

# Living *vnye*: The example of Bulat Okudzhava's and Vladimir Vysotskii's *avtorskaia pesnia*

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## Abstract

The paper analyzes *avtorskaia pesnia* as a deterritorializing milieu (A. Yurchak) par excellence. In order to address the question of heterogeneity during the late Soviet socialism, the analysis does a close reading of the poetry of two prominent Russian bards, B. Okudzhava and V. Vysotskii, paying special attention to one of the most authoritative Soviet cultural myths and ideologemes, that of "motherland" (*Rodina*).

**Keywords:** *avtorskaia pesnia*, B. Okudzhava, V. Vysotskii, motherland (*Rodina*).

In the period after Stalin's death and the crisis of the monolithic dogma of socialist realism, some of the most exciting cultural practices were associated with three cults: the cults of youth, individualism and westernness. In the following period of Stagnation (*zastoi*) and Brezhnev's less liberal political doctrine, the process of cultural disintegration was even intensified. *avtorskaia pesnia* (literally "author's song") responded ideally to the 'zeitgeist'. It was not only close to individualism, youth culture and student population, but also to the process of cultural disintegration. *avtorskaia pesnia* is sometimes called the poetry of wild youth. Emerging as a 'temporary autonomous zone' (cf. Hakim Bey), as part of the so-called apartment culture or the institution of communal art, it is related to the phenomenon of 'magnitizdat' (from 'magnitofon' = magnetic tape recorder and 'izda(va)t' = to publish). It directly influenced the development of Russian rock music (it is argued that this is one of the reasons why text dominates over music in Russian rock). Moreover, due to its immense popularity, *avtorskaia pesnia* influenced contemporary Russian poetry in general. In the period of late Soviet socialism it was probably the most attractive and the most widespread form of cultural production and consumption.

Two theoretical protocols frame this

analysis. First, I approach *avtorskaia pesnia* as a deterritorialized milieu (A. Yurchak) par excellence. Yurchak developed his understanding of "deterritorialization" in close epistemological connection with Bakhtin's concept of *vnenakhodimost'* (translated usually as "outsideness" or "exotopy"), which has been re-articulated in Yurchak's writings in the form of the famous operative term *vnye* ('outside'). Yurchak's understanding is closely related to what American anthropologists depict as the "performative shift" which authoritative discourse experienced during late Soviet socialism.<sup>1</sup> According to Yurchak, the authoritative language after Stalin's death developed the ability to create the reality it names. This performative shift was accompanied by a decreasing ability of the same language to relate to the objective reality it names.<sup>2</sup> As a result, authoritative language inspired "new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated or controlled by the state, although they were fully made possible by it".<sup>3</sup> New aesthetic paradigms, identities

1 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 134.

2 This refers to the "constative" function of language, cf. John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, second edition, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

3 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 128.

and social interactions created, as Yurchak further elaborates, “a major *deterritorialization* of late Soviet culture”<sup>4</sup>, which included a set of cultural and social practices that were operating *within* and yet *beyond* the hegemonic Soviet ideological discourse.

Secondly, I will do a close reading of the poetry of two prominent Russian bards, B. Okudzhava and V. Vysotskii. In doing so, I will pay special attention to one of the most authoritative ideological concepts of Soviet cultural and political history, which was often subject to mystification and glorifications of all kinds – that of “motherland” (*rodina*).

#### *Avtorskaia pesnia*

During the last few decades, both in humanities and in social sciences, theoretical descriptions of Soviet culture very often use binary terms, such as repression and freedom, oppression and resistance, official and unofficial, state and society. At the same time, various popular cultural formations belonged to the “grey zone” of culture, situated between such dichotomies.<sup>5</sup> It was precisely these practices which reflected crucial paradoxes of late Soviet socialism and influenced the ways in which ideology was constructed, regulated and understood among Soviet citizens.

4 Ibid.

5 The “high policy” played an important role in the formation of this rather disorientated (and disorientating) cultural field. During late Soviet socialism political authorities dealing with censorship were rather lost. Very often it was not clear what belonged to the sphere of the forbidden and to the sphere of the allowed. This resulted in frequent absurdities, such as the fact that in the 1970s a large number of subversive bands played in dance parties organized by the Komsomol (cf. Alexei Yurchak, “Gagarin and the Rave Kids”, *Consuming Russia. Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele M. Barker, Duke University Press, 1999, p. 83). See also: Rachel Platonov, *Singing the Self: Guitar Poetry, Community, and Identity in the Post-Stalin Period*, Northwestern University Press, 2012, pp. 38-56.

In this essay, I understand *avtorskaia pesnia* as one of the most significant cultural formations of the time. Emerging from the “grey zone” of culture, it reflected trajectories of late Soviet socialism while actively preparing political and economic changes. Speaking with Bourdieu, this popular cultural practice operated as a “structuring structure”<sup>6</sup>, which means that it had an ability to do both – organize cultural practices and their perception.

*Avtorskaia pesnia* gained immense popularity during late Soviet socialism. Bards used forbidden ways of distribution (*magnitizdat*) and played their songs on guitar<sup>7</sup>, which was

6 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 170.

