Anything Can Happen: 
Everyday Morality and Social Theory in Russia

by

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Abstract

The language and the sensibilities of social theory are used differently, and to different purposes, by experts and “laymen.” But they are increasingly shared, challenging the “meta” status of social theory vis-à-vis analytics employed by the subjects of anthropological analysis.

This dissertation draws on ten months of ethnographic study in Russia, a country that offers a unique perspective on the issue of epistemology and native social theory. Focusing on those born in the 1970s, it illuminates the life-worlds of people who have lived through profound social and historical transformation. This postsocialist space has been shaped by decades of mass indoctrination with a sociocentric, socialist, and modernist social philosophy, producing a kind of “vernacular Marxism” among its population.

This dissertation examines vernacular Marxism in popular discourse, especially in talk about morality, the constitution of subjectivity, and techniques of the self. It shows how something often deemed to be an ideological or performative aspect of the “has-been” Soviet project
continues to shape everyday morality and practical ethics. Vernacular Marxism considers not only the tension between the individual and society, but also between two forms of communal life, characterised here as the Collective and Communitas. Subjectivity is commonly perceived through a material-metaphysical lens as a resource and an exchange of “energy.” Consumption and the relationship to material objects are complicated by antifetishist imperatives. Everyday reasoning is influenced by dialectics, modernisation, and historical materialism.

Asserting that vernacular Marxism is more than a “local ideology,” this work discusses the epistemological and ethical questions that arise when some routine “meta” analytics are applied to social reality that is already structured by social reflexivity. Rather than evaluating the fit between these analytics and social reality, this dissertation argues that scholars must be attuned to the mutual dislocation of their own knowledge and that of their “informants,” all within a flat epistemological and ethical hierarchy.
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Introduction

When “Natives” Are Marxists

The inspiration for this study came from a reaction that I believe familiar to many anthropologists who struggle to find an appropriate “framework” in which to situate their material. Such struggles take many forms, and often focus on the ethical and epistemological im/possibility of “writing culture,” of understanding and representing—in terms of both depicting and speaking for—the “native point of view.” “Russian culture” has been researched extensively, though only for the last thirty years has this research been done anthropologically, through fieldwork that became doable after the fall of Iron Curtain. As a native, I was particularly curious to discover files of the usual anthropological kind describing my own background: the “Russian” “mythologies,” “values,” “rationalities in context,” and “practices.” As an anthropologist, I have learned to ignore the often-orientalising tone of many such studies, and appreciated the genuine, often appropriately socially and especially historically contextualised attempts to “make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.”

These explorations, however, left me mostly with a nagging dissatisfaction when it came to finding “theory,” or “positionality,” to comprehend my own material. The reasons could be many, but in the end they congealed around the word “reflexivity.” This was not, however, the familiar Bourdieusian dilemma of borderlines between “people thinking” and “people doing.” Instead, it was the borderline between “(Russian) people thinking” and “(Western) anthropologists thinking.” What is the nature of the epistemological distance between the “anthropological” and the “native” point of view, and what is at stake in defining this distance in a particular way?

This question is doubly tricky for myself as both an “anthropologist” and a “native.” But again, I share this concern with “non-native” anthropologists who increasingly worry about how “meta” is the “meta” of anthropological knowledge and approach. For instance, Henrietta Moore (2009) discovered that her “research subjects” of many years, young women
in Kenya, embraced a type of thinking about culture that was not entirely unlike her own. Their mentors—the government, evangelical churches, and internationally sponsored NGOs, among them quite a number of people with degrees in anthropology—urged them to contemplate the subject, or, rather, the object of their “traditional” culture.\(^1\) Culture became relativised as a type of rationality, or a collection of practices from which only the most relevant for the future should be sustained, and the rest discarded. Nowadays, Moore (2009:214) observes, the girls’ concerns are no longer “with the appropriateness, or not, of specific situated practices; instead, they were about the nature of knowledge itself and its effectiveness in modern contexts.” The girls, argues Moore, understand that there are “universal truths” and “cultural specifics,” that “rationalities” are rational “in context.” When our “informants,” increasingly, are themselves cultural relativists, anthropologists “need to go a lot further than declaring that we are all rational in context, or that the interactions between researchers and the researched can be explained by the incommensurabilities of different forms of rationality and their accompanying knowledge economies” (Moore 2009:209).

A scholar of (post)socialism would notice that this transformation that ostensibly recently happened in Kenya, had also happened in many (ex)socialist countries, and nowhere so forcefully as in Russia, almost a century ago, on a much larger scale, and in every facet of life. Some would even point out that 1917 was only a highpoint in the general development of such “popular relativism” in Russia, that it had been a structure of feeling brought about by centuries of rapid, violent, top-down modernization (see Epstein 1999 on Russia as a forever “postmodern” country). I would note that 1917 (some would argue 1945) can be highlighted as the year when Marxism-Leninism—a tradition of social thought to which the

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\(^1\) In particular, the evangelicals rolled out parallel campaigns of mass conversion and eradicating female circumcision. For that, they associated female circumcision with “bad” parts of “culture” that Kenyans should discard. The (by)product of this strategy was that people developed an ability to think about culture in a way that was not (at least in Moore’s interpretation) possible before: as detachable from life, as something malleable, something that can be evaluated, taken apart, or eradicated. Moore points out that anthropologists never fully assumed or accounted—either ethically or epistemologically—for this meta-reflexivity on the part of the “native.” She, however, does not develop this claim beyond this point, but merely suggests that if social sciences were to take these developments into account, it would have “profound consequences.”
“constructed nature” of culture and society was a foundational premise—became a truly hegemonic foundation of the new social order. In the postrevolutionary time of sweeping conversions and transformations, culture and social relations were declared to be nothing but a consequence of economic relations, and, for this very fact, amenable to change. Not only was society constructed, the very fact of its constructedness was the reason why it could, and therefore should, be constructed in a better way.

For people who lived through the socialist project, especially in its earlier years, it was obvious that society was constructed: not merely because of the “brainwashing” power of ideology but because they witnessed its actual construction, as it was brought down to the ground, deleted, and built anew, before their eyes and through their bodies. On the other hand, the regime engaged both intellectually and politically with the questions that were formative for contemporary social theory: modernity, especially capitalism; commodification, especially the fetishist nature of added value; and liberal democracy, especially its profound entanglement with individualism, idealism, and colonialism. The work of objectification continued: every mundane act, like putting a nail in the wall, could have been, and was encouraged to be, interpreted as having a historical and social meaning. The very explanations and paths of analysis, and the choice of subjects, were themselves tools of indoctrination: “problematised” in a prescribed way, reified, and limited in number (just as female genital circumcision is “problematised” by evangelists in Kenya today). But this also required—and allowed—a certain mode of reflexivity, a means to objectify and to reflect upon “categories” and “aspects” of life as if they were separate from life.

This, in its turn, assumed a degree of mastery on the part of Soviet citizens in thinking, and speaking, a (pseudo) sociological language of objectified social imaginaries. First among them was Obschestvo, “Society,” an imagined community of Soviet people—the builders of communism. For decades, citizens’ attention and sensibilities were drawn to “the question of women” (zhenskiy vopros), “ethnicity” (narodnost’), and “class” (klass). They became

2 The “pseudo” is the tribute to the ideological entrenchment of my respondents’ views on society—an entrenchment that has been many times pointed out by the critics of Soviet Marxist claims to being a “science.” Science or scientism, it is dressed in the vestiges of “logos,” hence, “sociology.”
accustomed to notions of “Power” (specifically, “Soviet power”), “History,” and “Progress”—through every newspaper, every meeting, and every textbook. They learned of “Culture” through the guidelines to cultural production, the “Houses of Culture” (Grant 1995; Donahoe and Habeck 2011), and the manuals on how to be “cultured” (Kelly 2001; Donovan 2010). They were taught about “Morality”—through school curricula, activities, and special brochures like the “Moral Codex of Communism Builders” (Kharkhordin 1999:231–51). They were exposed to ideas about “Language”—through the incessant touting of the sublime qualities of the Russian language. They learned to think about “Theory,” “Practice,” and “Activity”—through behavioural, performance-oriented, and activity-centred social and psychological sciences, and pedagogy (for an excellent overview see Matza 2010).

This “reflexive” ideological work and its foundation in social constructivism, however, should not be confused with idealism (Magun 2014). Ideology—the abstract representations of “culture” and “society”—were deemed but a necessary evil, a way to explain the “blueprints” of a new society to its builders before the need for such “blueprints” is gone. The ontological foundation of Soviet state was materialist.

There was also an effort to develop a corresponding, materialist kind of ethics. Paradoxically for Marx but logically for a society where religious thought was the unquestioned moral authority for centuries, the early twentieth-century Russian thinkers who theorised the possibility of a just society attempted to fill the moral insufficiency of Marxism by turning to religiosity, and specifically to Christian Orthodox virtue ethics, as a model for moral behaviour. The transcendental—religious—source of morality was eradicated, and the ethical barrenness of Marxism was filled by making religions of both Marxism and society.

Following a virtue ethics model, Soviet moral educators eschewed developing moral dogmas in favour of building communities that would subvert “the relativity of the physical individual” to “one absolute—collective practice” (Lunacharsky, one of the founders of Soviet moral education, in Kharkhordin 1999:79). Collectives centred on practices of good living and stories about the lives of heroes, just as Orthodox Christianity taught about the

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3 This model is associated most strongly with Aristotle and therefore with the “materialist” camp of European philosophy.
lives of pious men and saints (ibid.). These forged strong symbolic and ideological connections between virtue, action, practice, and sociocentricity—as opposed to dogma, (symbolic) representation, and egocentrism.

