sang in childish, not yet broken, sonorous voices, but they did not pray for themselves and they did not complain about endless hardships and misfortunes; honestly and directly, they demanded justice from the Lord. They demanded for Adam and Eve the right to address their Creator.[46]

For Sharov, absolute power leads to childish behaviour; the authorities also believe in their unique closeness to God.[47] The images of the Chekists as grotesque saviours connect Soviet and Christian ideologies. Similarly, this letter brings together the imagery of the Second Coming and the Stalinist purges. It is hard to locate this letter precisely in the context of the novel, since it is not clear whether the letter is a retelling of a dream or a hallucination. However, it appears that its writer believes in the actuality of these events. The letter provides an abrupt and uncertain ending to the novel.

In his attempt to reconcile Russia's traumatic past, Sharov turns to metaphysical explanations of revolutionary violence and Stalinist terror. While his representation of Soviet history is grotesque, one has to wonder why the author invests so much effort in these alternative histories and synthetic millenarian ideologies, which reappear in ever-changing variations from one novel to the next. What is ultimately achieved by these alternative histories?

When utopian and revolutionary ideas are connected with the Bible and sectarian beliefs, their meaning is altered. By equating and synthesizing early twentieth-century history, social movements, and diverse utopian ideologies, Sharov erases some of their complexity and provides very specific interpretations of historical events. Moreover, by representing the security forces as united with their victims, both intellectually and emotionally, the novels demonstrate historical relativism, where all parts of Soviet history are united in its millenarian and religious aspects. This conflation of different strands of Christian, philosophical, and Communist messianic beliefs leads to ideological homogeneity. In Sharov's world, everyone is a messianic believer, and everyone wants to save the nation.

Whereas the past in Sharov's fiction is characterized by flourishing salvation myths and millenarian expectations, his depiction of post-Soviet Russia appears as Utopia's wasteland. Thus the utopian aspirations of the past are reduced in the present to the hopes of a small group of cemetery enthusiasts focused on the resurrection of their individual fathers. Furthermore, the narrator forecloses the future as he becomes more and more engaged in the past. He retreats to the cemetery and refuses treatment for his advanced cancer. His only connection to the present is his communication with his daughter, who, judging by the apologetic tone of his correspondence, is skeptical of the entire project.

Sharov positions himself as a liberal writer – he even wrote a critical essay titled "Some Thoughts in Defence of Liberalism" – yet his reading of history seems unconventional for Russian liberals, since he sees the early Soviet period and Stalinism not as an aberration in Russian history but as a continuation of Russian millenarian ideology.[48] In many ways, Sharov's eccentric view of history is very different from the official version. Specifically, he undermines the regulating and normalizing role of the state, which is strongly emphasized in contemporary historiography. By contrast, his novels often erase the distinction between people in positions of power and marginal figures, creating an atmosphere of carnival – an equalized playing field for diverse actors united by similar marginal ideologies. However, similar to the contemporary, official history of consensus, his novels create a peculiar view of the past characterized by ideological indeterminacy. In one of his interviews, Sharov explained that the ideological clashes punctuating Russian history are often "simply two stations along the same railway line," the oppositions being necessary when taken together and insufficient when taken separately.[49] In this view, Stalinism appears as another aspect of Russian spirituality – a "completely sectarian attempt [. . .] to put things in order all at once."[50] This view of Stalinism and the 1917 Revolution connects opposing ideational elements and can be seen as parallel to official attempts to forge a historical consensus.

In his 2013 novel, *The Return to Egypt*, Sharov develops this idea even further. The novel focuses on the history of the Revolution, combining it with the history of the Runners (*Beguny*) – one of the charismatic sects in imperial Russia. In this novel, Sharov resolves all contradictions of Russian history through the image of the palindrome: "Both history and our own lives are built on palindromes. Christ with Antichrist, the Holy Land and Egypt, good and evil, there is no difference. One could read from right to left or from left to right, everything is the same."[51] This image erases distinctions, creating a holistic picture of early Soviet history. For Dominick LaCapra, the processes of overcoming trauma involves making distinctions or developing articulations that "function as limits and as possibly desirable resistances to undecidability, particularly when the latter is tantamount to confusion and the obliteration or blurring of all distinctions."[52] Therefore, blurred distinctions and a blocked future foreclose the overcoming of the traumatic past.[53] Both the official historical consensus and Sharov's obfuscation of ideological differences create a holistic view of history that is driven by a unifying idea.

