Vladimir Sorokin's Languages: An Introduction

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From Moscow underground to the English audience

The future post-modern and (post-)Conceptualist classic Vladimir Georgievich Sorokin was born in Bykovo near Moscow in 1955. Having obtained academic training as a chemical engineer, he worked for several years as a book designer and illustrator, before joining the artistic underground in Moscow and starting to write for samizdat and tamizdat. As one of the youngest members of the Moscow Conceptualists, a term introduced by the group's theoretician Boris Groys,[1] he cooperated with Ilya Kabakov (born 1933), Lev Rubinshtein (born 1947) and Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov (1940–2007), and in combination with the latter also with Viktor Erofeev,[2] to whose works some of his earlier material was often compared.[3]

During the Soviet era, censorship prevented Sorokin from becoming known beyond the inner underground circle. The late 1980s, however, saw the start of an academic response in the German-speaking countries. In the early 1990s, the Zurich-based publisher Haffmans released the first translations of Sorokin's books into German,[4] and the first mono-

1 Boris Groys, 2003, "Moskovskii romanticheskii kontseptualizm," *Iskusstvo utopii,* Moscow, pp. 168–86.

2 Viktor Erofeev, Dmitrii Prigov, Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, *EPS: Sbornik rasskazov i stikhov*, Moscow.

3 Ellen Rutten, 2010, *Unattainable Bride Russia: Gendering Nation, State, and Intelligentsia in Russian Intellectual Culture*, Evanston, Ill., pp. 162–63.

4 Vladimir Sorokin, 1990, *Die Schlange: Roman*, transl. P. Urban, Zürich; Vladimir Sorokin, 1991, *Marinas dreißigste Liebe*, transl. T. Wiedling, Zürich; Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, *Der Obelisk: Erzählungen*, transl. G. Leupold, Zürich; Vladimir Sorokin, 1992,

graphic Sorokin conference took place in Mannheim in 1997.[5] In the light of this academic interest abroad, Sorokin's books, when they eventually came to be published in Russia in the 1990s,[6] were received with a double distance—as texts from the Soviet past and "from abroad." *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999) was Sorokin's first book to sell well in Russia.

Sorokin eventually came to the attention of a broader Russian public in the wake of the scandal whipped up by the pro-Putin youth movement *Idushchie vmeste* (*Walking Together*) around *Blue Lard* in 2002. Since then, Sorokin has become indisputably one of the most prominent writers in contemporary Russia, surrounded by an aura of political dissent.

Whereas Sorokin's works are widely discussed in Russia and in the German-speaking countries, his œuvre has attracted little research in the Anglo-American world. Since the translation of *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983) in 1988,[7] it has taken roughly twenty years for further books by Sorokin to be translated into English.[8] This is even more telling if one bears in mind that books by Sorokin have been translated into many

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Ein Monat in Dachau, transl. P. Urban, Zürich; Vladimir Sorokin, 1993, *Die Herzen der Vier*, transl. T. Wiedling, Zürich.

5 Burkhart, Dagmar, 1999, "Ästhetik der Häßlichkeit und Pastiche im Werk von Vladimir Sorokin," *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 9–19. For an outline of the early academic reception see Dirk Uffelmann, 2000, "Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk Sorokins, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, 1999 [book review]," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 45, pp. 279–82. Russian monographs followed later: O.V. Bogdanova, 2005, *Kontseptualist, pisatel' i khudozhnik Vladimir Sorokin: uchebno-metodicheskoe posobie*, St Petersburg; B.V. Sokolov, 2005, *Moia kniga o Vladimire Sorokine*, Moscow; Maksim Marusenkov, 2012, *Absurdopediia russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina: zaum', grotesk i absurd,* St Petersburg; Natal'ia N. Andreeva & Ekaterina S. Bibergan, 2012, *Igry i teksty Vladimira Sorokina*, St Petersburg.

6 It started with Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, *Sbornik rasskazov*, Moscow, and continued with Vladimir Sorokin, 1994, *Roman*, Moscow, and Vladimir Sorokin, 1994, *Norma*, Moscow.

7 Vladimir Sorokin, 1988, *The Queue*, transl. S. Laird, New York. The English translation followed the French tamizdat edition (Vladimir Sorokin, 1985, *Ochered'*, Paris) and was published in the same year as the Polish samizdat translation (Władimir Sorokin, 1988, *Kolejka*, transl. I. Lewandowska, Cracow).