How does Moore’s problem of epistemic dislocation, described above—what I call the “dislocated coincidence” between local ethics and epistemologies, on the one hand, and those of social theorists on the other—translate into the “Russian” case? One way to look at it is to consider the materialist-idealist dilemmas. Pivotal to the Soviet project, they were also important to twentieth-century anthropology. What is the ontological status of “culture”? Is it “in the body” or “in the mind”? Clifford Geertz (1973:5) famously “resolved” this dilemma for anthropologists, by asserting the irrelevance of the question:

The interminable, because interminable, debate within anthropology as to whether culture is “subjective” or “objective,” together with the mutual exchange of intellectual insults (“idealist!”—“materialist!”; “mentalist!”—“behaviorist!”; “impressionist!”—“positivist!”) which accompanies it, is wholly misconceived. Once human behavior is seen as … symbolic action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or resonance in music, signifies, the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask about a burlesque wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.

Geertz’s approach has been sufficiently critiqued, not the least for his being a closet idealist. But my question to him would be—what does it mean to ignore, epistemologically, the materialist-idealist divisions, and embrace a “deep play” analysis, if the local “deep play” is about the moral incommensurability of materialism and idealism? Can an anthropologist just ignore her own materialist or idealist bias as unimportant, if the materialist scepticism, and the scepticism of this scepticism, is part of the “deep play” of her “ethnographic subjects”? For instance, believing in social constructivism as truth does not necessarily make it possible as a moral choice.\(^4\) The sublime—in a classic Kantian sense, simultaneously beautiful and

\(^4\) The Marxist-Leninist view of society indeed leaves little room for ethics. The inseparability of present social relations from capitalism makes the coincidence of society and morality impossible. Current societies are idealist and capitalist, and therefore ethically barren; Marxism itself assumes an ethical insufficiency by following its own critical momentum. Morality is located in the future, and it will naturally follow from the political-economic foundations—first socialist, then communist.
terrifying in its utter inhumanity—attraction of constructionism is weighed against its
detractions, its inhumanity, and its traumas. Believing in construction, people look longingly
for things that are least imaginable as constructed: the “truths” of pain, orgasm, experience,
strong emotion, hunger, silence (as opposed to speech and especially language), the “wild”
and “unconquered” nature, bodily labours, pleasures, and comforts. And yet, the paradox of
Marxist materialism makes it so that pursuing such things that appear to be beyond
construction, could also be read as virtuously Marxist—because they can be read as
materialistic: rooted in matter, body, and action. It should not therefore come as a surprise
that, just as in Kenya everyday talk may be about the interpretation of cultures, in Russia
everyday talk may be about the problem of the relationship between (cognitivist) theory and
(bodily, habitual, class-related) practice.

On the other hand, perhaps, symbolic analysis is the only analysis that will be
epistemologically honest in such a case. One notable example of “dislocated coincidence,”
between “local” knowledge and the “meta” knowledge of social theory, is the work of
Michael Taussig (1983). Himself a Marxist, he found that Bolivian miners were (sort of)
“natural” Marxists, who “critiqued” capitalism and their situation as subjects of capitalist
exploitation by means of some rather captivating rituals. He, however, did not have to
explain his own stance toward Marxist materialist ontology, nor explain how the ontology of
his ethnographic subjects was Marxist. He conducted a symbolic analysis of symbolic
actions. Furthermore, the rituals, as all symbolic actions, were ambiguous. This allowed
Taussig all kind of distance from his informants, and hence, the very status of “theory” to his
interpretations.

I, on the contrary, am not only a native myself, but I study in a place where one of the main
cultural forms (Ries 1997) is talk: spoken word, rant, speech, conversation. As speech, it is

5 And this is why the Soviet social and ideological order was a fertile ground for—or a continuation
of?—the familiar “Russian” materialist ideologies (as described in classic Russian literature,
Orthodox history, “traditional” peasant culture, etc.) of the zhiva žizn’ (“lived life,” a
Dostoyevskian term), and the sobornost’, meaning social and bodily immersion in the world, as
opposed to “theoretical” or “cognitivist” alienation from it. It is not my aim, however, to recount the
Russia-specific history of ideas: I wish rather to contrast some of their specifics—vernacular
Marxism—with the ideas of anthropology.
less ambiguous than any action. But I follow Taussig in that I look at Soviet Marxism—or Marxism-Leninism; or dialectical materialism; or “Stalinist metaphysics,” a term used by Russian historian and critical theory scholar Irina Sandomirskaya (Larionov 2014); or any other name of Soviet version of Marxism—as a local symbolic culture. This object of study is, therefore, what I call “vernacular Marxism.” I focus on Marxism as it was consumed by “laymen,” rather than produced by statesmen, writers, and intellectuals; spoken rather than written; and inflected for use in practical situations. I connect it to practice because Marxism was not only an official state institution and scholarly discipline, but also an aspect of everyday life, especially everyday morality. With “vernacular” I intend a countermovement to the tendency to reify Marxism as “just” orthodoxy, an ideology, a political thing.

As such, some may question why I call it “Marxist” at all. I agree that I could call it a “cultural” (or even an “ontological”) setup. Identifying a Soviet way of life in anthropological and philosophical terms, as was popular in the beginning of the past century, later dwindled with the growing ideological and political stakes of the Cold War, a trend that was later concomitant with the postcultural, poststructuralist, post-1980s turn in anthropology. There seems to be, however, a rising interest in looking at “Soviet civilization” through a classical comparativist, empiricist, anthropological lens. Recently translated were the works of David Zilberman (1977, 1978), a Soviet émigré sociologist and an Indologist by training, who describes life in USSR as a “post-sociological society,” a continuation of a rather unique cultural and religious tradition that combined “the other-worldly asceticism of the yogic type with the most powerful externally oriented philosophy of action, of the coercive, rather than adaptive, kind (even in relation to God, where it looks more like ‘titanism’, no wonder Berdyaev, very sensitive to these things, identified Marxism as ‘titanism’, too” (1978:314). To this end, I argue that the very victory of (this particular strand of) Marxism in Russia is apparent precisely in how its vernacular forms lost the very association with its “canonical” forms, the written and “intellectual” aspects (the latter, ironically, became habitually ostracised as “ideology,” or “something political,” by Russians themselves). And through this very dissociation, vernacular Marxism was granted a
particular longevity: it persevered—as ethics, as symbolic culture, as ontology—after the “canonical,” or “official,” Marxism as state ideology had long been discarded.\textsuperscript{6}

This definition of “vernacular Marxism,” however, cannot escape the problem of “dislocated coincidence” (between social theory and local knowledge). What does it mean to call something “symbolic” in a place focused on explicating the relationship of actions to representations? What does it mean to use an analytic of the “everyday” in relation to a place where “everyday life” (byt) has been a local construct, an object of critique, and the subject of a politics of de/re-“everyday”-ization, for centuries?\textsuperscript{7} The subject of this study therefore follows Moore’s suggestion. I attempt to build a series of topics (each chapter is one, except the first and the last) that posit a question: what points of epistemological and ethical interest may arise when particular manifestations of vernacular Marxism are interpreted by means of social theory that does not examine its own (materialist-idealist) commitments?

## 1 Vernacular Marxism: The Grammar of Agency

My initial interest was not Marxism, but rather the state of political, social, and ontological uncertainty and anxiety that I perceived as ubiquitous during my pilot fieldwork in 2009. Provisionally, I have defined it by an operative analytic of uncertainty/indeterminacy (in Russian, these are the same word: “neopredelennost’”). I wished to outline a local phenomenology of uncertainty. How do my respondents interpret their experiences of anxiety and uncertainty? Do they rebel against, or question, the uncertainty? What anthropological generalities might their understanding of uncertainty entail? The challenge was to describe how ostensibly “Russian” uncertainties are indeed Russian, as they are culturally and historically defined experiences—and yet how they also translate into anthropological and global-historical sense.

\textsuperscript{6} This was observed very perceptively by social commentator Ekaterina Shul’man (2014), although she attributes such survival only to politicians, exonerating the rest of the population for, my guess would be, political reasons.

\textsuperscript{7} Stephen Hutchings (1997) elaborates how the Soviet critique of the “everyday” can be traced to the much earlier separation of “the worldly” and “the otherworldly” in Orthodox Christianity.
In the very beginning of my fieldwork, I asked Sergei (b.1975, an entrepreneur in the entertainment industry, and always an excellent story teller) — what would he answer if I asked him to define “indeterminacy/uncertainty” (neopredelennost’)? (As an anthropologist committed to to inductive methods, I can justify this question only by the anxious realisation, probably common to first-time doers of fieldwork, that I should try everything once.) “What is uncertainty,” I asked? How is it felt, or defined, by himself or people he knows; how do people live in uncertainty? In reply, I got a story:

Here, I tell you what uncertainty is. There was a flat on the ground floor of our condo. A decade ago, there lived an old woman. Quiet, always drunk, often delirious. She used to jump out of the window and had smashed her face to bits. One day she died this way. It is all very sad, really 8 — the granny died, and the flat went to whoever it was who, well, looked after her. They sold it. New owners opened a shop selling standard tax forms. They hoped that the small businesses in the city would flourish and need those forms. The form-sellers went bust, along with the small businesses they hoped to cater to. And the flat was flooded, suddenly on a regular basis [vnezapno na postoyannoy osnove]. Imagine, they still have “Forms Sold Here” on the wall, and people sometimes come and ask about them. Next, a hair salon came and went. My wife got a haircut there just once before they shut down. But the hairdresser who worked there still comes to our place and cuts hair for the whole family. The next owners, against regulations, cut a doorway in the outer wall and opened a convenience store. They sold everything — glass cleaners, meat, fish, chicken, milk — everything on the same shelf, such a mess! That shop went bust as well. Now, the flat seems to be a brothel, and it’s holding on so far. I see men come and go. I don’t know how the brothel owners manage to stay afloat because the girls are not, frankly speaking, of star quality. They must have really low prices and go for mass services [chuckles] —. There, Anna, is your uncertainty for you.