7 In the practice of *avtorskaia pesnia* the guitar occupies a strong symbolic space. Therefore it is not surprising that many scholars refer to this genre as “guitar poetry” (see, for example, Rossen Djagalov, “Guitar Poetry, Democratic Socialism, and the Limits of 1960s Internationalism”, *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 148-166). While in the time before Stalin’s death guitar bore conflicting meanings, symbolizing the negativity of bourgeois lifestyle, after his death it became a cult instrument for youth self-expression. It should, however, be emphasized that, apart from its reputation of being a “democratic” instrument, the Thaw saw the rise in its popularity for other, more practical reasons. One of them was availability: guitars were cheap, for example in 1964 a guitar costed only seven rubles. Also, parallel to economic growth and increase in purchasing power in the 1960s, the Soviets became increasingly interested in traveling and hiking. These leisure practices – with the guitar as a frequent fellow-traveller – were the symbol of a liberating and politically carefree way of life among the youth. The confirmation of its symbolic and associative relation with leisure can be found in Okudzhava’s poetry, where the guitar motif is most frequent in songs referring to an “empty” time (past or leisure, or holidays). For example, in a 1979 self-reflexive song *Chuvstvuiu, pora proshchat’sia* (I Feel, Here Comes the Time to Say Goodbye) the lyrical I of Okudzhava’s song invites friends to his home, for “dinner and guitar / and words of days long gone” (Bulat Okudzhava, *Stikhotvoreniia*, Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2001, p. 264). The guitar was primarily associated with intimacy, private cultural practices taking place behind closed doors. For bards it carried a deep symbolic meaning – it was the absolute

not repressed, but out of favor with the party. People associated their songs not with labor, but with leisure activities, i.e. with “doing nothing” – hiking, camping, traveling<sup>8</sup>, or just sitting, drinking and smoking in a *khrushchevka* kitchen or in a communal apartment. The poetry of the two most prominent bards, Bulat Okudzhava (1924, Moscow – 1997, Paris) and Vladimir Vysotskii (1938, Moscow – 1980, Moscow), was rarely published in its original form. Songs of Okudzhava were officially published as written, not sung poetry. As for Vysotskii, who was remarkably famous during his lifetime because of his acting career

object of the poet’s devotion, as well as the symbol of his artistic freedom and autonomy, which is also the theme of one of Vysotskii’s most well-known songs, *Serebriannye struny* (Silver Strings) from 1962. 8 From the point of view of “high policy” of the time, traveling was to a certain extent problematic. On the one hand, weekends spent outside and organized leisure practices witnessed to the fact that the Soviet Union, like other countries, went through deep economic changes. On the other hand, these practices were marked by what culturologist P. Corrigan describes as “doing nothing”. The subversive potential of this seemingly passive social behavior is obvious. Although “doing nothing” seems as an endless waste of time, an absence of purpose, it is, in fact, “full of incident, constantly informed by ‘weird ideas’” (Paul Corrigan, “Doing Nothing”, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, second edition, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 84-87). Therefore, it is not surprising that “simple” walking was the most popular activity, along with camping, hiking, alpinism and speleology, because it obscured the fact that it was an end in itself. A witness of the period, quoted in A. Yurchak’s book, points out that archaeological expeditions did not have much to do with archaeology, but with fostering the culture of independent thinking: “It was very important on these expeditions... that everyone developed in his own direction and no one stood in the way of another’s thinking and feeling in his own way. That was very important... It was like meditation” (Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 138). According to Yurchak, the metaphor of meditation “captures well the experience of living in deterritorialized worlds of friendship, poetry, and never-ending discussions in the contexts of nature, bonfires, and hiking. The practice of meditation also stands for a particular relationship to the world – one stays acutely present in the world and yet uninvolved in its concerns, which is synonymous with the relationship of being *vnye*” (ibid.).

(which includes a highly praised performance of Hamlet), the first official recordings of his songs from the movie *Vertikal* were published in 1966. But almost none of Vysotskii’s songs were released by the state-owned recording label *Melodiia*, and only one song (*Iz dorozhnogo dnevnika – From a Traveller’s Diary*) was published in printed form through official channels, after harsh censorship. Okudzhava’s and Vysotskii’s poetry circulated the country in the form of privately-made copies. Their content and form did not follow the axioms of socialist realism, which – after Khrushchev’s famous speech at the twentieth party congress in 1956 – lost some of its discursive power, but was not abandoned in practice until the second half of the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Okudzhava’s work at *Literaturnaia gazeta* was compromised by phone calls by authorities, who were “surprised to have a guitar player working at the poetry section”<sup>10</sup>. Okudzhava’s poetry was discredited as naive, anti-patriotic, pessimistic, and pacifistic.<sup>11</sup> Vysotskii, by contrast, was “the star of the underground showbusiness”<sup>12</sup>. His poetry was part of an unofficial artistic stream in his career. Official acknowledgements of his poetical activities came only posthumously.