8 Vladimir Sorokin, 2007, *Ice*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York; Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, *Day of the Oprichnik*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York; Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, *Ice Trilogy*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York. It should be noted that some scattered translations of individual stories by Sorokin were published in magazines and anthologies during the 1990s.

other languages, including Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak and Swedish, and almost the whole of Sorokin's œuvre is available in German. Correspondingly, the number of academic articles in English lags behind research literature not only in Russian, but also in German.

"Vladimir Sorokin's Languages," the second monographic conference devoted exclusively to Sorokin's œuvre, which took place in Aarhus, Denmark, from 29 to 31 March 2012, aimed to fill this academic gap in the Anglophone academia and was therefore held in English—apart from the roundtable discussion on translation, which was conducted in Russian. The conference started with a keynote lecture, delivered by Mark Lipovetsky, and culminated when Vladimir Sorokin himself joined in towards the end to meet his translators, who engaged with him in a discussion about the challenge of translating his works into other linguistic and cultural contexts. The Aarhus event concluded with Sorokin reading from *Metel'* (*The Snowstorm*, 2010) and the launch of this book's Danish translation by the Copenhagen-based publisher Vandkunsten.[9]

Research on Sorokin's language(s)

Taking translation and the plurality of languages as a starting point, language played a key role for the Aarhus-based Sorokin event. Language (and languages) was not addressed as a barrier to be overcome by translation and not only as the very texture of which literature is made. It was also discussed as one of the main focal points, if not *the* main focal point, of Sorokin's œuvre, which possesses metalinguistic, metarhetorical, metastylistic, metadiscursive and metapragmatic dimensions.[10] The conference therefore focused on the multifaceted dimensions of language(s) and metalanguage(s) in Sorokin's works, including archaisms and neologisms, foreign terms or intercultural stereotypes, colloquial and vulgar language.

9 Vladimir Sorokin, 2012, *Snestormen*, transl. T. Roesen, Copenhagen.

10 Cf. Peter Deutschmann, 1998, "Dialog der Texte und Folter: Vladimir Sorokins 'Mesjac v Dachau'," *Romantik—Moderne—Postmoderne: Beiträge zum ersten Kolloquium des Jungen Forums Slavistische Literaturwissenschaft, Hamburg 1996* (Slavische Literaturen 15), eds. C. Gölz, A. Otto & R. Vogt, Frankfurt/M. et al., pp. 324–51.

The contributions to the conference and to this volume drew on existing research devoted to the "language(s) problem," which evolved around five nodes: 1) the lack of the author's "own" language, which questions the very concept of authorship, 2) the reflection on language as such and its pragmatics in Sorokin's texts, 3) language as a "generator" for Sorokin's plots and textual worlds, 4) the presence of various languages in his works, and 5) the question of translatability.

1) *Sorokin's texts as already "foreign"*: The problem of determining any "own" language of Sorokin, whose œuvre comes with various poetics and dozens of different styles, makes it impossible to inscribe him into the tradition of a particular moral authority, as ascribed to the Russian Writer with a capital W. Instead of developing an idiostyle, Sorokin's trademark is rather the "Nachvollzug"[11] or mimicry of foreign texts and/or entire textual systems such as epoch styles, which his stylizations reproduce in a deliberately recognizable way. Irrespective of the kind of pre-texts, particular intertexts or stylistic systems he deals with, he does not appropriate them but keeps them at a "xenotextual"[12] distance. Sorokin operates as a medium[13] or a ventriloquist[14] rather than a creator, and thus somehow appears innocent.[15] Reacting to this bundle of scholarly observations, one might consider a defensive terminological solution where the almost inevitable talk of "Sorokin's texts" would bracket both authorship and ownership: "(Sorokin's) texts." Not by chance is the motif of cloning so prominent in his work, especially in *Blue Lard*, where the reader is presented with the (imperfect) textual products of the clones Dostoevsky-2, Akhmatova-2, Platonov-3, Chekhov-3, Nabokov-7, Pasternak-1 and Tolstoy-4.

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11 Georg Witte, 1989, *Appell—Spiel—Ritual: Textpraktiken in der russischen Literatur der sechziger bis achtziger Jahre* (Opera Slavica 14), Wiesbaden, p. 152.

12 Dirk Uffelmann, 2010, "Marina, oder Sorokins Konzeptkenose," *Der erniedrigte Christus—Metaphern und Metonymien in der russischen Kultur und* Literatur, (Bausteine zur Slavische Philologie und Kulturgeschichte NF—Reihe A: Slavistische Forschungen 62), Cologne et al., pp. 853–918, p. 901.