Calling this remark a social commentary would not make a prize observation (as my friends in the field often told me, “One doesn’t have to be an anthropologist to understand that.”). Social commentary is habitual to any person in Russia, or at least to those who are old enough to be educated in the spirit of finding a (Marxist and sociocentric) rationalisation behind every mundane action or phenomenon. It is also not an uncommon story, if we look at it as “a genre of lament” utilised to bemoan ‘polnaya razruch’ — ‘complete collapse’ and ‘anti-Disneyland’ of “Russian life” (Ries 1997:42). Literature on postsocialism is full of such laments: stories about “crisis” (Shevchenko 2009), “dardubala” (roughly, “absurdity”; Manning 2007), and “chaos” (Nazpary 2002). It can be a story of “proval,” a genre of story

8 In quotes, I will use dashes or commas for pauses, and dots for ellipses.
about a chain of failures meant to demonstrate the futility of human endeavours (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). A scholarship of these stories has emerged: a recent (2013) conference in Princeton explored “Complaints: Cultures of Grievance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.”

What would be arguable, however, is to read this commentary as merely a criticism in the line of *alas the times, and the manners*, I suggest reading it, instead, as an expression of a certain dialectics, a story about the ontologically important difference between two forms of life. One form is chancy, spontaneous, indeterminate, existential, and verging dangerously on the point of social dissolution and madness. The other insists on formalization, canon, norm, discernment, organization, complexity. Uncertainty is thus simultaneously the “natural” state of affairs of the bodily, indeterminate, existential life-form (I will refer to it as “number one”), and the chaos that ensues from attempts to transform this life-form into something characterised by calculative goal setting, discernment, and complexity (life-form “number two”). These two forms of life are, of course, my own abstractions; they are a way to point out the meaningful and consistent differences that Sergei habitually indexes throughout his story. I will further interpret Sergei’s story, using italics to highlight the words that index these differences.

The flat starts as an example of life-form number one: the tragic environs of a *dementia-suffering* social reject immersed in *lonely* drinking. The granny attempts to cross over to the social and the public, the space of the street, by “jumping out the window,” to *declare*, if in vain, her presence in the other form of life. After her death, the space of the flat is informed with social and symbolical *complexity* through a series of events. Someone inherits the flat through the *laws* of kinship or the *language* of a *contract*. The next owners expand from *family* to the higher social organization of *business*. Ambitious, they chose to include the *state*, calculating their plans based on the state’s promise to *develop* small business. The promise turned out to be false—there was not enough real power, presence, or determination on the part of the failing state to support business development. The next occupants, businessmen all, tried to keep closer to *simple* life, to *mundane* human needs. One sold haircuts, the other food. The latter shunned any *specialisation* and kept the shop “*messy*”—practically replicating the average Soviet *chulun*, a tiny closet customarily inbuilt in apartments and stuffed with preserves, New Year’s decorations, laundry powder, and family
albums. But these “convenience stores” failed as well. To live—that is, to survive—his story suggests, one has to be closer to the organic, unformulated, sprawling vitality. This step is taken by the down-to-earth business of sex services. Sergei implies that the double proximity of the brothel to the basics of human existence—both to the poorer and déclassé segment of customers, and to the sexual instinct—is what, perhaps, kept the business afloat.

Sergei also plays with the notions of the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary” in the story, and with the listeners’ perceptions of social norms. For instance, sobriety is normative; managed alcoholism is normal. (Sergei often carried a flat flask with him to “cope with the stress,” and would never judge someone who did the same.) But women’s alcoholism is not normal; an elderly woman especially is/should be the archetypical figure of a teetotalling moraliser who scolds a tipsy passerby. By telling the story of a deliriously drunk old woman falling through her window onto the street, he showcases how the scale of “the normative” and “the normal” is sliding to the (extraordinary) point of no return, past some moral baseline. But, by making this moral baseline only a part of the story, mentioned only in passing, he simultaneously makes it sound ordinary. The brothel theme is treated similarly: it is both normal and a shocking violation of the norm (for most Soviet people it existed only as rumour, an impossible possibility, a depravity bordering on the fantastical). Sergei simultaneously mocks and embraces such sensibilities—shocking us with the idea that meeting girls and johns in your stairwell on the way to work (theirs and yours) can be a part of the banal everyday, and the implicit ordinariness of the brothel as just another business dependent on economic norms of cost-effectiveness.

Sergei also invited his listeners (myself and his wife) to share a sense of dramatic amazement and awe. (After a while, I started to code such registers in my notes as “witnessing”—they often were introduced with “predstavlyaesh” or “ponimayesh,” meaning—“Do you see/imagine it right now? Do you understand?”). As such, Sergei’s story provides at least two surprises. First, it is a surprise that the first form of life, the one that is devoid of “society,” “culture,” “status,” “business,” and “communication” still leaves ample space for the extraordinary. Granny’s life may have been “formless” because of her social insignificance, but it was loud and violent. Granny’s death was what phenomenologists call “unsurprised” surprise (see Zirker 2004/2005, and the discussion of her article in the same journal),
something that could have been foreseen because of her drunkenness and insanity, and yet
shocking and extraordinary because any death, and especially violent death, cannot be but
extraordinary. (Sergei does not play with its significance, saying only, “It is all very sad,
really.”) Floods are banal because they happen on a “regular basis,” but yet extraordinary
because they are “sudden” and disastrous intrusions of “nature.” The hairdresser, a chance
acquaintance (“she only cut her hair once”), developed a significant relationship with
Sergei’s family. Shops cater to “pragmatic,” ordinary, banal human needs, but one can
marvel at the tenacity of human enterprise (and be moved by the tragedy, because the
suddenness of their failures implies violence). The banality of sex, especially transactional
sex, is counterpointed by the imaginaries of sex as ultimate fantasy—what one of my
interviewees called “glamour.” We are tempted to think that somewhere—not in the flat in
question, but somewhere—there are “girls of star quality.” Finally, uncertainty itself is
ordinary because it is so chronic, extended in time, and diluted in many instances in life. And
yet, as experience, as an uncontrollable anxiety, it is distinct, and it can render itself into a
metaphor and a story—that of “the uncertain flat.”

When all is said and accounted for, one cannot say for sure which form of life Sergei would
prefer, either as a moral way of being, or as an ontological truth. On one hand, he welcomes
the effort to “civilise” the flat. On the other, there is certain satisfaction in seeing that “life
itself” confirms that an exercise of will to social and symbolic complexity—what, to play on
Veena Das’s 2007 book title, could be termed “the ascent from the ordinary”—is always only
a temporary success.

As I see it, much of the philosophical anthropology of postsocialism struggles with the
attempt to bring such dialectics to light. Notable examples include differentiating, in a
culturally sensitive manner, between “private and public,” “official and unofficial,” “society
and the commons” (“obschestvennoye” and “obschee”—see Kharkhordin 2012), and
“political and sentimental” (Lemon 2008:237). Among those, I will detail only two
investigations, the ones I found most useful for my task.

9 Compare the ideal romantic meeting as being fortuitously fateful in Field 2007 (more on this in
Chapter 6).
The first appears consistently in the works of Alexei Yurchak (2005, 2008), who explores the spaces of the negative and the liminal in late Soviet culture. Particularly famous is his definition of “vnenakhodimost’,” or “being outside,” described as a form of life characteristic for his respondents, intelligentsia inhabiting St. Petersburg in the 1970s and 1980s (2005). 10 Yurchak’s argument is that their habitus and their ideology were about “being outside”—outside both the ritualistic realm of Soviet officialdom and the dissident movements that attempted to counter this officialdom. “Being outside” did not count as either “unofficial” (as opposed to official) or “private” (as opposed to public) space. It constituted a sort of a third space, and a sensibility that, as I read it, relied on the philosophy of the negative.

The problem with this approach, at least in application to my “population sample” (described in the section below), is that “being outside” did not seem to be problematic in the social and moral imaginaries of Yurchak’s informants. He focuses on their (self-declared) capacity to separate their (supposedly “free”) agency and their moral universe from those of the dissidents and the state. I would argue that this may have been only possible for people of certain cultural and social background (and, perhaps, of certain age cohort, since his “last Soviet generation” seem to be born mostly in the 1960s—more on this below). Outside of such circles, the concept of moral agency—indeed, any agency—was much more intertwined with the state ideology, that is, with vernacular Marxism and its moral and ontological dilemmas. The very concept of agency, as I will argue, was affected by the imaginary of mobilisation: an effort, a strain of will, delivered specifically in connection to the demands of the state, its project of socialist modernity, and its teleological history. It was therefore an everyday moral choice between two forms of life; agency was thus connected to mobilisation and to demobilisation, both of which could be rationalised as moral.

Another investigation that is relevant to the question of certainty and uncertainty, form and formlessness, is the work of Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2003) on the forms of governance in 1990s “deep” Siberia. His work is anthropological in a classical way—not only does it deal with “the other,” an indigenous minority and (Soviet) colonial subjects, but it also translates

10 This sentiment is captured in the title of Yurchak’s 2005 book, Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation.
various dichotomies into spatial-temporal processes and spectres of relationship: between centre and periphery, colonisers and colonies, the state and its subjects. My interest was particularly drawn to his comparison of what he calls “Durkheimian” and “Hobbesian” views on society. In the Durkheimian view, “society is reality sui generis, always immanent” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003:13). Hobbesians are suspicious of the social and the cultural—the inherently feeble and unstable—aspects of human life that are prone to falling back into the “state of nature,” the formless and the wild, full of conflict and indeterminacy. Ssorin-Chaikov himself supports the Durkheimian view, but he cannot but be struck by the relevance of Hobbesian persuasions to local forms of governance, and to the corresponding views of society among locals. The state—a Durkheimian imaginary of “society”—has to be sustained by an act of will that has to be constantly renewed. The will to will, however, is always in short supply, and therefore the “perfect social form” of the state is described as, alternatively, existing in “the typical state of failure” or in “the poetics of unfinished construction.”

In this dissertation, I address similar topics, but outside of the “colonial” context and in terms of contemporary everyday vernacular Marxism. Seeing how the previous “East-West translation-based” epistemologies (official-unofficial, private-public, etc.), often complicate rather than clarify these matters, I chose to formulate several of my own abstractions. But in using these abstractions, I do not mean to reduce the richness of interaction to some schematics, but rather to highlight the priorities expressed in vernacular Marxism, to point out not only its symbolic meanings but also its ontological preferences.