In this essay I argue that the popularity of Okudzhava and Vysotskii, as well as of the genre of *avtorskaia pesnia*, was directly

9 M. Epstein refers to the period after Stalin’s death as “socialist sentimentalism”. Mikhail Epstein, “After the Future: On the New Consciousness in Literature”, *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika*, eds. Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 257-287.

10 Alexandr Gorodnitskii, “... Nam ne khvatalo Okudzhavy”, *Golos nadezhdy*, Vyp. 2, Moskva: Bulat, 2005, p. 78.

11 Andrei Krylov, “Vspomnim ikh poimenno”, *Golos nadezhdy*, Vyp. 2, Moskva: Bulat, 2005, pp. 237-284.

12 Maxim Kravchinskii, *Russkaia pesnia v izgnanii: Khudozhestvennoe oformlenie*, Nizhnii Novgorod: DEKOM, 2007, p. 9.

connected to the fact that they did not take – in their poetry and in their personal lifestyles – a clear and decisive political stand.<sup>13</sup> By considering themselves anti-Stalinist, but neither anti-Soviet nor pro-Soviet, they reflected and incorporated the lifestyle that A. Yurchak describes as “living *vnye*”.<sup>14</sup> Further on, I argue that the prevailing characterization of *avtorskaia pesnia* as the sung poetry of “the loyal opposition”<sup>15</sup> is not accurate.<sup>16</sup> As a

13 The question of the level of oppositionality, that is inscribed in *avtorskaia pesnia*, is nowadays still vital among the genre’s historians. J. M. Daughtry emphasizes that “unofficial, grassroots recordings such as these – known popularly as *magnitizdat* – generate ambivalence on the part of Soviet authorities, who treat them at times as a benign by-product of amateur artistic activity, at times as a pernicious attempt to circumvent the state’s monopoly on the mediation of cultural production” (J. Martin Daughtry, “Sonic Samizdat’: Situating Unofficial Recording in the Post-Stalinist Soviet Union”, *Poetics Today* 30:1, Spring 2009, p. 28). In his book *Songs to Seven Strings: Russian Guitar Poetry and Soviet Mass Song* (1984), Gerald S. Smith emphasizes that many bards, and Okudzhava and Vysotskii respectively, “stayed by and large within the tolerated limits of [...] the middle ground between what is actively promoted and what is actively persecuted by the authorities” (cf. Platonov, *Singing the Self*, p. 6). R. Djagalov writes that “guitar poetry enjoyed a liminal, semiofficial status, never particularly liked by Soviet bloc cultural bureaucracies for the uncontrollable public sphere it fostered and the near-impossibility of censoring highly improvised, oral performances but not explicitly forbidden either” (Djagalov, “Guitar Poetry, Democratic Socialism”, p. 155).

14 Living *vnye*, according to A. Yurchak, refers to the refusal of an individual to take a clear political stand. It includes the position of being uninterested, and is applied to those who “considered themselves neither anti-Soviet nor pro-Soviet but non-Soviet (*asovetskie*), uninterested in political and ideological topics” (Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 138).

15 Namely, even the Soviet emigration of the time criticized their poetry on account of their “singing songs about Van’ka Morozov or the little blue ball” (Gorodnitskii, “... Nam ne khvatalo Okudzhavy”, p. 79) instead of offering a harsh, explicit and decisive criticism of Soviet authorities. Some authors claim that Okudzhava’s and Vysotskii’s poetry, unlike the poetry of A. Galich, was not dominated by political oppositionality but rather a symbolic one – at best (Ol’ga Shilina, “Chelovek v poeticheskom mire Vladimira Vysotskogo”, *Mir Vysotskogo*, Vyp. III/2, Moskva: GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 1999, p. 38).

16 This image of *avtorskaia pesnia* was predominantly shaped in Russian scholarship, see for ex-

ample Argus (M. K. Zhelezov), “Zoshchenko v stikhakh”, *Mir Vysotskogo*, Vyp. III/1, Moskva: GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 1968, p. 320; Vladimir G. Dagurov, “Odn poet na svete zhil”, *Golos nadezhdy*, Vyp. 3, Moskva: Bulat, 2006, p. 23; Liudmila L. Ivanova, “Istoria i pustota. K voprosu o postmodernizme”, *Mir Vysotskogo*, Vyp. V., eds. Andrei Krylov and Valentina Shcherbakova, Moskva: GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2001, p. 282; Andrei Krylov, “O zadachakh i osobennostiakh tekstologii poeticheskikh proizvedenii Okudzhavy: K postanovke problema”, *Okudzhava: Problemy poetiki i tekstologii*, ed. Andrei Krylov, Moskva: GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2002, p. 187; Mark Tsybul’skii, *Planeta Vladimir Vysotskii*, Moskva: Eksmo, 2008, p. 501.

17 Platonov, *Singing the Self: Guitar Poetry*, p. 4.; see also Adele M. Barker, “The Culture Factory”, *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele M. Barker, London: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 20-21.