13 Mikhail Ryklin, 1998, "Medium i avtor," *Vladimir Sorokin: Sobranie sochinenii,* vol 2, pp. 737–51.

14 Natascha Drubek-Meyer, 1999, "Sorokins Bauch-Reden als Negativ-*performance*," *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 197–212.

15 Igor' P. Smirnov, 1995, "Oskorbliaiushchaia nevinnost'," *Mesto pechati* 7, pp. 25–47.

2) *Sorokin's texts about language*: Researchers have pointed out many times that the postmodernist Sorokin replaces referentiality with reference to language, instead of any kind of pre- or extralingual reality. The metalingual tendency in his œuvre goes hand in hand with metaartistic titles such as *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1985–89) or "Kontsert" ("The Concert," a draft later included in *Blue Lard*).[16] If Sorokin's texts focus on the functions and mechanisms of language, this in no way excludes pragmatic implications. On the contrary: the plots of Sorokin's prose works often lay bare the violent nature of vulgar language and stress the performative potential of language[17] and its connection to the body, not only the bodies of the protagonists but also those of the author and the recipients. His early texts, in particular, reportedly caused physical repulsion in unsophisticated readers with native Russian, who had internalized the traditional taboo against the (scriptural) use of the vulgar language stratum *mat*.[18] No less telling was the astonishment voiced by experienced readers over the (relative) absence of *mat* in Sorokin's texts from the late 2000s.[19]

3) *Language as generator of Sorokin's texts*: Not only is language in Sorokin's œuvre constantly meta-thematized. Many of the very plots of Sorokin's prose texts are motivated by the plot-building device of materializing colloquial (and vulgar) metaphors.[20] Unreadable passages, often toward the end of a segment or entire text, draw the reader's attention to the material dimension of language, to the phonetics of interjection (the destruction of articulated language in the fifth part of *Norma* (*The*

16 Susi Frank, 1999, "What the Fuck is Koncert…," *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin* (Die Welt der Slaven Sammelbände 6), ed. D. Burkhart, Munich, pp. 229–38.

17 Sylvia Sasse, 2003, "Vladimir Sorokin—literarische Sprech- und Sprachakte," *Texte in Aktion*: *Sprech- und Sprachakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus* (Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste 102), Munich, pp. 189–292; Neil Stewart, 2006, "'Ästhetik des Widerlichen' und 'Folterkammer des Wortes': Die russische Konzeptkunst von Vladimir Sorokin," *Das schlechte Gewissen der Moderne: Kulturtheorie und Gewaltdarstellung in Literatur und Film nach 1968*, eds. Jochen Fritz & Neil Stewart, Cologne et al., pp. 231–72.

18 Mikhail Ryklin, 1992, "Terrorologiki II," *Terrorologiki*, Moscow & Tartu, pp. 185–221.

19 See, for example Aleksandr Voznesenskii & Evgenii Lesin, 2004, "Chelovek—miasnaia mashina," *http://www.srkn.ru:8080/criticism/lesin.shtml*, accessed 3 August 2012.

20 Christine Engel, 1997, "Sorokin im Kontext der russischen Postmoderne: Problem der Wirklichkeitskonstruktion," *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch* 43, pp. 53–66, and many others.

Norm, 1979–83), to seriality and uniformity (the endings of *Roman/A Novel* and *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (*Marina's Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84)). Voluminous novels are less made for reading than for reception as a haptic artifact destined to be leafed through and weighed in the reader's hands,[21] or as an exercise in continuity, challenging both the writer's and the reader's patience (like the *Led* (*Ice*) trilogy, 2002–2005).

4) *Foreign languages in Sorokin's texts*: Another type of obstacle to reading is connected to the intrusion of foreign language elements into the Russian texts. Whereas, in Sorokin's works from the 1990s, the privileged foreign language was German (in *Mesiats v Dakhau* (*A Month in Dachau*, 1990), in the film script for *Bezumnyi Frits* (*Mad Fritz*, 1994) or in *Hochzeitsreise* (1994–95), which even has an original German title), in *Blue Lard*, Chinese took over. Sometimes transliterated and translated, but far from always understandable, languages which use other alphabets draw additional focus to the materiality of letters etc. As with German, which in Sorokin's works is closely related to the history of the Third Reich and the Second World War, there is often a mixing of languages from different periods. Thus, Russian-language versions of the past and the future also intermingle (see Mark Lipovetsky's neologism *retrobudushchee* (retrofuture[22])). The imaginative foundation of textual worlds located in the future triggers fantastic languages of technology, such as in *Blue Lard* or "Iu" (2000), or even borders on mysticism.