Perhaps a third one is Tomas Matza’s (2010) work on psychotherapies in Russia, in which he characterises them as Russian “moral economy” centres, within an “inherent counter-current to rationalization of society—one that is a part of a long-standing tradition in Russia” (2010:392). Yet another is an article by Morten Axel Petersen and Lars Hojer (2008) that describes the “problem” of “leaky selves” in Mongolia. The “leaky self” is a “postsocialist” condition of an “overflow” of the “private” and the “casual” (in my development herewith, the inarticulate, intimate, “simple”) life-forms, at the expense of the conveniences that come from formalising relationships and keeping borders and distances in place (herewith, the “articulate”). I would call for caution in seeing such “leakage” as “postsocialist,” or even “local.” The slippage between the distanced and the intimate, the formal and informal—the articulate and the inarticulate—is historical, and human. In the first chapter I suggest viewing it as a problem of navigating (already problematised) moral landscapes under (already not so new) historical conditions.
2 The Collective and Communitas

Artemiy Magun contemplated whether there ever were instances, however “fleeting,” of “real communism” in existence. In his reading, “communist” forms of “social organization” are those “in which communal life is not brutally opposed to individualism, but joins in, so that a community exists at its strongest in the modus of its own dissolution” (Magun 2014:19, emphasis mine). Magun suggests that these “communities” are not merely a construction of political philosophers. There were concrete instances of such social forms in various places. And these curiously “intermediary” forms—or states—of social organization, as Magun argues, embody a certain negativity of Marxist thought.

In the examples above, this negativity is described as the index, the “keeping in mind” of uncertainty, the Hobbesian space, and the existential life-form (life-form number one). I would agree that it is possible that these communities “existed” in Russia as forms of social organisation; I would certainly agree that they existed as social imaginaries, and that these imaginaries were central to vernacular Marxism. Magun refers to “a community”; I, to honor the Marxism of Victor Turner, refer to them as Communitas.

Agency in Communitas, if it appears at all, appears masked in paradoxes—just as its social solidarity, according to Magun, exists in a paradox of being “at its strongest” because it is “on the brink of its dissolution.” (I imagine this abstraction through the process of properly Marxist dialectics, and also by calling on the experience of drinking with others. The force of alcohol as a social lubricant, the force of sociability, increases with the progress of inebriation; and yet it is at some peak point when the warm party of friends turns into a bunch of sleeping—and hence socially disconnected—bodies). The members of Communitas may engage in various activities, but not in very specific, or especially “rational,” goal setting, and especially not with the goals that align themselves with power and status. Imaginaries of Communitas in general tend to be spatial and stationary rather than processual. They are indexed by the family, the feminine, nature, leisure, and sentimentality.

12 His is a Marxism that is, of course, quite different from both the “canonical” Marxism-Leninism and vernacular Marxism.
As such, the members of Communitas may also be seen as “free” in a sense, because, if we follow Foucault, power is the power that conducts the conduct; if there is no conduct to conduct, there is no power-over.  

This intimate place may also take on sombre connotations. Communitas is dangerously close to madness, social and biological death, and violence. Communitas is often a community surviving a war or some other catastrophe, overcoming obschaya beda, “the disaster that we are all in together.” Living on the “brink of dissolution” is living with the threat of full dissolution, of falling back—not only in the “Hobbesian” state of nature, in the state of an animal, but worse, in the state of humans who deny any imperatives of the social, the moral, and the rational. An example of this would be cannibalism; indeed, tales of cannibalism haunt the history of Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, which lived through a four-year Nazi siege in WWII.

Soviet Communitas did not get as much publicity as did another form of life, the Collective. The figure to the ground of Communitas, the becoming to the Communitas’ being, the Collective is the self-conscious and conscientious team of comrades, literally, co-doers and co-creators. Kharkhordin in particular devotes many pages to the Collective as a form of life, describing it as “a monastic ideal in the midst of secular civilization.” (1999:117). Magun notices the “famous” “excessive sociality” of Soviet collectives, that is, precisely the “Durkheimian” spirit of their social pressure. I would add to these descriptions the power of their equally excessive representational force, since it is the Collective that appeared on the innumerable frescoes, sculptures, and mosaics of Soviet public art. The language of (pseudo)sociology, of objectifying aspects of life as Culture, Language, Morality, History, Progress, etc. (see above), is also the territory of the Collective.

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13 Alexei Yurchak (2008) elaborates on the political meanings of negative agency in his description of the necrorealist community of artists in the late USSR. They reached the limits of Communitas by declaring themselves dead, or, rather, neither dead nor alive.

14 By this, I mean Orwell’s 1984, Huxley’s Brave New World, the Borg in the Star Trek saga, and countless other dystopias inspired, in no unequivocal terms, by the orientalist vision of the Russian/Soviet Other as the Communist Collective. Nowadays, however, “the Collective” is more likely to be a brand of coffee in an indie coffee shop.
Both Communitas and the Collective can be morally viable and valuable, normative and desirable, forms of the good life. Transitions in both directions—from Communitas to Collective, and from Collective to Communitas—can be understood as ethical or unethical, depending on the situation. And yet, they are, of course, also productively incommensurable. One can claim a moral necessity to mobilise into a Collective; one can claim it is time to reach back to Communitas through the relaxation of control.

3 Mobilisation and Articulation

With Communitas and the Collective, I have outlined the scales, or the imaginary endpoints, of subjectivity and agency. In this section, I detail the process of moving between them—the process I came to think of as mobilisation or articulation.

The movement from Communitas to the Collective, is, of course, unmistakably modern, operating through the familiar imperatives of progress and enlightenment. As a mode of agency, however, it differs significantly from many other ways to imagine, to theorise, and to embody modern agency, and agency in general. This agency connects form and action. In

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15 This is why mobilisation or articulation, as described in the next section, cannot be defined in terms that would give them strictly normative-positive connotations, such as “improving,” “flourishing,” “enlightenment,” etc. Nor does “diversifying” work, since the diversity of the Collective is limited by predetermined utopic visions; Communitas is rather indifferent, if not averse, to variety.

16 Transitions in both directions are common in the moralising narrative structures of popular culture. In the 1956 film Spring on Zarechnaya Street, the main character is a charming young man, a great factory worker, who, however, is boyish in his behaviour and does not think that education should be his priority. A young female teacher, a university graduate, becomes his love interest; she is a mobilising force that brings him towards the “light” of education and, potentially, a career in engineering (this development is not shown in the film but implied). In the 1977 film Office Romance, the movement is reversed. A soft, inarticulate man, a widower and a good father to two children (hence, a “mother” to two children), working as an office clerk, is a demobilising force for a masculine and articulate Soviet woman-boss. By falling in love with him, she loses her ability to produce stern orders, smooth speeches, and fast decisions, and instead acquires the humanity that coincides with femininity and inarticulateness—getting tipsy, not being able to finish a sentence without hesitating, being attentive to the iconic power of clothes instead of the symbolic power of words.

17 Let me offer a couple of examples. Webb Keane (2006) visualises the mode of action of “Western” modernity as the process of “purification,” of cleansing the “cultural” from the “wild” and the “natural”—in other words, cleansing what is form from the formless. “Purification” was relevant to
his 2004 article “The Flexible and the Pliant: Disturbed Organisms of Russian Modernity”, Sergei Oushakine gives a good historical example of how the agency that connects form and action came to be. The immediate aftermath of the socialist revolution was the reduction of people to bare (not life! but) material—the raw, “flexible and pliant” human mass (which was often called exactly that, the masses). This bare material was to construct society anew; that is, build itself from the formless, flat, often genderless and nameless and paperless, ontologically bare and socially undifferentiated ground up into the ultrasocial, technological, and ideological manifestation of a future communist form of life. Although without the initial revolutionary fervour, this “building,” this construction, remained a model of agency in Marxism-Leninism and in vernacular Marxism. People were reminded that they had to form themselves, and others, from formlessness into active, masterful, and cultured beings: state citizens, discerning consumers, eloquent speakers, enjoyers of artful life.

This mode of subjectivity and agency collapses the division between agent, action, and form. People, as (potentially) the Collective, are the seat of the divine (“sublime”? “utopian”? “ideal”?—What is the proper word in the language of soteriological, sociocentric civil religion?). But they are also the instruments, the expendable tools. They are not only the “centres” from which subjectivity radiates and action develops, but also the matter to act upon; they are the instrument with which to act, and the action itself. One can visualise it as a piece of pottery rising from the lump of clay on a potter’s wheel—being encultured, shaped, and overcoming the material’s inertia—except that the potter (creators, civilisers), the clay, and the pot, are one and the same. The philosophically rich “becoming” could be an option for the name of this process, except that “becoming” usually does not convey the sense of resistance and conflict central to the Marxist dialectics of becoming. In dialectical thinking,
the real production and the emergence of the new is a result of conflict, friction, or otherwise realised opposition of forces. Nor does “becoming” convey the romance of suddenness, the (military and revolutionary) imaginaries of abrupt, rather than gradual, change, a production that comes from a blow rather than friction. (One of the popular visualisations of production was kovat’, to forge or to smith—as in “to forge the future” or “to smith human happiness”—to en-form forcefully through hammer blows.)

Conflict, in a sense, is the direct result of the continuity of an idealised Soviet subject. Assuming no border between the interior and the exterior, she was, as described by Alaina Lemon (2008:236), a “Vygotskian, Bakhtinian, or even Marxian social self” and not the “Freudian individuated self” (also see Kharkhordin 1999 on the aversion of Soviet psychological science to Freudianism). A particularly good summary of the concept of the self in Soviet psychology is provided by Thomas Matza (2010:65): “1. The individual was not set against environment according to a Freudian model of repression, but was understood as a fundamentally socially shaped being; 2. consciousness was not an a priori but a product of a complex dialectical relationship between the material world and the psyche, a unity of material and psychic process, and an emergent result of being in the world; 3. since environment was determinative of psychological development, therefore the so-called new Soviet Man people could be made through the transformation of social conditions.” An introspective self-practice was not ideal (and in any case, better if articulated outward, in writing, as in a diary—see Hellbeck 2006; Rozhanskiy 2007). Self-fashioning was theorised—and experienced—best as a mutual fashioning, a building of the self in the process of communion and collective labour, and collective shaming (all described in Kharkhordin 1999).