18 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 139.

authoritative regime that made *avtorskaia pesnia* possible. Most bards, including Okudzhava and Vysotskii, were never imprisoned or exiled. M. Daughtry even emphasized that the tapes of *avtorskaia pesnia* were submitted “to the customs officers for review [...] before the officers emerged, smiling, to return the tapes and approve their export”.<sup>19</sup> The popularity of Vysotskii “with state officials was unmatched”<sup>20</sup>, and by the end of the 1960s, there were strong institutional ties between the bard movement in the Moscow Amateur Song Club (*Klub samodeiatel’noi pesni*) and the Komsomol.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it could be argued that it was the system itself that enabled the phenomenon of *avtorskaia pesnia* to gain popularity.<sup>22</sup> Outside the Soviet state project this cultural practice would presumably have lost its social significance and ultimately made no sense. Okudzhava even explicitly complained that *avtorskaia pesnia* lost its credibility and meaning, and became a form of mass culture, i.e. ‘estrada’, as soon as it became officially approved.<sup>23</sup> A. Krylov therefore rightly claims that “the genre would never have achieved its cultural centrality without

official censorship”<sup>24</sup>, and that “censorship’s disappearance in the late 1980s robbed the genre of the advantage it enjoyed over print culture and ironically doomed it”.<sup>25</sup>

Recalling the famous analogy between postmodernism and the cultural logic of late capitalism by F. Jameson, Yurchak describes late Soviet socialism in terms of the “double-sided cultural logic of the Soviet universe”.<sup>26</sup> “The absence of any political attitude, either pro-official or anti-official, was a way of avoiding official meanings, of existing within them – and even pretending to support them – without needing to think about them.”<sup>27</sup> Yurchak gives an apt example where listening to Vysotskii’s sung poetry reverberates this particular lifestyle:

*At the moment Lena mentioned Vysotskii to her editor, a mutual recognition of svoi occurred. They both liked Vysotskii, and although both also wrote formulaic texts, they were not completely cynical about the socialist ideals and ethics, and regularly had to attend Komsomol and party meetings.*

*The editor looked at me thoughtfully and asked: “Does your friend like Vysotskii?”*

*“Yes, I think so.”*

*“And what about you?”*

*“I could also say that I do.”*

*He was quiet for a moment and then said: “OK, I need to go to the party committee. In the meantime, you may listen to this.”*

*He turned on the tape recorder. It was Vysotskii. He added: “When you get tired of it you can turn it off.”*

*How can I GET TIRED OF VYSOTSKII?!?<sup>28</sup>*

<sup>19</sup> Daughtry, “Sonic Samizdat”, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Unofficial culture (or, as in the case of *avtorskaia pesnia*, semi-forbidden culture, cf. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 116) depended on its ability to manipulate official channels. An illustrative example is the phenomenon of *magnitizdat*, since magnetic tape recorders were manufactured in state-owned factories and sold in state-owned stores, while the state also determined the price of magnetic tape recorders. Also, it should be mentioned that the ambivalent, and often weak and unsophisticated subversive capacity of the texts of popular culture illustrates one of the key features of popular culture in general: What is to be resisted is present in the resistance to it, cf. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Dmitrii Suharev (ed.), *Avtorskaia pesnia: Antologija*, Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoria, 2002, p. 455.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Djagalov, “Guitar Poetry, Democratic Socialism”, p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Yurchak, “Gagarin and the Rave Kids”, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 123.

This example illustrates the gap between the private life of an average Soviet citizen and its public representation. Even if the citizens publicly approved of many ideas of socialism, they participated in socialist practices rather by default, without contemplating their symbolic meaning. They “inserted” socialist practices between actions they were really interested in doing, frequently in a subversive way.

Extra-textual characteristics of *avtorskaia pesnia*, concerning its production and consumption (aspects which are well known and already researched thoroughly) as well as intra-textual characteristics (that I will address in the second part of this essay) make these songs a paradigmatic example of a cultural practice that was “in peculiar relationship to the authoritative regime – they were ‘suspended’ simultaneously inside and outside of it, occupying the border zones between here and elsewhere”<sup>29</sup>. In order to elaborate this argument and to illustrate how the *vnye* lifestyle was structured, operated, and maintained, I will do a close reading of the “motherland” discourse in the poetry of the two bards.

### “Motherland”

The discourse of the “motherland” went through different stages during Soviet history. It became more defined in 1934,<sup>30</sup> after the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> In his text *Arkhetipy sovetskoi kul'tury* (The Archetypes of Soviet Culture) H. Günther writes that it is the year 1934, the year of the First Session of Soviet Writers where M. Gorkii presented his famous paper *O sotsialisticheskoi realizme* (On Socialist Realism), that saw the appearance of the female/feminine/maternal principle in the archetypal scheme of the Soviet myth. This principle, which found its most intense expression in the cult of the Homeland and the soil, is closely related to the changes of the Soviet myth, which, according to H. Günther, should be viewed as the core which generated but also maintained the Soviet culture in

beginning of socialist realism, and peaked in the poetry written during the Second World War and its aftermath.<sup>31</sup> During Thaw and Stagnation, “motherland” represented the marginal contents of the weakening state culture. These developments are more or less clearly reflected in Okudzhava’s and Vysotskii’s poetry.