5) *Sorokin's language(s) translated by others*: Beyond the production of the author himself lies the translation of his works into other languages, a far from easy task given the many languages and metalanguages.[23] But this is also the way in which some of the aforementioned metalinguistic estrangement effects return to the "sender": during the roundtable held in Aarhus, the author reflected on the estrangement caused by reading (or—if he does not understand the language—viewing, leafing through, weighing) his books in other languages. This reflection and many others

21 Sven Gundlakh, 1985, "Personazhnyi avtor," *A-Ya* 1, pp. 76–77; p. 77.

22 Mark Lipovetskii, 2012, "Sovetskie i postsovetskie transformatsii siuzheta vnutrennei kolonizatsii," *Tam, vnutri: praktiki vnutrennei kolonizatsii v kul'turnoi istorii Rossii*, eds. A. Etkind, D. Uffelmann & I. Kukulin, Moscow, pp. 809–45, p. 839.

23 Andreas Tretner, 2007, "Komjagas Klöten: *Der Tag des Opritschniks* aus der Nahsicht des Übersetzers," *Kultura* 2, pp. 12–14, *http://www.kultura-rus.uni-bremen.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=246&Itemid=49&lang=de*, accessed 27 May 2013.

by the author and the three translators participating in the roundtable have been transcribed, translated and edited and are presented at the end of this volume.

The volume

While drawing on and elaborating existing research on Sorokin's languages, the articles in this volume also present new approaches to the languages and various meta-levels of individual works, groups of works or the whole œuvre. Existing theories and concepts are discussed and new directions pointed out; early works are analyzed anew and recent works are scrutinized further; recurring themes, trademark devices and long lines as well as shifts, differences and exceptional texts are identified. The contributions are structured according to their approach rather than to the works they analyze, although a certain chronology occurs in the order of the different sections, so that the volume ends with chapters on Sorokin's most recent works.

In the opening article, introducing the section on "Discourse and Narration," Mark Lipovetsky proposes that it is not so much materialization as, more precisely, *carnalization* that is Sorokin's master trope, and traces this trope across his œuvre. This trajectory reveals how Sorokin, in direct as well as indirect carnalizations, methodically transforms discursive elements into living, active and suffering bodies, but also how he sometimes presents the reverse version of carnalization, i.e. disembodiment of the corporeal, as well as how, in his most recent work, multidirectional transformations co-exist. Food, drugs, ice/snow and clones are recurring motifs that serve as metaphors for apparently endless mutual transitions between the corporeal and the spiritual. To Lipovetsky, carnalization lies at the core of Sorokin's deconstruction of authoritative discourses, symbols and cultural narratives, and his analysis of its symbolic implications and heuristic potential leads him to suggest that Sorokin's method is even more radical than his critics have assumed, since it aims at the very core of the logocentric paradigm. Drawing on Prigov's words about his own method, Sorokin's writing can be seen as "staging discourses," but he also saturates the rhetorical figures with bare life. This artistic strategy may be regarded as one of the most vivid and philosophically provocative examples of neo-kynicism (Peter Sloterdijk) in contemporary Russian culture, and thus as opposing modern cyni-

cism, not with morality but with a discursive apocalypse, in an attempt to reach the non-discursive dimension.

Several aspects of discursivity and textuality are examined by Nariman Skakov in his detailed analysis of Vladimir Sorokin's *Roman/A Novel*. Regarding the novel as a daring textual experiment, in which Sorokin at once *exercises* and *exorcizes* classical novelistic writing, Skakov argues that the excessively "normal," 500-page-long first part of the novel challenges the very text it produces through an overproduction of verbal matter, and he provides examples of cracks in the narrative that begin to appear because of this tension between affirmative and critical forces. Sorokin's trademark of "shifting gears" occurs late in this work, but altogether more radical is the liberation of the protagonists from the conventional narrative constraints in the literal and metaphorical overkill of the final pages, listing Roman Vospennikov's acts of slaughter. In this latter part, it is the ritualistic repetition that allows the writer to achieve the ultimate silence of the novelistic genre, since there is no end to language's excessiveness or to its deficiency and ceaseless self-deconstruction. In addition, Skakov reflects on the semantic consequences of Sorokin's conceptual move from handwriting to typewriting the novel's manuscript, and shows us how Sorokin, in an unpublished addendum listing all the victims killed in the novel, as if in imitation of Ivan the Terrible and his *Sinodik* (Memorial List of the Executed), seems to mourn the victims for whose death he himself is responsible.