Traumatic history and the specificity of Russian postmodernism

Both *The Old Girl* and *The Resurrection of Lazarus* contain a number of elements typical of classic Russian novels, such as character development rooted in psychological complexity and plotlines that include a plurality of voices. However, this resemblance is deceptive and rather superficial, since Sharov is less interested in presenting developed and realistic characters than creating characters that embody philosophical and religious ideas and traumatic periods of Russian history. Sharov takes a creative approach to Russian history, treating it as a collection of texts. Therefore, personal diaries and recovered archives play such an important role in his novels. Sharov's reimagining of the past, as well as his attention to the textual or constructed quality of history, would appear to place his fiction with the works of international postmodernism that Linda Hutcheon describes as "historiographic metafiction." For Hutcheon, this type of literature

> refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.[54]

In fact, Sharov's work has been classified as postmodernist since the 1990s. Mark Lipovetsky compared Sharov to such postmodernist writers as Iurii Buida, Dmitrii Lipskerov, and Valerii Zalotukha.[55] More recently, Khan, Lipovetsky, Reyfman, and Sandler have placed Sharov within the neo-baroque trend in post-Soviet postmodernism.[56] At the same time, however, Sharov rejected being labelled a postmodernist writer, stating: "I consider myself a realist. I do not now, nor have I ever, considered myself a postmodernist of any stripe."[57] This self-designation as a realist author is surprising, given the alternative universe constructed in his novels. Postmodern literature is usually characterized by irony and destruction of grand narratives. While Sharov is quite ironic in his depictions of the apocalyptic expectations of early twentieth-century Russian culture – after all, all the novels' salvation plans ultimately fail – his fiction nevertheless creates a kind of grand narrative by constructing a unified view of Russian history. Moreover, in Sharov's own description, his novels are invested in revealing deeper truths about Russian history and culture. According to Irina Ashcheulova, Sharov sees history as a "way to understand being, and as a way to comprehend the metaphysical meaning of life."[58] In the interview for *Rossiiskaia gazeta* mentioned above, Sharov described Russian history as a commentary on the Bible: "I understand the entirety of Russian history through the Bible, and I am trying to write about it. Our history seems to me not a Book of Genesis, but a book of comments, interpretations of biblical texts. Comments on Genesis . . . ."[59]

By claiming to express deeper truth, Sharov creates a new mythology of the past. Given this revelatory approach, it is hard to see Sharov's counter-factual history as primarily ironic, unless Sharov maintained his postmodernist persona even during interviews, such that the alleged parallel between Russian history and the Bible is also a postmodern game. If we take Sharov's interviews and essays at face value, they lead us to re-examine his fiction by paying closer attention to its religious ideas. In the same interview, the author also claimed that he had a great respect for history, not as an abstract idea but as the real history of events.[60] In fact, placing Sharov's fiction with postmodernist literature might lead to misinterpreting the author's intentions and worldview. On the contrary, it appears that Sharov endorses an essentialist view of Russian history that depicts the past as uniquely influenced by sectarian beliefs and messianic ideologies. In this respect, the closest analogue to Sharov is Berdiaev – a thinker quite different from postmodernist philosophers. Like Berdiaev, Sharov sees religious belief as an underlying principle or a deeper meaning of Russian and Soviet history – an idea antithetical to most postmodernist fiction, with its emphasis on textual play rather than the pursuit of deeper meaning. Moreover, the references to the Bible help Sharov to account for the traumatic aspects of Russian history. For Sharov, this religious interpretation of Russian history serves as a grand narrative that runs as a unifying theme throughout his works.