The key framework of the “motherland” concept is the female, the maternal. In the Soviet period, when the role of the Great Father was attributed to Stalin, the patron of general welfare<sup>32</sup>, the female archetype was limited to the mother aspect, where the mother, like the mother of the wet soil (*mat’ syra zemlia*), has the ability of self-impregnation. Mass song (*massovaia pesnia*), the representative genre of socialist realism in art, and one of the most important propagandistic expressions of “homo sovieticus” as an ideal form of

its official form. While in the 1920s, with fresh memories of the October Revolution, the Soviet myth assumed a horizontal direction, grouping around the ideal of egalitarian brotherhood (the idea of fraternalism), the late 1920s and early 1930s saw the emergence of the figures of an older brother and wise, authoritative father (the idea of paternalism). This is the period when the Soviet myth assumed a vertical (hierarchical) direction, which implied the tendency of “ascent” from the concrete to the abstract, from action to idea, from the individual to the collective, in a word: from the low (concrete, real) to the high (ideal, symbolic) level. The horizontal distribution of the Soviet myth develops into the “complete triangle of the Great Family”, cf. Hans Günther, “Arkhetipy sovetskoi kul'tury”, *Socrealisticheskii kanon*, eds. Hans Günther and Evgeny Dobrenko, Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000, pp. 743-784. The wise father is at its top, and with the replacement of the linear with the vertical, hierarchical idea, the brothers turned into (heroic) sons and daughters. Since the sons and daughters needed the mother, and the father needed the wife, the image of a Motherland embodied the archetype of the female sex.

<sup>31</sup> See also: Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Poster under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996 (Introduction and Chapters Two and Three).

<sup>32</sup> Samarin in: Günther, “Arkhetipy sovetskoi kul'tury”, p. 765.

Soviet political subjectivity, conceived of the “motherland” as follows:

1. The “motherland” is seen as a place that constantly renews its energy (light and warmth). The energy originates in Moscow, or in the Kremlin, and thanks to the strength of the source, the light and warmth reach Siberia, the outer border of the “motherland”. Along the vast stretch from the centre to the frontier there are also other sources of energy. The “motherland” represents the synergy of all these sources, constantly renewing its energy potential (like a star or the sun). Due to the fact that it revolves around motives of source, origin and development, this specific discourse of the “motherland” can be termed “cosmogonical”.

2. In this discourse, the most characteristic symbolic ornament, representing the “motherland” chronotope, is the circle. Apart from the fact that it symbolizes perfection, it also signifies the femininity of the concept.

3. In this kind of poetry, there are only two types of subjects (“I” and “we”), and both of them express their affirmative relationship with the “motherland”. Both subjects are impersonal, but presumably masculine. The love of the (masculine) subject towards the (feminine) object is asexual and protective (resembling the relationship between a son and his mother) and primarily moral. Loving the “motherland” is a matter of collective, as well as individual duty.<sup>33</sup>

33 These conclusions are based on my readings of numerous popular mass songs of the time (1920s-early 1950s), such as *Pesnia o Rodine* (Song About “Motherland”), *Marsh veselykh rebiat* (March Of the Cheerful Children), *My Rodinu slavim trudom* (We Celebrate “Motherland” With Labour), *Pesnia o Volge* (Song About Volga) by V. Lebedev-Kumach, *Vernulsia ia na Rodinu* (I’ve Returned to “Motherland”) by M. Matusovsky, *Rodina* (“Motherland”) by D. Altauzen, *Letiat pereletnye pticy* (Migrant Birds Fly) by M. Isakovskiy, *Daleko ot doma* (Far From Home) by H. Labkovskiy, *Toska po Rodine* (Yearning For the “Motherland”) by E. Dolmatovskiy, *Kremil’ noch’iu*

Such a discourse of the “motherland” is not only characteristic of the “golden age” of socialist realism (from 1934 till 1953). The stereotypes of the “motherland” are also echoed in the cultures of the Thaw and Stagnation (until the early 1980s), especially in the works of writers and poets whose art offered an aesthetical revision of socialist ideas in the spirit of Leninism.<sup>34</sup>

### Okudzhava’s Arbat

Okudzhava “gave birth” to the bard movement – a movement of “singers of guitar poetry who would forever elude official control, and whose intimate songs distributed by modern tape technology opened a space for free discourse in Soviet society”.<sup>35</sup> Okudzhava’s *avtorskaia pesnia* – like the one written by other poets – has a distinctive urban quality. In his texts, Moscow carries a strong symbolism, resembling the stereotype of “motherland” in mass poetry. However, Okudzhava’s lyrical subject uses Moscow to express feelings opposite to those emanating from mass poetry: the sense of lack, of not-having, of radical emptiness, loss and disappointment. The Kremlin is associated with darkness, while the author’s focus lies on the iconic (but

(Kremlin by Night) by S. Vasil’ev and many others. More in: Danijela Lugiarić Vukas, *Ruski bardii. Modusi popularnog u poeziji Bulata Okudzhava i Vladimira Vysockog* (Russian Bards: Popular Aspects in the Author’s Song of Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Vysotskii), Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2011, pp. 161-248. Valuable insights, many of whom inspired my analysis as well, are offered in: Irina Sandomirskaja, “Kniga o Rodine. Opyt analiza diskursivnykh praktik”, *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, Sonderband 50, 2001.