These structured the experience of self as not only relational but spatial. A continuous subject engaged with the world in, ideally, an uninterrupted outward-oriented vector of thinking, speaking, and making. This out-fluence, again relying on Lemon’s (2008:259) helpful metaphors, was oriented less “outward towards some place” but rather outward “from inner circles to outer, widening circles.” A good Soviet self is a mini-model of Moscow, the centre of the empire, that radiates outwards—“from the place where she sits, where we watch her sit: Moscow, source where talent unfolds, centre from which trains depart, where the clocks
are set, where the New Year rings” (ibid.). Expanding, it engaged, often in productive conflict or shock, with other subjectivities: other, and ever larger, groups and classes of people, the party (“The party and the people are one,” a ubiquitous slogan), the state, and finally the world (“Workers of the world, unite!”). Taking form is therefore taking space, expanding and colonising outward from the (intimacy) of Communitas to the (grandeur) of the Collective; losing form is retracting inwardly. To sum up, mobilisation indicates concentration, alertness, and control, the flexing of the body, and the will to will, all of which are necessary for becoming. But it also indicates anxiety, the expenditure of life-force (detailed in next section), and the anticipation of conflict. Articulation is an act of forming animate and inanimate materials into a (higher, more civilised) form, but is also an act of self-expression and self-expansion that affirms one’s connection to the centre, modernity, civilisation. Demobilisation is rest and recuperation, and relaxation of control. Inarticulateness indexes little concern with form and formalities, intimacy, and sentiment, but also uncivilised behaviour, slurred and unprintable speech or silence, and the geographical periphery.

4 Volubility and Voice

In line with a Marxist hermeneutic of suspicion, both Communitas and the Collective may be performed in pretence. I will borrow a coupled metaphor from the work of Veena Das (2007) to convey how pretence can be conceptualised. Das distinguishes explicitly—and her respondents do it tacitly—between voiceful and voluble registers of signification. Voice is a personal presence, but it is also a force of real intent. It connects (sincere) thought and the act of (sincere) speech (symbolically as well as somatically, through motion and breath that are directed from inside out). Voice is a moral horizon of personal involvement in the world and the act. Being “voiceful,” or having a voice, marks the presence behind signification: a person, a passion, a witness, and a concreteness of concern. In the language of phenomenology, as described by Duranti (2008:492), voicefulness embodies the “aboutness and directness” of intentionality, projected into the world “that is not necessarily equivalent to rational action” or a “mental state.” In contrast, voluble signification carries no voice. For
In Communitas, pretence is the possibility of the inauthenticity of desire. In the Collective, pretence is the possibility of the ineffectiveness of power. Testing power “for voice” is especially paramount. Encountering beauty, language, and activity; city, state, and modernity; or capitalism, socialism, and neoliberalism, it is most important to see that their representations, rationalisations, and actions carry voice. What is implicit in this approach is that the “definitions”—whether of “freedom,” “socialism,” “modernity,” “democracy,” or “moral renaissance”—would be seen as incidental. Political offices are also somewhat incidental. It makes little difference if the leader is a president, a prime minister, a revolutionary, a charismatic marketer, or a science expert. (One can say that, to some extent, they are all religious leaders.)

5 Vernacular Marxism and Everyday Mythologies

Much of what follows shows the mutual articulation of vernacular Marxism and everyday “mythologies.” This may come as negotiations of value: “People think the city of Perm’ is a boloto (swamp), but I think it to be a vmenyaemiy (literally, intelligible, making sense, or conscious) city.” Translation: “people think that Perm’ is a voluble Communitas, a city in a state of demobilisation and inarticulation, which nonetheless has no true desire, no voice, attached to it; it is hollow. I, on the contrary, think it is nice—it is a Collective, effective in its voiceful power.” Indeed, Chapters 2 and 3 discuss Perm’s imaginaries at length: is it a charming village (voicefully inarticulate), a boisterous modern avant-garde industry giant

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18 The distance between voiceful and voluble can be understood as the distance between two meanings that the English word “performance” (conveniently, for theorists) combines: the theatricality, the illusion of “an act,” and versus the effectiveness or consequence of an act. If we were to define the emptiness of volubility, it is not the emptiness of an “empty signifier” but rather the phantom nature of a ghost who is a “who,” is visible, and therefore is a “sign”; who has a “meaning” of one kind or another; who can be active, and even have some polluting results of this activity (for instance, “ideology” is an outflow of voluble “stuff” that nonetheless interferes with personal voiceful flows—see Chapter 1). Therefore, ghosts may have destructive power, the power-over. What they do not have is the power-to, the power of the effective act of creation, or the vital power to change the situation in a “real” way.
(voicefully articulate), a conglomeration of bureaucratised and soulless public space (volubly articulate), or a collection of disjointed private spaces where zombie-like people drink themselves to death (volubly inarticulate)?

Affective economy of “energies” governs the ethics of everyday communication (Chapter 1), and plays a role in the wider field of cultural production.19 (In Chapter 2, I show how this affective economy informs the aesthetic regime, and the social contract, of public space.) It comes, as I see it, inevitably from the contradictions of agency that collapse the sacred and the instrumental, society and technology, agents and objects of actions. Voiceful articulation is expenditure; what is spent may even be specifically indexed by popular expressions like “nerves,” “energies,” or “moral health.” (The material existence of “nervous energy” may be entertained philosophically, but it is rather beyond the point; experientially, bodily, and in practice, its existence is confirmed.) Voice becomes a cost, the currency in an affective economy of combative and communal stances. The ultimate engagement with the world may, intentionally or unintentionally, turn into self-sacrifice, exhausting one’s body and will in the service of society. In addition, “energies” may be engaged against one’s will, as in battle magic (Chapter 1). One’s “energy” is restored through rest and recuperation, usually by taking part in the inarticulate demobilisation of Communitas. Overexpenditure to the point of no return (a burnout that carries the meaning of a spiritual death), is always a possibility and a concern. But engagement and the outflow of vitality are also necessary, for if it does not flow, it “bottles up” and also results in spiritual death. (Both possibilities are described in Chapter 3, “Affective Bankruptcies.”)

To some extent, I also use these abstractions as structuring devices in the organization of Chapters. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are foundational. Chapter 1 is devoted to the problems of inarticulation, especially in interpersonal relations. Chapter 2 tells the tales of the pleasure, meaning, and social functions of inarticulation and demobilisation, especially in public space.

19 For an ethnography of various usages of “energy” in the psychotherapeutic community, see Matza 2010:329–35. He confirms that “energy” has an “ontological status” as “internal state/gendered phenomenon/unit of measure” (329).
Chapter 3 reverses the values, and examines the reasons behind the popular pleas to (finally! Enough is enough!) start to mobilise and to articulate.

Mobilisation and articulation are (en)forming—and often confrontational. Chapter 4 deals with the historical and ethical rationalisations of conflict, violence and domination, and the ways in which violence is contained, and its borders drawn, in everyday moral practice. Life also articulates itself, often suddenly, and often violently. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the local understanding of what constitutes “events,” both “ordinary” and “extraordinary”—the themes that were also prominent in Sergei’s story of “uncertainty.” Acknowledging something to be “an event” is acknowledging it to be a form. How does one align one’s action, and one’s disposition, with such a form?

In Chapters 1 through 6, I do not limit the topics of the conversations I record. They include everyday banter about life, work, or what is on TV, etc. Chapter 7 is different in that it is an attempt to show the interplay of the previously developed themes as they revolve around just one topic—driving private automobiles.

6 Chapter Outline

Chapter 1, “The Dangers of Articulation,” is an introduction to the inarticulate and the suspicions of vernacular Marxism as they appear in the ideologies of language and communication.

Semioticians customarily distinguish between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions of utterances. Locutionary dimension may be defined as ethically neutral deliveries of a piece of information. Illocutionary dimension of utterances effects a change in the state of affairs through announcing a new status quo in a ritualistic manner; perlocutionary dimension conveys the persuasive intent of the speaker, such as a threat, that may affect the addressee.

Local ideologies of language render the first locutionary form, “just information,” as almost mythically rare. A meaningful statement never “just informs” but always also “does”
something (it persuades, entertains, threatens, or otherwise affects the addressee). Therefore, all communication is illocutionary and perlocutionary, language-as-doing and language-as-making (Lambek 2010). Communication is therefore an implicitly ethical and political field where “energies” are at work to a particular effect.

The problem of articulation in communication, then, takes the form of violence or the unpredictability of communicative effects (from “brainwashing,” to “jinxing,” to “sucking up” someone’s energies). The act of “thinking”—talking to oneself about things “in one’s mind”—is a particularly difficult case. Thoughts about worries, the negativ, should certainly be banished, but what to do about wishes and daydreaming? Should one dare to wish, to think about one’s desires, and therefore articulate them to “the universe”; or should one leave the “decision” to the universe, maintaining instead the inarticulateness of the virtuously hopeful, mindless, and optimistic disposition of pozitiv?

Such everyday moral work takes the form of what I would call “communication hygiene”: the task of defending oneself from harmful influences, and controlling the effects of one’s own articulation. One way to do the latter is to talk in a way that does not commit to “naming,” that is, connecting particular signifiers to particular signifieds. Intent can be minimised through the use of indexicals. Certain topics and certain registers of speech are associated with a claim to status or power, and they are also ethically minimised.