Sharov's combination of postmodernist style with the desire for a grand narrative points to the modification of postmodernism in the Russian context. Specifically, his emphasis on the particularity of Russian history as a higher truth places him close to contemporary conservative writers who employ a postmodernist style, particularly Aleksandr Prokhanov.[61] In the 1990s, postmodernism was associated with a liberal political agenda and moral relativism; however, in the twenty-first century some conservative writers, such as Prokhanov and Pavel Krusanov, have adapted the aesthetically provocative styles and tropes of such postmodernist writers as Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin.[62] These conservative and imperialist writers "smoothly incorporate postmodern genres and tropes into a radical political-literary program which, in a highly ambivalent tone, proposes to address the problem of Russia's future by autocratic, totalitarian, or 'imperial' means." They "merge ideological radicalism with postmodern irony, pastiche, and humor."[63]

While Sharov does not share these authors' ideology, he is similarly invested in a grand narrative. Like Sharov, Prokhanov's novels connect Stalinism and Christian beliefs, even if Prokhanov focuses on the Orthodox faith rather than on the Russian charismatic sects. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from Prokhanov's novel *Krym* (Crimea, 2014):

> In this sacred place, in the city of the Russian Victory, a fountain was built. This Stalingrad fountain is sacred. This is a chapel built on the source of the Russian Victory. The water in the fountain is holy. It will heal the sick, comfort the offended, return the faith to the dejected, fill the strength of the weakened.[64]

Prokhanov equates Stalinism and Orthodoxy with the state, seeing them as guiding principles of the Russian past – principles that have to be restored in contemporary Russian life. Moreover, both Prokhanov and Sharov combine a kind of grand narrative with postmodernist stylistics of playfulness and irony. While I agree with Kevin Platt that a critical worldview is not a prerequisite of postmodernism, the belief in a deeper meaning of history contradicts postmodernist philosophy.[65] Both authors employ a kind of split irony that coexists with a deeper spiritual truth of Russian history, even if Sharov's irony is much more complex, working on both textual and narrative levels. Probably because of this preoccupation with spiritual meaning, the novels of both authors are characterized by repetition of their major themes – characters, imagery, and ideas migrate from one novel to the next, leading to the remarkable consistency of their fiction. For writers such as Prokhanov, the grand narrative expresses imperial nostalgia; for Sharov, it serves to explain Russia's difficult history. This similarity suggests the authors' longing for some deeper truth characteristic of an earlier time, even if their style is clearly postmodernist.[66]

For Hutcheon, "Historiographic metafiction does not pretend to reproduce events, but to direct us, instead, to facts, or to new directions in which to think about events."[67] Thus, according to Hutcheon, the best examples of this writing would deepen our understanding of the past in its complexity and in connection to the flow of history. Hutcheon's interpretation of historiographic metafiction corresponds to Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the best examples of postmodernism would give the audience an ability to imagine new social structures and new cognitive connections, resulting in "a global cognitive social mapping."[68] While Sharov offers highly unconventional interpretations of Soviet history, in contrast to the contestatory function of historiographic metafiction, his works have become comparable to Putin-era cultural trends such as conspiracy theories and reconciliation of historical narratives.

Conclusion

Sharov's unique narratives and grotesque imagery serve as a shortcut that provides access to past traumatic experiences. However, his fiction represents Russian history as exotic and insulated from world processes. In this respect, his fiction and non-fiction are comparable to those of conservative writers who depict Russia as a unique civilization radically different from other countries. Like the works by conservative writers, such as Prokhanov and Krusanov, his works combine postmodernist style with a particular interpretation of Russian history. Following one of the most prominent trends of Russian culture and politics, Sharov's novels focus on the past, depicting the present as insignificant; therefore, his characters live in their archives or even reverse their life progression. The contemporary Russian poet Mariia Stepanova sees this constant return to historical paradigms as symptomatic of the post-Soviet period and as the biggest problem besetting the Russian intelligentsia. According to Stepanova, the obsession with history prevents Russian cultural elites from developing the language to describe not only a vision for the future but even the present condition.[69] Consequently, official Russian politics and culture are preoccupied with national history, failing to provide a coherent picture of the future.