34 See: Mikha Javornik, “Ekologija teksta in ruska kultura 20. stoletja”, *Primerjalna književnost*, vol. 30, issue 1, 2007, p. 63.

35 James von Geldern, “1961. Bulat Okudzhava”, *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <http://www.soviet-history.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1961okudzhava&Year=1961>, accessed 31 August 2017.

– in spatial terms – marginal) Arbat street. For Okudzhava the Arbat represents a “garden of Eden”, a “motherland in miniature”, a microcosm, a “genetic motherland” and the most valuable source of creative inspiration. In his song *Rechitativ* (Recitative), which belongs to the so-called “Arbat cycle”, the Arbat is represented as a unique and modest private space (the Arbat courtyard) existing exclusively in the poet’s memory. This space, originating from the personal memory of the poet, becomes a ‘*lieu de mémoire*’ in Pierre Nora’s understanding, i.e. an “entity [...], which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community”<sup>36</sup>. Autobiographical details (a private courtyard, planted birches) are intertwined with elements of collective cultural memory (Homer, of whom there are no traces, and Glazkov, who lived across the street):

*Тот самый двор, где я сажал березы,  
был создан по законам вечной прозы  
и образом дворов арбатских слыл:  
там, правда, не выращивались розы,  
да и Гомер туда не заходил...  
Зато поэт Глазков напротив жил [...]*<sup>37</sup>

In his famous *Pesenka o moskovskom murav'e* (Poem of the Moscow Ant), the poet contrasts the great city of Moscow with the lyrical subject – a tiny ant. What is highlighted are not the political or otherwise significant parts

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Nora, *Preface to the English-language edition. From Lieux de memoire to Realms of Memory*, [http://faculty.smu.edu/bwheeler/Joan\\_of\\_Arc/OLR/03\\_PierreNora\\_LieuxdeMemoire.pdf](http://faculty.smu.edu/bwheeler/Joan_of_Arc/OLR/03_PierreNora_LieuxdeMemoire.pdf), p. xvii, accessed 31 August 2017.

<sup>37</sup> “That same yard where I planted birch, / was established by the laws of eternal prose / and by the sample of Arbat yards: / there, however, roses did not grow, / and Homer did not go there... / But the poet Glazkov lived opposite.” (Translated by D. Lugarić Vukas.) Okudzhava, *Stikhotvoreniia*, p. 239.

of the city, but rather its empty, disorientating “winding streets”. Even though the city carries the “higher rank and name of Moscow”, the lyrical subject perceives it as warm. The interaction between the lyrical subject and the city effectively deconstructs the idea of Soviet and Stalinist culture that a man, being a part of a collective “we”, was the image and mimicry of his (political and ideological) environment. In Okudzhava’s song the reader encounters a different logical direction. In the last verse the lyrical “I” states: “Ах, этот город, он такой, похожий на меня” (“Ah, that city, it is like me”).<sup>38</sup> In this case, the city is represented as the image of the ant(i)-subject, rather than vice versa. This turns Arbat into a metaphor that grasps trajectories of political and cultural transition in a profoundly attainable, popular way. In the song *Arbatskii dvor* (Arbat Courtyard, 1959) the city topos is referred to in a similar way. Accordingly, the city loses the aspect of physical and geographical vastness and becomes a humane space, a stage of private and ideologically insignificant lives. In *Pesenka ob Arbate* (The Poem of Arbat, 1959), the famous central song of the cycle, the Arbat is compared to a clear and transparent river (the Russian word *prozrachnyi* means glowing, gentle, but also clear, easy to understand). The Arbat becomes – just like a river – a site in motion, movable and difficult to grasp. It becomes a symbol of the irreversible passage of time, of loss and forgetting, and finally an infinite spiritual space of self-reflexivity, an unlimited source of creative inspiration.

Despite the heterogeneity of symbolism in Okudzhava’s poetry, Moscow’s Arbat never represents the canonical “motherland”. On the contrary, Arbat is a space where big words and big ideas are avoided. Apart

<sup>38</sup> Okudzhava, *Stikhotvoreniia*, p. 47.

from its smallness, its key attributes are urbanity, humanity, intimacy and sexual neutrality, but also motion and change. What is more important, it does not possess the ability to expand like the big Soviet “motherland”, neither in the geographical, nor in the temporal sense. Okudzhava’s Arbat has no future, it rather resonates a certain past. Unlike the Soviet “motherland”, it is not the projection of an ideal future, but the product of memory, reflection and nostalgia. Being turned towards the past, transience is Arbat’s significant property. Unlike the monolithic and resistant image of the Great Motherland, the imagological construct of the Arbat is volatile – just like the sentimental “old-school romantic” subject who sings about it.