Widening the scope again to the whole of Sorokin's œuvre, Peter Deutschmann breaks new ground in leaving deconstruction and (his own paradigmatic analysis of) metadiscursivity in Sorokin's texts aside in favor of a scrutiny of narrative techniques and, with reference to a model of communication inspired by Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems, their possible implications beyond the merely formal and abstract aspects. The analysis reveals that as a designer of narratives, Sorokin displays an astounding diversity, yet favours three techniques. First, many of his texts are dominated by direct speech, i.e. representing speech acts and laying bare their illocutionary force. This device, understood as bodily acts and interactions, Deutschmann suggests, is matched metaphorically by the frequent motifs of consumption, defecation, sex and violence. The second preferred technique is the dominance of communication over consciousness, for even where introspection oc-

curs in Sorokin's texts, consciousness is approached not with a focus on epistemology or individuality, but from the perspective of speech, and is characterized by striking simplicity and uniformity. The foregrounding of text and communication over consciousness has its symbolic counterpart in drug use. Finally, complementing the many boxes, bags and other containers in his narrative universes, a preference for framing and embedding structures is detectable; simple or complicated, they imply diachronicity and contrast. The fact that communication interacts both with consciousness and with bodies leads Deutschmann to conclude that, to Sorokin, communication is more than language.

Maxim Marusenkov opens the section on "Ideal Languages" with a reading of Sorokin's artistic world as characterized by a fundamental Romantic opposition between the ideal and reality. Drawing on examples from across the whole œuvre, Marusenkov identifies four traits which together can be seen as constituting a Romantic paradigm. Thus, a conflict between two contradicting artistic realities is found in several stylistic, figurative and thematic variations in Sorokin's works, *The Norm* and *Pervyi subbotnik* (*The First Saturday Workday*, 1979–84) serving as cases in point. Just as important are embodiments of the anti-ideal, such as the faeces briquettes that constitute "the norm," and, conversely, embodiments of the ideal, such as "blue lard" and "Heaven Ice." Last but not least, the tragic unattainability of the ideal is a theme forming an absurd proto-plot in works as different and chronologically spread as *The Queue*, *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (*Four Stout Hearts*, 1991) and *The Snowstorm*. The tragic dilemma of Sorokin's œuvre, Marusenkov concludes, is that the very aspiration towards the ideal and sublime is also viewed as dangerous, for instead of harmony it may result in the triumph of violence and totalitarianism.

Romantic fairy tales by Wilhelm Hauff and Hans Christian Andersen are among the many pre-texts identified by Nadezhda Grigoryeva as informing Sorokin's mystical "language of the heart" in *Ice Trilogy*. Her article solidly places Sorokin's interest in speaking hearts in the tradition of cardiocentric theories of the mind, demonstrates how it is inspired by his linguistic plurality and skepticism about language as a medium of knowledge, and concludes that his work overcomes the overcoming of ordinary language by the avant-gardists—his language of the heart marking the death of *zaum'* (transrational language)—and not only renews but

acts out the end of the very cardiocentric tradition to which it belongs. This tradition also includes the Byzantine heritage of Hesychasm and works by François Rabelais and Maksim Gor'kii, as well as by the Russian symbolists, some of which have presented ice hearts similar to those in Sorokin's trilogy. Significantly, Sorokin focuses not only on heart speech, but also on the repeated cardiac initiation ceremony. However, although his protagonists seem at first to succeed in awakening hearts, their work is undone in the trilogy's final apocalypse, which affects only the initiated elite, while letting the "meat machines" and their language live on.

Ice Trilogy also has a central place in Ilya Kalinin's contribution, in which he highlights Sorokin's consistent attempts to discover productive forces in language, indicating a linguistic or even metalingual utopia beyond fiction and literariness that distinguishes Sorokin's project from the critique of language and discourse in the conceptualist tradition. At the level of plot, the trilogy may thematize the ideal language of the heart, but, at the level of texture, Kalinin insists, paraphrasing Roland Barthes, Sorokin is in fact striving to create "some new Adamic world where language would no longer be alienated," and this qualifies as the most straightforward affirmation of a utopian principle also discernible on various levels of his poetics in previous works (*The Norm*, *Blue Lard*, *Marina's Thirtieth Love*, as well as the screenplay *Moskva* (*Moscow*, 1997) and the collection *Pir* (*The Feast*, 2000)). Discussing the concept of utopia as the absent place (*ou-topos*), Kalinin shows that Sorokin's metalingual utopia is not the social implementation of an ethical or aesthetic ideal, but rather an instance of destruction through which the identity on which language is founded is revealed and language ceases to function as a semiotic system, while releasing its organic energy in an absolute mimetic identity with the material, physical nature of bodies and things.