These strategies of opacity may, and do, backfire. Vagueness renders social agreements as noncommittal as the language in which they are expressed. Masking status removes obligations of generosity or responsibility. Opacity can be used for personal gain, intentionally and unintentionally. These are the dilemmas that make communication hygiene, or the morality of opacity, as well as general views on communication, both questionable and questioned. How does one discern voice (presence and power) in silence? Love, if it is “real love,” cannot be but voiceful; but whom does it benefit when it is inarticulate, “merely” or “simply” enjoyed without mutual declarations? Can there be communication that is voicefully effective, and yet somehow immaterial—that is, absolutely safe in that it does not threaten to “suck up” the energies of either speakers or listeners?
Chapter 2, “Sensory Utopia,” introduces the city of Perm’ and a controversial attempt on the part of the city authorities to introduce “contemporary art” to open-air city common spaces.

The (mostly negative) comments on such art reveal a particular moral economy that connects the work of the energiya (“energy”), ethical and aesthetic ideals, and the meaning of public space. I begin by describing the historical origins of what I call (inspired by Buck-Morss 2000) “sensory utopia”—the ideas of the “good life”—and good art. Here, the apparent anti-intellectualism of “not thinking” appears as a commitment to the virtues of Communitas. “Simplicity” (a loaded term, hence in quotation marks), organic forms, the sensuality of “nature,” the embodiment of pleasure, and the therapeutic, restorative functions of bodily labour are juxtaposed with the work of the mind, and its concomitant strain, anxiety, and expenditure of the “energies.” The call to think is, of course, the call to mobilise, to move from “nature” to “culture,” from formlessness to form; it is a call to abandon spontaneous gaze and languid relaxation. As such, it always comes from the Collective.

Now, in popular imagination any public space continues to be a space of collectivity (compare Fehervary 2009)—either of the Collective or Communitas—and not of an individual. So the move, on the part of the city authorities, to represent the “contemporary art” project as originating with (individual) artists and their uncensored creativity was unsuccessful. Worse, the project violated a particular paternalistic social contract between “the populace” and “the state” (or vlast’, the authorities), an ethical and aesthetic moral economy that is performed habitually in public city space. In this contract, the “populace” commits to spend some of its energies in contemplating ideological, “cultured,” and often aesthetically unenjoyable pieces, in order to sustain the Collective. In exchange, the state also takes it upon itself to balance such calls to mobilisation by providing means and places where one can entertain Communitas, the “mindless” pleasures of sensory utopia. The “creativity” of this art violated this contract, not only because it often broke away from the aesthetic ideals of sensory utopia, but also because the very effect that contemporary art considers its rationale—perplexing the audience, bringing together the incommensurable—was seen as a call to think, to concentrate, and to mobilise, while the ideological drive of the art—to mobilise towards what, exactly?—was, well, perplexing. It was seen as an attempt to reorient the familiar scales and vectors of (in)articulation and (de)mobilisation in an way which fitted
neither; while disregarding the fact that these scales also underpinned the ideas of social responsibility.

In Chapter 2, I attempt to provide an example of a “dislocated coincidence” between local epistemologies and social theory. The case study offers a glimpse of a local understanding of meaning making, at least to the extent that it can be derived from an economy of art and public representations. Can it be fruitfully analysed in terms of the “politics of meaning”? On one hand, we can say that the developments in Perm’ are an example of “the politics of meaning.” We can observe the contestation of power between those who assert their right to decide what does and does not make sense in Perm’s public space. But this type of analysis contains an unexamined and, from the “local” point of view, bothersome premise: that the very process of meaning making, or sense making, is “natural”; that is, it is not a type of labour, or a burdensome responsibility. The local materialistic view of semiotics assumes that production, interpretation, “the signal” and “the noise” (Larkin 2008) of semiotic mediation is exactly that, production. It became quantifiable per se, just like any labour is quantifiable: in hours spent doing it, in the materials used, in the exhaustion engendered. Meaning making became a site of labour and exchange, a part of the social contract, a particular moral economy. In this moral economy, power is not only in deciding what makes sense, but in having control over who “works” and who “rests” while sense is being made.

Chapter 3, “Affective Bankruptcies,” discusses how so many people in Perm’ notice that “lethargy,” “apathy,” “indifference,” “stupor,” and other conditions of “boredom,” grow and spread in people’s lives, in homes and at work, and, generally, as a structure of feeling characteristic of the time (late 2000s). The moral ontology equates such states with spiritual death, with a (potentially irreversible) dissolution of subjectivity. Calls to mobilise and to articulate proliferate in particular in the form of moral tales about how important it is to avoid burning out, becoming “bored.” In these tales, imaginaries of “boredom” are gendered—translated, for instance, as impotence in men and greed in women. They connect, in one moral–experiential field, the social conditions of class and intimacy: practices of consumption, rituals of domesticity, states of wealth and of being married. How can one help others not to become bored through one’s own outwardly oriented sexual, or generous,
dispositions? How one can avoid becoming bored when one has to be a part of places and institutions that are conducive to boredom—the army, the school, the marketplace?

These interpretations of emotions and experiences, as well as their linkages with social conditions, have cultural histories. Such histories are also voluminously described in terms of local “mythologies” or “tropes,” in other words, as symbolic meanings. Throughout the chapter, I refer to some of these meanings. However, I mainly try to account for the definitions and sensibilities of “boredom” in terms of vernacular Marxism. As such, they can be seen as forming a local philosophy and ontology of desire, and thus seen as “on par,” and thus compared with, other philosophies of desire.

I then imagine such a “hypothetical” argument, a comparison, between the philosophy of desire described in *Anti-Oedipus* by Deleuze and Guattari (1977), and the dialectics of desire as it transpires in vernacular Marxism and the ethnography presented in this chapter. Both philosophies/ontologies of desire claim to be materialist, sociocentric, outward-oriented, and antibourgeois. Both view desire as a productive, rather than acquisitive, activity. The difference, however, is that the “laymen” of my ethnography are not only materialist, but also realist. Unlike Deleuzians, they see desire as material (as energy), and therefore an exhaustible resource. Arguing that it is not an exhaustible resource, and therefore can be, at least in potentia, endlessly and unconditionally produced, is to deny the very limitation that defines material as material. This difference, as I imagine and as Moore predicted, morally complicates the application of this Deleuzian philosophy of desire to local life-worlds. The “laymen” of my study would find the Deleuzian economy of desire naively utopian; very likely, still idealist; and oppressive in the same way that the (Soviet) state can be found oppressive when it demands its citizens to mobilise and articulate to the point of self-destruction.

In Chapter 4, “Believable Threats,” I discuss how vernacular Marxism informs domination, violence, and aggression. Zilberman (1978:314) describes Marxism as a philosophy of action “of coercive, rather than adaptive, kind.” On one hand, violence and domination are “naturally” exonerated in an ontology in which agency is imagined as overcoming the resistance of inertial, inarticulate material, and in which conflict is seen as a condition of
production. As such, violence “seeps” into everyday talk, sometimes in the form of tales of domination, and sometimes as a non- emphasised element in other types of stories. In general, “coercive” philosophies of vernacular Marxism are rarely refuted or negated (although this also happens). The same speakers reveal themselves as self-righteous perpetrators, and sometimes as willing victims, of domination, aggression, and coercive disciplining. These constitutions of agency and (the formation of) subjectivity play with familiar cultural tropes: heroic sovereign action, stoicism, self-sacrifice.

Is violence, then, a “part of Russian cultural DNA” (Lovell 2006:159), one that is embedded in ordinary ethics on such an unreflective level as the DNA metaphor suggests? I found that my ethnographic vignettes revealed ethical subtleties in the approach to violence. The more “humanist” imaginaries of an a priori intersubjectivity of all interaction, the connectionism of “energies” (Chapter 1), and the cost of “energies” and “voiceful articulation,” also inform tales about violent conduct. By this, a performative distance is produced between violence and aggression, associating moral value with four particular types of aggressive charismatic performance, namely, performances that are 1. believable, 2. reversible, 3. individual, and 4. sudden/singular.

Furthermore, incorporating some insights offered by Judith Butler (1997a, 1997b) and my own line of thought as developed in Chapter 3, I suggest that idealising these (Weberian?) “sovereign” charismatic actions implies a moral judgement, namely, idealising them against their unnamed and immoral other—the instrumental, collective, institutional-bureaucratic, and chronic (Foucauldian?) disciplinary violence. In other words and in terms of “dislocated coincidences,” the local philosophy of domination seems to differentiate what social theorists epistemologically define as “structural” versus “interpersonal” violence, but it also extends such differentiation into the very morality of domination, that is, in the ways to distinguish “good” domination from “bad.” Also, in the stories of being a victim of domination, the moral and the pragmatic values of the externalisation of control are judged against what Lauren Berlant (2007a:757) calls “the burdens of compelled will”: interiorising norms and self-responsibilisation, deemed especially hard in the routine everyday maintenance of health, comportment, and emotional balance. “Russian talk” (the title of the book by Nancy
Ries 1997) about domination therefore discusses connections between value, on the one hand, and performativity, governmentality, and “structural violence,” on the other.

In the world of my respondents, “anything can happen” but “nothing really changes.” In Chapter 5, “Anything Can Happen,” I move from agency located in actors to agency located “in the world.” In the opening of this Introduction, I related the story of the “uncertain flat”—a flat that goes through various metamorphoses but does not “really” change; the wider world is similar. In Chapter 5, I discuss the moral economy of control over the fact that “anything can happen.” Among the possible modes of control, insurance and calculations of risk (Collier, Lakoff, and Rabinow 2004; Lakoff 2008) are discarded as irrational, or as unaffordable in either moral or economic terms. Precaution and avoidance (Lakoff 2008)—building “a wall” of defence, preventative measures, or radical autonomy (compare Shevchenko 2009)—are rational, but may be unaffordable. The focus is therefore on the practice of scanning and the cultivation of vigilance, a “mode of reflexivity” (Willerslev 2007) and a particular relation to the future unpredictable event. A vigilant agent scans the environment in a passive yet proactive manner, countering threats in a just-in-time, and largely uncalculated “reflexive,” “knee-jerk” reaction.