#### Vysotskii’s liminal zones

One of the characteristics of Vysotskii’s poetry is its liminal quality, its duality: he frequently plays with symbolic borders between high and low, stereotypical and original, artistic and everyday, et cetera. In his song *My bditel’ny – my tain ne razboltaem* (We Are Careful – We Will Not Blurt Out Secrets, 1978), topics like the racial discontent in the USA, Yasser Arafat’s health and the politico-economic situation in China which are taken extremely seriously by a devout Soviet citizen, are intertwined with everyday activities, such as bathing a child and watching a hockey match. This – often grotesque – duality, as described by the Slovenian scholar M. Javornik,<sup>39</sup> is characteristic of Vysotskii’s poetry in general. However, unlike Okudzhava, for whom Arbat represents a bridge to the “other” world, the world beyond the “objective” reality, Vysotskii purposefully stays *within* the (authoritative)

39 Javornik, “Ekologija teksta in ruska kultura 20. stoletja”, p. 63.

language and within the world view of mass consciousness. His lyrical “I” does not speak *about* “a devout Soviet citizen”, it rather is this Soviet citizen. As the poem unfolds, images of mass consciousness are disrupted by poetic devices such as catachresis. They are also degraded as the authoritative discourse and Soviet iconography are reduced to mere performativity. Vysotskii acts as a “hero” (object) and at the same time as “the author” (subject) of the authoritative discourse. This intertwined relation between subject and object illustrates the process of deterritorializing Soviet life from within. It bestows new meanings to the authoritative script that a poet uses and simultaneously *abuses*.

Moreover, unlike Okudzhava’s poetical discourse, which can be termed centripetal in the context of its logic (all elements and aspects of the discourse are drawn by the central “little motherland” of the Arbat into a single structure), Vysotskii represents and articulates the motifs of his poetry in terms of greatness, expansion, even hyperbole. In this sense, his discourse can be termed centrifugal. It is hence no surprise that traveling is one of the central themes of Vysotskii’s poetry.<sup>40</sup> It is also one of his most interesting ways to subvert canonized principles. Unlike Soviet mass poetry, which tolerated only one reason for leaving the native land (going to war), and unlike Okudzhava’s poetry of space and stasis Vysotskii’s songs can be viewed as poetry in motion, as poetry of non-rootedness. With his oeuvre containing references to 67 Soviet and 56 foreign cities,<sup>41</sup> the number of geographical

40 See also: Danijela Lugarić Vukas, “Aspekti nomadizma u stvaralaštvu V. Vysockog” (Aspects of Nomadism in Poetry of V. Vysotskii), *Nomadizam (Nomadism)*, ed. Jasmina Vojvodić, Zagreb: Disput, 2015, pp. 205-218.

41 Sergei I. Kormilov, “Goroda v poezii V. S. Vy-

toponyms in his songs makes Vysotskii unique among Russian writers. It is worth pointing out that the poet travels both horizontally and vertically in his songs. Vertical traveling does not necessarily imply going upwards, but downwards as well, and it is interesting to see that it is especially in moments of precipitation, falling or entering the hypothetical gate of the earth and the subterranean, that the stereotype of the Soviet “motherland” seems to be partially rehabilitated. For example, in his song *V den', kogda my, podderzhkoi zemli...* (When We Will, Supported By The Soil..., 1973) we encounter the comparison between the earth and the “faithful bride” or between the sea and the “mother of unruly children”:

[...] *А когда из другой, непохожей весны  
Мы к родному причалу придем прямоком, –  
Растворятся морские ворота страны  
Перед каждым своим моряком.*

*В море – водная гладь, да еще – благодать!  
И вестей – никаких, сколько нам ни пиши...  
Оттого морякам тяжело привыкать  
Засыпать после качки в уютной тиши.*

*И опять улываем, с землей обручась –  
С этой самую верной невестой своей, –  
Чтоб вернуться в назначенный час,  
Как бы там ни баюкало нас  
Море – мать непутевых детей. [...]*<sup>42</sup>

sotskogo”, *Mir Vysotskogo*, Вып. VI, Moskva: GKCM V. S. Vysotskogo, 2002, pp. 234-272.

42 “[...] When we come from a foreign, unusual spring / And we near the Motherland’s wonderful shores, / Then all gates will the country wide open swing / To embrace every seaman of hers! // Velvet water is stretched, so soothed, so smoothed, / To the outer world there aren’t any threads... / Coming back sailors find it too hard to get used / To the comfort of home and cozy beds.” (Translated by George Tokarev [2002, <http://www.wysotsky.com/1033.htm?581>, accessed 3 September 2017]); *Vysotskii, Sochinenia v dvukh tomakh*, Ekaterinburg: Y-Faktoria, 1997, Tom 1, p. 445.