In the subsequent contribution by Manuela Kovalev, introducing the section "Bad Words, Bad Writing?," *Blue Lard* is also the focus, but now scrutinized from the particular angle of obscene words or *mat*. Juxtaposing Sorokin's own claim that words are "mere letters on paper" with the fact that *Blue Lard* became the subject of an obscenity trial in 2002 (the discourse around which, ironically, was as sexualized as the discourse in the novel), Kovalev attempts to elucidate this paradox by analyzing the nature and function of verbal obscenity in the novel and its poetic function in the individual parts. In doing so, she distinguishes

between obscene language and obscenity per se, and also discusses the self-referentiality and poetic quality of obscene words, as well as their linguistic and performative functions, and the similar expressive functions assumed in parts of the novel by Chinese words, euphemisms and graphemes. Particular attention is given to the materialization of obscene metaphors and to the violent and destructive sexual acts that serve these bodily transformations. Significantly, these acts are rendered in emotionless language without any *mat*, drawing instead on excessive realism for an obscene, nauseating effect. Kovalev's analysis leads her to conclude that far from being "empty," the obscene words in *Blue Lard* are made tangible and highly visible, and that this over-visualization and self-referential hyperrealism constitute the obscene mode of the text.

That frequency matters is a major point in Dirk Uffelmann's treatise on so-called bad writing in Sorokin's œuvre. Taking as his point of departure Sorokin's mastery of several styles and languages, which in some of his works are staged coherently (in deceptive comprehensibility) while in other works they clash, mix or develop into incomprehensibility, Uffelmann sets out to develop a metatheory for a more precise differentiation of Sorokin's types of "bad writing." To this end he investigates the linguistic features and montage nature of *Blue Lard* as well as comparable constellations in the short stories from *The Feast* "Concretные" ("The Concrete Ones") and "Iu," all of which are characterized by Chinese words and passages, but to different effects in terms of functionality and comprehension. In the course of his investigation, Uffelmann explicitly distinguishes between classicist and modernist "bad writing," with their different criteria for homogeneity and heterogeneity, and also discusses the 2002 scandal, with demonstrations and accusations aimed at Sorokin and *Blue Lard*. Uffelmann's quantifying approach to the different kinds of "bad writing" results in a new perspective on the analyzed works and their popular and academic reception, and it allows him to introduce a tripartite categorization of the whole of Sorokin's œuvre.

Yet further types of norm-breaking language elements come under examination in Martin Paulsen's endeavour to understand the significance of the strong visuality and materiality of the Latin alphabet in Sorokin's texts, against the backdrop of, on the one hand, the state-reinforced special juridical and ideological status of the Cyrillic alphabet, as well as the strong standard language ideology in the Russian-language community,

and, on the other, of the long presence and recent resurgence—due to Western cultural influence and digital technology—of the Latin alphabet in Russian culture and literature, not least in post-Soviet popular culture and postmodern literary experiments. Paulsen performs two case studies in order to illustrate the differences within Sorokin's œuvre, where the frequency and use of Latin script seem to correspond to the time and place of the fictional universe. First, he looks at "Concretные," in which not only Chinese words rendered in Cyrillic, but also Latin script in a number of innovative blends and compounds, contribute to creating a nonsensical language, the Chinese element possibly signaling some kind of Russian-Chinese association separate from the European languages, whereas the Latin script serves to undermine the boundaries between Cyrillic and Latin script and thereby also the sacral status of the Cyrillic alphabet in the Russian-language community. The second case study focuses on *Roman/A Novel*, where Latin script is only used to render foreign language elements, such as the Latin names of biological phenomena, expressions in German and English and dialogues in French, the main effect being a reduction of Russian to a less precise and useful language and a destabilization of its standing.