To demonstrate a “dislocated coincidence,” I show that this vigilance, at first glance, is “global” in the way that it falls in line with the theory of “reflexive modernisation” (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). According to reflexive modernisation theory, the world has shifted to a “reflexive”—playing on both “reflexivity” and “reflex-like”—“modernization.” “Reflexive” means “people’s reflections on society,” especially in terms of the heightened inclination of the world’s population to critique the status quo. This “self-reflexivity” (1994:115) implies that everything is thought of as potentially predictable and controllable, as socially and historically (over)determined. Headlines declare, for example, that “a new study finds that climate change is, with 99 percent probability, caused by humans”; this statement underlines the use of “probability” as a metaphor for overcertainty. And yet, “society” (or “nation” or “humanity” or “history”) is too immense and complex to be seen either as a culprit, a cause, or a venue of control. In short, the reflexivity and knowledge of “high modernity” lead to fear; fearful people demand ever more control and safety, and such
demands overestimate any real possibility of control in an increasingly complex and interdependent world.

In vernacular Marxism, the society and “the world”—which is, first and foremost, society—are not viewed as “complex”; on the contrary, I describe in Chapter 3 how social imaginaries in particular tend to be monolithic. At the same time, “reflexivity” about society was fostered throughout the seventy-something year history of Soviet modernity. Like no other modernity, this period posited the rationality of ultimate human control, of the primacy of nurture over nature. No “acts of God” could have been cited; “nature” was an agent, but one whose agency was presented as rapidly diminishing in the face of conquest by science and human will.

This presents the paradox of contemporary “Russian” vigilance as a mode of relationship to the future. On one hand, it is “global-sociological,” going along the lines of “reflexive high modernity” with its reflexivity and jerky, reflex-like, fearful reaction to the world. On the other, it is “particular-anthropological” because this reflexivity may be fostered just as much by the vernacular-Marxist habitus of “sociological” reflexivity. In a way, the rhetoric of vigilance is an expectation that is rooted in a memory of a different trajectory of modernity (see Charles Piot’s Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War [2010]). Viewed from the modernity of vernacular Marxism, “reflexive modernisation” is a non-statement. The “reflexive” part of the phrase is redundant: to be modern is to be reflexive about one’s social and historical condition. And the “modernisation” part is untrue: being modern is defined by controlling one’s condition.

In Chapter 6, “Witnessing,” I further explore the tropes of suddenness and unpredictable events. The fact that “anything can happen”—indeed that everything has already happened—can open up a venue to experiencing one’s subjecthood while masking the reliance of this experience on articulations—on language, norms, and other mandates of the Collective. This is achieved through “witnessing,” narrating events in a manner that reveals the collapse of the narrator’s expectations, while also suggesting that these expectations only come into full view of the narrator at the moment of witnessing (both being present at and retelling) the event. Witnessing therefore becomes another venue of the production of fruitful
uncertainty—but this time, a way to be voiceful, to feel one’s existence, by simultaneously relying on, and masking the reliance, of subjectivity upon signification, language, norms, and other subjectivation devices.

The ethics and politics of witnessing—of constructing events—are constitutive of the ethical landscape of class making. They are a part of a regime of value that re/informs social differentiation in terms of a sensibility of, and sensitivity to, events: who defines what is “a happening,” and how. I juxtapose the construction of social difference in terms of “shockability”—of sense and sensibility of and to “happenings”—with the construction of social difference in terms of lifestyle, education, and consumption.

In terms of a “dislocated coincidence,” this may represent a twist on the concept of identity. Anthropologists identified identity as a process of identification—that is, drawing an imaginary link between the “self” and some sort of social body or community, imagined or otherwise. Identity, in postmodern anthropology, is processual, fluid, situational, and layered (see overview in Brubaker and Cooper 2000). If, however, we consider how witnessing involves a game of shock and expectations, norms and abnormalities, that is, simultaneously accepting and negating the possibility of identification, identity can be seen as “deconstructed” by “laymen,” albeit in a way that is different from acknowledging its situational, relational, processual, layered, etc., aspects.

Chapter 7, “Driving as a Human Condition,” is the concluding ethnographic chapter that explores how sensory utopia, affective bankruptcies, vigilance, and witnessing play out in the burgeoning culture of automobility and in the space of the road.

7 People: “The Last Soviet Idealists”

There are specific difficulties in choosing a way to cut the contemporary Russian “social pie” in a methodologically and theoretically meaningful way. For instance, merely applying abstract terms like “imagined community,” in Benedict Anderson’s sense, or “class” in Bourdieusian tradition, is of little merit in a society where creating—and censoring the meaning of—classes and communities, had been for a long time one of the main purposes of the state (how successful it was in this enterprise is another matter). On the other hand, in the
homogenised and egalitarian Soviet society the differences were largely informal rather than institutionalised. Over the last twenty-five years, the usual points of departure—politics of identity, lifestyle and consumption, fandoms and hobbies, gender and ethnic identities—have been under active (re)construction. Social differentiation, in terms of income and access to global spaces, has been especially drastic. And yet, it often occurred to me that the lives of the people I socialised with during fieldwork were not unlike what their lives would have been like in late socialism, divided mostly between work, home, school, a summerhouse, and informal visiting (though the last of these, I heard the complaint, was hard to do these days, when one has to work several jobs to get by).

There were, however, two significant divisions. One, as I have mentioned, was income: the wild growth of “Russian capitalism” brought the country from being one of the top egalitarian countries to having one of the widest wealth gaps in the world. The monthly income of the people in my study varied between 15,000 and 50,000 roubles; they were, roughly, between the fortieth and eightieth income percentile for a city the size of Perm’ in 2009–201120 (this did not take into account other, often game-changing, circumstances such as owning/inheriting a flat or having to rent one). In terms of class, it looked like a middle position from which it was easy to envisage a more luxurious lifestyle, but even easier to imagine a fall into poverty. They had cars, often on credit, and almost always second-hand, inexpensive Japanese models. The flats in which they lived were built in the Soviet era, standard flats around thirty to fifty square meters. In summer, many of them could afford to escape to their inexpensive vegetable plots and little shacks in the countryside, within a two- to four-hour drive. Most of them had been abroad at least once, mostly to Turkey, to spend a vacation at the seaside; some went every second year; but almost none had savings to last them several months without work.

20 Levada Centre (2015), one of the independent sociological monitoring services in Russia, has developed four categories to mark the wealth factor of their respondents: 1) “The poor” have to save in order to purchase food and clothes, 2) “average income” people must save to purchase a TV or a fridge, 3) “good income” people have to save for a car, and 4) “rich” people can purchase an automobile without saving. Depending on other circumstances, having an income between 15,000 and 50,000 roubles placed my respondents mostly in the second and somewhat in the third category.
The second division was one of age. In the 2000s, (inter)generational dynamics started to draw the attention of postsocialist studies scholars and Russian intellectuals. There have been attempts to account for the generational differences in outlook, to sketch “generational portraits” in terms of their historical experiences, and to characterise their present preferences and concerns (Baiford 2009; Pilkington 1996; Lovell 2007; Levada and Shanin 2005; Shanin 2005; Polukhina 2006; Semenova 2009; Yurchak 2003; Pedersen and Hojer 2008; the 2011 special issue of *InterDisciplines* on “Generations of Change: Understanding Postsocialism and Transition Processes from a Generational Perspective”; the 2005 Oxford conference on “Generations in Europe,” with an overview in Pilkington 2005). One particularly relevant example of how generational differences may matter is the article entitled “Between Elias and Foucault” by Sarkisova and Shevchenko (2010), who compared an interpretation of the same photo by a grandmother and her twenty-year-old granddaughter; the authors found these interpretations curiously reflecting the “sociological” positions of, respectively, Elias and Foucault. The photo depicted a group of children in a Soviet kindergarten circa 1950. The granddaughter was appalled by the similarity of the children’s clothes and by other evidence of the state apparatus’s coercive function (hence, “Foucault”). The grandmother read the representation benevolently, as the evidence of the unity of her own agency (she used to be a kindergarten teacher) and the agency of the Soviet socialist state in the labour of education and cultivation (hence, “Elias”).

The authors argue, an interpretation with which I agree, that the difference in reading is rooted in the difference of the “ground zero” social reality of the grandmother and the granddaughter (see Karl Mannheim’s ([1923] 1952) view on generational dynamics). For the last hundred years, each generation in Russia has come of age in a social reality very different from the one in which their parents came of age. Every ten years have been their very own epoch: the revolutionary enthusiasm and violent collectivisation of the 1920s; the fervent industrial development, “enemies within,” mass political witch-hunts and killings, and “personality cult” of the 1930s; the enemy at the border, mass fatalities, deprivation and patriotism of the military 1940s; the rebuilding of the country in the 1950s; the first doubts

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21 Polukhina focuses on those born in the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, the timespan significant for the present dissertation.
and the political “thaw” of the 1960s; the stagnation of the 1970s; the perestroika of the 1980s; the wild “primary accumulation of capital” and the “moral dispossession” (Hann 2011) of the 1990s; and the uneasy stability of Putin’s 2000s. For the grandmother, “the ground zero” of social reality was the duality of the scarcity of material goods and the exuberant aspirations at both the state and grassroots level in post-WWII Russia. For the granddaughter, it is the relative prosperity and the political cynicism of Russia today.

Social historian Mikhail Rozhanskiy (2010) points out that people in USSR were encouraged to be conscious of the mutual articulation between one’s life and personal identity, on one hand, and social/historical forces on the other. This consciousness differed from person to person, and its particular meaning changed over time. Nevertheless, he identified several types of relation to history and collectivity, focusing in particular on what he calls “Soviet idealism.” Idealism compelled people to believe that one’s personal life, and the life of the Soviet society as a whole, should be “true” or “authentic” (nastoyaschii) because it realises in practice some ideal visions of progress and well-being. This desire to live not just “better” but somehow more authentically, and within some equally authentic collective life (although not necessarily a Soviet type of collectivity), transpired often in the way my informants talked about their lives.