In the early 1990s, when Sharov's novel *Before & During* was published in *Novyi mir*, two members of its editorial board protested the decision.[70] However, in 2014 his novel *The Return to Egypt* won both the Russian Booker Prize and the Student Booker, while also receiving third prize in the "Big Book" awards. Sharov's novels had entered the literary and cultural mainstream. Neither Sharov's style nor his historical vision had significantly changed; nevertheless, Sharov's fiction met with greater acceptance, and in recent years this development has continued. Postmodernist style has become much more common in the representation of Russian history, appearing even in official media. While Sharov did not subscribe to the official interpretation of Russian history that celebrates statist and imperial projects, the author's reconciliation of equally grotesque parts of Russian history allows for an approach to trauma similar to that of official Russian culture, exemplified in the Raketa watch commercial. This view presents everyone as equal victims of traumatic historical forces, thus removing the necessity of further disagreements and debates. Sharov constructs a kind of reconciliation of opposites to yield a holistic picture of Soviet and Russian history. His novels contain a synthetic view of the past that unites such incompatible elements as Orthodox Christianity, sectarians of all stripes, Bolshevism, and Stalinism. The dominance of the ideology of reconciliation and unification both in Sharov's fiction and in Russian culture forecloses a more sustained examination of the social and cultural diversity of Soviet history. This totalizing, if contradictory, approach to history is becoming a dominant feature of the current state's ideology, with the Russian state mobilizing history as one of its legitimation and security strategies.[71]

Notes

1. The video can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQztvXt6Agw.
2. The problem appears especially acute, since, in the Russian context, a number of events, such as the Revolutions of 1917, Stalinist repressions, World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the instability of the 1990s can be interpreted as traumatic depending on the chosen perspective. That these events can be interpreted in a variety of ways emphasizes the constructed nature of collective traumas. For the discussion of collective trauma as a narrative, see Alexander, *Trauma*.
3. Sharov's depictions of Bolsheviks, and especially Soviet security forces, as sectarian believers to some extent parallels Yuri Slezkine's understanding of early Soviet ideology as that of a religious sect. Apparently independently from Slezkine, Sharov develops this idea much further; whereas Slezkine suggests that Bolsheviks were similar to early Christians, Sharov describes Soviet security forces espousing a variety of sectarian Christian beliefs. Slezkine, *House of Government*.