The productive notion of a "body-text" with which to grasp Sorokin's works, be it understood as repulsive and liberating or in terms of signification and transgression, has invariably been interpreted as testifying to the fundamental incommunicability of bodily experiences. But where does this textual breakdown, this torture of language, come from? This is the question asked by José Alaniz in his contribution to the section dealing with "Bodies in and beyond the Text." Rather than staying within purely literary or metaliterary interpretations, Alaniz sets out to explore Sorokin's "physiocultural biography," suggesting that the writer's own speech difference, his stutter, forms the key to grasping an important aspect of his poetics: the stammering language, nowhere more insistent than in *A Month in Dachau*. Analyzing the many examples of repetition, recycling and return in this work, Alaniz admits that it may be defined with a deconstructive, Deleuzean move as a text constructed through a poetics of the stutter. However, since this reading abstracts the body and the writer's actual stammering out of the text, Alaniz offers a complementary analytical mode, derived from a Disability Studies approach. In this interpretation, which focuses on compensation, substitution and

creativity as tactical moves used by stammerers, Sorokin's writing also becomes a kind of prosthetic means of communication, and *A Month in Dachau*, as well as exercising linguistic estrangement, returns the writer's uncanny, unruly body to the text and, as far as the twentieth century's historical trauma and atrocities are concerned, places the stutter at the core of Sorokin's peristaltic poetics of unfreedom.

Bodies other than that of the writer are the centre of attention in Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya's piece on clones and the crisis of subjecthood, revolving around Julia Kristeva's theories of the abject. In Wakamiya's reading, the clones in Sorokin's works, as well as the coprophagia, cannibalism and scatology, serve to enact the function of the abject in subject formation, but, instead of excluding the abject and letting subjecthood emerge, the bodies in his texts tend to assimilate the abject, becoming figures of excess that erode the boundary between the subject and the threatening abject, and thus question the autonomous status of the former. Wakamiya's prime examples are *Blue Lard*, the opera libretto *Deti Rozentalia* (*Rosenthal's Children*, 2005) and the screenplay for the film *4* (*Four*, 2004). Tracking the recurring figure of the clone in these texts as well as the creative compositions of these clones, she characterizes them as figures of excess in every respect, and demonstrates how the anticipated responses to this excess, such as calls for regulation, are already integrated into the works—in the case of *4* in the protagonist Marina's function as a proxy for the viewer, being the only one to acknowledge excess and gesture toward limit, while simultaneously herself epitomizing the abject body. An awareness of the representations and functions of the abject, Wakamiya concludes, not only exposes the desire for order and limit that inform tendencies to view Sorokin's work either as self-referential or as calls to social engagement, but also serves to reconcile these tendencies.

Brigitte Obermayr's contribution also navigates between the literary text and its reception, but does so through a discussion of the basis and boundaries for deducing judgements on reality from a literary work, specifically from *Den' Oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006). Maintaining that Sorokin's novel is not so much a satirical statement on Russian contemporary reality as a discussion of the boundaries of similar judgements on reality, Obermayr elucidates its tight intertexture of historical narratives revolving around Ivan the Terrible. Through these intertexts from

Russian literature, opera, paintings, drama and film—a central precursor text being Aleksei K. Tolstoi's historical novel *Kniaz' Serebriannyi* (*Prince Serebriannyi*, 1862/63)—Sorokin addresses the crucial question of how to judge Ivan the Terrible, rather than simply comparing the Putin era to this medieval reign. Obermayr refers to Hannah Arendt for general philosophical criteria of judgement as such, transferring Arendt's insights to the case of historical novels, and introducing the concepts of "paradigmatic" historical narration as opposed to "syntagmatic" narration, the latter further elaborated in the idea of a "temporalized mode" of judgement. Obermayr concludes that *Day of the Oprichnik* deconstructs the Ivan plot and demonstrates that it is in fact about sovereign power, and as such points to the Russian empire's continuous state of political emergency.

In continuation of Obermayr's analysis of *Day of the Oprichnik*, Tine Roesen's contribution concentrates on the protagonist, Andrei Komiaga, who is apparently completely defined and driven by the imposed norms of the regime he serves. In a close reading, however, adding to the great number of contradictions in the novel, Komiaga's individuality reveals itself as problematic as well. Through a combined narratological, psychological and corporeal-symptomatological analysis, Roesen considers the question of collectivity versus individuality in relation to the narrative situation, to the protagonist's mind and behaviour and to the effects of their conflicting imperatives on his mind and body. The exclusive collective of the oprichnina, whose rituals also serve to integrate them as being of one mind and body, is read by Roesen in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival as interpreted by carnival "revisionists," i.e. as repressive and totalitarian rather than liberating. Against this background, glimpses of Komiaga's individuality—in the form of over-identification with imposed norms, exaggerated minimalization of himself, a worn-out body and, not least, poetic dreams—reveal him as a modern individual tragically caught in a limiting pre-modern regime. The effect, comic as well as tragic, establishes a streak of dark humour in the novel, alongside other more straightforwardly humorous contradictions.