In this song, the hegemonic representation of “motherland” is reminiscent. However, Vysotskii’s intervention is obvious: The voices of his unruly children, resembling the “happy children” from the Soviet mass song *Marsh veselykh rebiat* (March Of the Cheerful Children), do not originate from the solid body of the disciplined Soviet “motherland”, but from the body of an unstable and precarious sea, symbolizing hostile and dangerous spaces, or even life in all its hardship and uneasiness. Further on, by introducing the motive of an engagement between the sailor and the earth – the “most faithful bride” – the poet does not reach for the motive of the Soviet “motherland”, but instead refers to a different popular cultural myth, that of the “unattainable bride Russia”<sup>43</sup>.

If the brilliant Soviet “motherland” served for Soviet poets as an ideal metaphor for the true mother of the Soviet state in its futurity, if the Moscow Arbat served Okudzhava as an ideal metaphor for the “little motherland” of a “little hero” in his past-ness, it is travel – physical and mental – that served Vysotskii as an ideal form to articulate that the Soviet “motherland” is reduced to its performativeness. Since the poet’s favorite place of devotion does not exist as a stable and geographically delimited site, but rather as elusive, the image of “motherland” in his poetry exists only hypothetically, as a non-place that can be epitomized by the following formula: “Навсегда и никуда – / Вечное стремление” (Forever and nowhere – / Eternal striving)<sup>44</sup>.

The non-existence of the authoritative cultural signifier of the “motherland” in Vysotskii’s

43 Ellen Rutten, *Unattainable Bride Russia: Gendering Nation, State, and Intelligentsia in Russian Intellectual Culture*, Evanstone: Northwestern University Press, 2010.

44 Vysotskii, *Sochinenia v dvukh tomakh*, Tom 1, p. 236.

poetry illustrates a “performative shift of authoritative discourse” during late socialism, leading to a situation where “the meanings of authoritative symbols, acts, and rituals were not supposed to be read literally, as constative statements. Therefore discussing them made no sense and was considered a mistake and a waste of time”.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the Soviet mass poetry, which had anchored itself in the goodness of this world (Kremlin, Moscow, Volga, Siberia) pointing at the same time to the evil other world (on the other side of the border), and unlike Okudzhava for whom the Arbat represents a dislocated chronotope, the source of memory and creative inspiration, Vysotskii’s images of space resemble the chronotope of the threshold in Dostoevskii’s prose writings – the spaces “in-between”, such as staircases or nameless city streets. As M. Bakhtin argues, the fundamental quality of these chronotopes is that they signify “crisis and break in a life”<sup>46</sup>, which – in the context of Vysotskii’s poetry – eludes the “I” of the (broken) poet. The bond between the own and the foreign, essential for the image of the Soviet “motherland”, is irrelevant in the context of Vysotskii’s poetical images of space. While the fundamental feeling associated with the Soviet “motherland” was faith in the bright future, and with Okudzhava’s Arbat nostalgia, longing and wistfulness, the essential feeling associated with Vysotskii’s non-(mother)land-as-mental-travel is deep-seated inner restlessness and rootlessness.

### Conclusion

Given the popularity of the authoritative

<sup>45</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 129.

<sup>46</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist; transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, p. 248.

concept of “motherland” throughout Russian and Soviet history, one could expect that Okudzhava’s and Vysotskii’s songs, which contain so many details of Soviet everyday life and often openly speak to (and about) collective consciousness, would reflect – at least to a certain degree – that influential and powerful stereotype. However, the canonical, hegemonic version of the “motherland” almost completely disappeared from Okudzhava’s and Vysotskii’s poetry. Instead, Okudzhava articulates the idea of the “little motherland” signifying smallness, finiteness, pastness and gender neutrality. In Vysotskii’s poetry, the representation of the stereotype of the “motherland” is deeply interlaced with the polyphonic foundations of his poetry. The variety of possible subjects in his poems, the “heroes in roles” (*rolevoi geroi*), undermines the exclusiveness, homogeneity of a masculine impersonal “I” or “we” that expresses the “motherland” in Soviet mass songs. Like in other contexts of his poetry, the image of “motherland” is referred to so rarely that it can be analytically discussed in solely hypothetical terms. Reduced to mere performativity, this powerful image is unmasked as emptiness, as pure “nothingness”. The ideal ornament of the Soviet “motherland”, the circle, is broken and turned into a curve, a voyage crossing borders and overcoming the binary opposition between the own and the foreign, an essential distinction for the discourse of “motherland”. This leads to an image of a borderline non-(mother)land, a “motherland” as a perpetually liminal space, which is international, belonging to everyone and no one simultaneously.

The analysis allows me to draw two conclusions. By not harshly and overtly criticising the Soviet authoritative discourse, Russian bards including Okudzhava and

Vysotskii do not express their faithfulness to the system, but rather mirror their indifference towards it. Their poetry is not inherently oppositional, but rather apolitical. Secondly, the cultural field of the late Soviet socialism was not homogenous. A comparative analysis of the ways the two bards treat the concept of the “motherland” reveals that indifference towards the Soviet authoritative ideological and political discourse intensified during Stagnation. That intensification remained inscribed in Vysotskii’s poetry in a profoundly sophisticated way: not with what has been said, but with what the poet has chosen to remain silence about.<sup>47</sup>

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