4. Philip Bullock points out that current Sharov scholarship revolves around the two interrelated themes of historiography and literary style. Bullock, “Beginnings, Endings, and Eternal,” 62.
5. This historical preoccupation of Sharov’s fiction is remarkably consistent. In an interview with Mark Lipovetskii, Sharov claimed that each of his subsequent novels continues the previous one. Sharov, “‘Kazhdyi moi novyi roman’.”
6. Sharov’s grotesque and carnivalesque representation of Soviet life is close to that of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*.
7. Kahn et al., *History of Russian Literature*, 701.
8. Among recent scholarly publications dedicated to Sharov’s fiction, especially remarkable is *Vladimir Sharov: Po tu storonu istorii*, edited by Mark Lipovetskii and Anastasiia De Lia Fortel’ and published soon after Sharov’s death. The volume combines memoir essays, critical articles, and interviews and highly evaluates Sharov’s personality and fiction.
9. Etkind, *Warped Mourning,* 227.
10. Sharov, “‘Otkaz ot detei’,” 369; and Sharov, “Oktiabr’ semnadtsatogo goda,” 369–379.
11. Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 10.
12. In Russia, conservative and liberal ideological camps are defined to a significant degree by their evaluation of Soviet history. On one hand, Russian liberal elites see the Soviet past as a burden that has to be cast aside in order to move on to a democratic future, while on the other hand conservative elites “look back on the Soviet period as a golden era for Russia.” Gjerde, “Use of History,” 150.
13. Sakwa, “Politics in Russia,” 13.
14. Gjerde, “Use of History,” 152.
15. Ibid.
16. Platt, “Post-Soviet is Over,” 9.
17. See for example, the history textbook under the authorship of Aleksandr Filipov published in 2007.
18. Vázquez, “History as a Propaganda,” 167.
19. March, “Nationalism for Export?” 406.
20. Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opylenie*, 60.
21. Ibid., 87.
22. Etkind, “Stories of the Undead,” 650.
23. Ibid., 657.
24. This emphasis on unfinished mourning leads Etkind to read much of contemporary Russian fiction as post-catastrophic rather than postmodernist. Etkind, “Sharov kak istorik,” 176. However, *postmodernist* does not have to be contrasted with *post-traumatic*.
25. Gheith, “‘I Never Talked’,” 160.
26. Differently from Etkind, Gheith sees these grotesque and non-narrative forms of expression not as “warped mourning,” but as an adequate way to represent the traumatic past in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.
27. Jeffrey Alexander understands collective trauma as culturally constructed narratives. Artists and other public intellectuals play a prominent role in their construction. Alexander, *Trauma*, 2.
28. Rutten, *Unattainable Bride Russia*, 16.
29. Etkind argues that women play an especially important symbolic role in a number of Sharov’s novels. Etkind, “Sharov kak istorik,” 167.
30. Sharov, *Staraia devochka*, 8. All translations from Sharov’s novels are the author’s.
31. Sharov, “Chto sluchilos’ s istoriei?”
32. Borenstein, *Plots against Russia*.
33. Lipovetsky, “Anything Goes.”
34. Livers, “Tower or the Labyrinth,” 477.
35. Laruelle, “Conspiracy and Alternate Histories,” 566.
36. Children are among the central symbols of Sharov’s fiction and essays.
37. Sharov, *Staraia devochka*, 129.
38. Lipovetskii, “Teologiia terrora,” 181.
39. Ibid., 182–200.
40. Epshtein, “Satanaditseia,” 152.

41. Like the characters in Sharov's fictions, the protagonist of Belyi's *Petersburg*, Nikolai Ableukhov, is a failed revolutionary. The apocalyptic expectations of the novel's characters similarly remain unrealized in *Petersburg*.
42. De Lia Fortel', "'Khod Konia'," 265.
43. Sharov, *Voskreshenie Lazaria*, 103–104.
44. Berdyaev, *Russian Revolution*, 43.
45. Sharov, "Kommentarii k Bytiiu."
46. Sharov, *Voskreshenie Lazaria*, 182.
47. Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opylenie*, 61.
48. Sharov, "Neskol'ko myslei v zashchitu."
49. Sharov, "Est' obraz mira," 174.
50. Ibid., 177.
51. Sharov, *Vozvrashchenie v Egipet*, 367–368.
52. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 22.
53. Ibid.
54. Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 93.
55. Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, 156.
56. See note 7 above.
57. Sharov, "Est' obraz mira," 176.
58. Ashcheulova, "Avtorskaia istoriosofiia v esseistike," 75.
59. See note 45 above.
60. Ibid.
61. Here I do not mean to compare Sharov to these writers in terms of the quality of their prose.
62. Noordenbos, "Ironic Imperialism," 149.
63. Ibid., 149–150.
64. Prokhanov, *Krym*, 108.
65. Platt, "Postmodernizm – eto ne problema."
66. Lipovetsky argues that one of the central problems of Russian postmodernism is a "desire to find a 'true transcendental signified' instead of the 'sacred symbols' of Soviet culture and the stale 'spirituality' of the Russian classics." Lipovetsky, "Post-Soviet Literature," 185. However, writers such as Sharov and Prokhanov take this tendency much further by creating new grand narratives of Russian history.
67. Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 154.
68. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 92.
69. Stepanova, "Haunted House."
70. Kostyrko and Rodnianskaia, "Sor iz izby."
71. Bækken and Enstad, "Identity under Siege."

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