Focusing on the diachronic dimensions which were already present in Obermayr and Roesen's analyses, Marina Aptekman's contribution, opening the final section on "The Languages of the Retrofuture," pinpoints some of these many contradictions in an examination of *Day of*

the Oprichnik and of the subsequent *Sakharnyi Kreml'* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008), with a particular focus on the dual nature of style and language and, accordingly, of the societies represented. Both novels are characterized by their use of a particular type of everyday archaic language for the future societies they depict, the result of which is an Old New Russian language which is grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense, being a language on the boundary of two languages representing two divergent world views. It is a language that not only utilizes folk elements and Old Russian morphological forms, aphorisms and verbal expressions, but also replicates pseudo-folk narrative discourses from post-Soviet neo-patriotic literary works and media, while simultaneously combining this "old" language with Soviet idioms, *New Russian* slang and post-Soviet concepts. Aptekman provides several examples to illustrate that the dividing line between "New Russian" and (pseudo-folk) "Old Russian" is actually very fine, and so, by implication, is the border separating the Russian past from the Russian future. Having in common the enjoyable juxtaposition of archaic verbal forms with modern technology and social phenomena, the different narrative structures of the two novels result in different versions of the Old New language. In *Day of the Oprichnik* the Old New Russian serves to characterize the first-person narrator's mentality and world view, while in *Sugar Kremlin* it is linked, through the separate stories that make up the novel, to a social study of the whole society.

The old and the new, past and present, are central to Ingunn Lunde's analysis of what she terms the diachronic dimensions of language in one of Sorokin's most recent literary works, the short story "Monoklon" (2010). In an attempt to go beyond the phenomenon of old and new words combining in his work and proceed to their juxtaposition of historically embedded linguistic features, Lunde performs a close reading of the story along three lines of enquiry: first, identifying the languages of the past, i.e. the words, phrases and concepts connected with the Soviet era ("cosmonauts" play a central role here) and the way they combine with those that refer to present-day Russia; second, detecting the various discourses of memory, collective as well as individual; and third, homing in on the prehistory of the protagonist, Viktor Nikolaevich, and the role played by his vengeful visitor, Monoklon, through the many time-bound references in the story. This analysis allows Lunde to characterize Viktor Nikolaevich as the "synchronic point zero" in which the two realms of

"now" and "before" are juxtaposed, and to conclude that the story creates a synchronicity of asynchronous historical pasts: the glorious, celebratory Soviet world of spacecrafts and cosmonauts and the violent, brutal world of the camps. Lunde interprets this in terms of an ethical and political concern on Sorokin's part, since his artistic strategy spurs the reader to reflect on the fact that these two Soviet pasts are both part of the Soviet era and must be tackled by contemporary Russia as such.

According to the final contribution, by Ilya Kukulin, the Soviet past and the dangers of refusing to scrutinize it also form a central idea in Sorokin's recent film script *Mishen'* (*The Target*, 2011), co-written with the film's director, Aleksandr Zel'dovich. Kukulin's ambitious and comprehensive investigation includes not only a close analysis of the hitherto little scrutinized film and its many links to earlier literary works by Sorokin and others, as well as to various cultural and political contexts, but also a discussion of relevant historiosophic ideas and an overview of Sorokin's treatment of history throughout his œuvre. Important contexts for the film are, first, the secret branch of Soviet science and its demonic and beneficial knowledge; second, ancient ruins such as Arkaim in the Russian steppe, visited by followers of various New Age religions; and, third, the image-paradigms of the ruin, the bewitched place and the hierophanic space in Russian culture. Although the film takes place around 2020, it can be viewed as a historico-political comment on Russia in the 2010s, in particular on representatives of the elite, who are depicted in the film as living in a radically unhistorical state from which they cannot break out, utilizing the mysterious "target" as yet another youth- and health-preserving device, and lacking the psychological resources to help them live within history. Similar historiosophic enquiries are increasingly characteristic of Sorokin's post-Soviet works, in which history appears as reality, corresponding to a mimetic structuring of narrative time, unlike his earlier works, with their logically structured narrative time and representation of history as primarily a simulacrum. In the case of *The Target*, the enquiry points to what Kukulin calls the "birth trauma" of post-Soviet elites, their inability and refusal to scrutinize their Soviet social genesis, which results in dangerously narrow horizons and irresponsibility.

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