Instead of locating the formation of a generation in (however defined) objective social change, Rozhanskiy pays attention to the fact that people in the Soviet Union were very conscious of the mutual articulation of one’s life and personal identity, on the one hand, and larger social and historical forces, on the other. He addresses the question of how people in a particular age cohort on Russia perceived social and historical change—as happening either to them or with them. From that point of view, the grandmother in Sarkisova and Shevchenko’s case study is an “idealist” who sees in the picture the voiceful articulation of the Collective. One might also expect, then, that the postsocialist “cynical” granddaughter, indoctrinated into a more recent liberal moral discourse, would focus on the violence of the Collective agency. And yet, I would note that both the granddaughter and her grandmother chose the same photograph in response to a request to “define her own twentieth century.” They both chose a photograph that focuses on the relationship between children, their educators, and the state; both interpreted that photo in terms of the agency of the state, rather
than, for instance, the appearance of the individual children, or childhood psychology, or any other angle that could have been brought up. The state matters. If somewhat jokingly, one can observe that there is a fair share of “perspectivism” (as in De Castro 1998) in Rozhanskiy’s view on Russian generational dynamics: ontologies are created not so much by different views on the same world as by the practice of applying the same tropes, the same problematisations—the same vernacular Marxism—to different social and economic life-worlds engendered by different stages in the development of the socialist/postsocialist project.

The people at the center of the present study were born in the 1970s. In historiography, this decade is marked as simultaneously the “stagnation” and the “peak,” or the “golden age,” of the empire, whose ideological and political life by that time had ossified into the most rigid ritualization. In general, however, there was nothing dramatic about such ossification. Life felt exceptionally secure, unchanging, timeless. The distance between the State’s lofty representations about Progress, Communism, etc., and the reality of everyday life was enormous. While this distance was resented and ridiculed, there was also an acceptance of such an order of things as a given, and of a sort of political correctness as the price of “big” sociality, of the Collective, of modernity, in general (all of these topics are explored by Yurchak in his 2005 book *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More*).

Privacy had little currency in the early Soviet period. By the 1970s, there had emerged a well-developed sphere of the “private” or “unofficial” life that took its place not only socially but also morally vis-a-vis the “public” or “official” life of formalised ritual. Numerous spheres of culture, from existential science fiction musing over “hypothetical” social dilemmas to the underground rock scene, reflected what Rozhanskiy (2010) calls “kul’tura raznomysliya,” which he describes as “a fully developed culture of multiple thought-ways”—the ability to imagine not only that the society is constructed, but that it could be differently constructed. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the parents of those born in the 1970s were people who, in their own teenage years, witnessed the first crisis of the Soviet socialist ideological project—the doubts and disappointments of post-1953 de-Stalinisation.
The 1970s-born “children of stagnation”—or “perestroika teens”—lived through three different social realities. Growing up, they were members of the Young Pioneers League (mandatory participation for children aged 8–14), but by the time they had completed their secondary education and were positioned to join the Young Communist League in 1985–1991, the League had become not only optional but dubious in terms of social capital. The second reality they experienced was characterised by the many currents of perestroika, the turmoil of political revelation in the media, and the hope that voice and liveliness would replace the empty, ossified voluble representational economy, bringing voice and articulations together (compare with the famous slogan about “building a socialism with a human face”).

After 1991 came the traumatic reality of navigating a changing economic and social terrain. They had to build their social, professional, and personal foundations at a time when established social networks started to crumble. It can be said that the “third” social and cultural reality for the 1970s-born cohort became something that they shared with the rest of the “post-Soviets”: disappointment in the results of perestroika and fatigue from the “revolutions.”

This points out how important it is not to lump Russian age cohorts into larger timespans. For those born in the 1970s, just three or four years of age difference had a great impact on life chances. The fastest economic reorganization happened in Russia between 1991 and 1996, and in 1991 it mattered if a person was sixteen or twenty, and thus had different possibilities for social agency, more or less developed peer networks, and shorter or longer indoctrination in the Soviet ways of doing things.

Born in Perm’ in 1976, I had shared the experiences of my to-be “respondents”—my childhood friends and other people portrayed in this study—until I moved, at the age of sixteen, to Siberia to study at a local university. I moved again, at twenty-one, to China to work for one of the Russian resource companies. (At the time, I used to explain my occupation to curious compatriots by saying, “I sell our motherland to the Chinese, in burlap sacks and in bulk,” replicating the logic of Sergei’s story: juxtaposing banal, everyday burlap sacks and the Collective of the motherland.) The majority of my school companions and
childhood friends stayed in Perm’. Some 70 percent of them got—or at least attempted—to get post-secondary diplomas. Education was still free, and already mostly useless under the condition of the collapsed and fast-changing Russian economy (my rather romantic choice of the Chinese language proved to be unexpectedly shrewd). Today, those among them who do not work “according to diploma”, try to dismiss their disappointment in the fact that their education—their articulation in life—holds little value, but it does trouble them.

From my earlier description of the “grammar” of vernacular Marxism, it should be apparent that perestroika destroyed not just some assumed (prior) coincidence between “life and words,” but problematised an already contingent system of relations between signification and agency, action and form. Additionally, the lives of the “children of stagnation” were beset with historical dislocations that also coincided with their socialization process. They mastered the uncertainties of vernacular Marxism, its ethics of actions and dispositions, while at the same time adapting to changing social realities. It would not be far-fetched to assume that, sharing this experience, the “teens of perestroika” would be prone to highlight what philosophers call “the negative”—the unknowable, uncertain, traumatic,22 “hermeneutics of suspicion”—mandates of vernacular Marxism. The number and the violence of these changes would be reason enough to develop scepticism toward any social order, and to the very idea of “society.” Last but not least, my fieldwork was conducted in 2009–2011, in the post-2008 economic crisis times of rising hardships and tensions. For these reasons, my “laymen” may have been particularly predisposed to ponder “uncertainty.”

But their capacity to recognise the contingency of their historical and cultural situation—their “ironist” (Lambek and Antze 2003) stance—may be curtailed by the same vernacular Marxism. Indeed, Rozhanskiy counts the “teens of perestroika” generation as “the last Soviet idealists.” The sociocentric and civilizational logic of the Soviet project—in reality and in propaganda—was the reality of their childhood, and the majority keep beautiful memories of

22 A member of my dissertation writing group was reminded here of the view of the world exercised by traumatised people—this observation is very true, because one can say that the whole setup of Marxism is traumatic (in other words, inhumane, unethical, confrontational). And yet it is not entirely accurate because usually trauma is understood as a singular event, a disruption of the social and symbolic order and the consequences flowing from that disruption, rather than a structure of the social order itself.
this period of their lives. They remember socialism as a time that had a sense of security, carefree play, purposeful life, and parental and social protection. They did not experience the “grown-up” reality of the system, which is the familiar image of a totalitarian Soviet society: the need to pretend (again, in Yurchak’s explanation, not really a problem), the difficulty of carving out a personal identity (although I am not sure that “identity” has any of its customary anthropological meaning in vernacular Marxism), and to provide for the family in an economy of shortage (that, a real bother); the violent punishment for those who dared political defiance; and the sense of despair some felt after being assigned a social role after graduation—a role that was not likely to change (as popular singer and songwriter Boris Grebenshikov conveyed it, “I am an engineer with a 120-rouble salary, and I will never be paid more”).

Instead, the members of this cohort seem to share a realisation that there was beauty in the socialist egalitarian ethos, in the certainty of its ideology, and especially in its transcendental drive that promised to engage each and every one in the active and purposeful making of human history. For them, declaring a longing for autonomy, solitude, or dissolution in the private (a common desire in post-Soviet Russia, see Shevchenko 2009) always comes with a tinge of guilt, and of defiance. In the absence of the Collective, the desire for demobilisation and inarticulation is less morally acceptable. They tentatively speculate about how they could be, under other circumstances, voicefully articulate. And they look for voiceful articulations in their ordinary lives: both imaginary, the articulation of “beauty” or “civilization,” and personified, in the form of a voiceful, energetic friend, a powerful friend who shares resources, an “activist,” “the life of the party,” “a zavodila, the one who “winds other people up” (like mechanical clocks, giving them a push towards articulation). Similarly, they seem to focus on the production of “happenings” and “events.” After the death of history, one is particularly inclined to romanticise “the event” (compare “the society of the spectacle” theory in Debord [1967] 1994, and its development in Žižek 1989), but, perhaps, none so much as the one who still cannot believe in the death of history.
8 Notes on Methods

Twenty-six people participated in the study, of whom ten individuals could be identified as “key informants.” All names, and sometimes occupations, have been changed to preserve confidentiality. For the same reason and because so much of their lives were documented according to age, I have also changed some people’s year of birth, but by no more than a year or two (given the importance of age, as I explained above). The main body of data comes from ten months of participant observation in the everyday lives of these people, and over a hundred hours of recordings of everyday, unprompted, or minimally guided conversations that happened as they happened—at homes and workplaces, on city streets, in hospitals, at birthdays and funerals, etc. To convey the “ambiance” of their lives, I have interspersed their voices with pop-culture and cityscape texts, and with “voices” from some Internet discussions—often from the social media sites that participants were likely to frequent, Odnoklassniki.ru and vkontakte.ru. Most of participants have children who were between eight and sixteen years old at the time of fieldwork, whose names and gender, if they are mentioned in the text, are randomly changed according to the same rationale.

With the exception of the “Sensory Utopia” and “Driving” chapters, the “observed-in-the-field” practices are represented as they happened in my fieldwork—that is, as talked about, or as circumstantial, as the background to the conversations that occupied both myself and my friends. This brings me to several considerations about the details of “participant observation” in this study. First, this group of people has little in common: they do not generally live in the same neighbourhoods, work together, or share other interests (although some of them know each other—Perm’ is, after all, “a big village,” as they often say), and, accordingly, the practices I took part in were not collective practices. Second, while I joined participants on errands, at the hospital, during shopping, or at work, it was often obvious that if it were not for the imposing anthropologist, they would be doing these things alone. My presence changed these practices, the moods, and intentions behind them, indeed, the very frames of these practices, significantly: it transformed them into the traditional anthropological situation of “hanging out.” At the same time, I cherished precisely the background of these occupations and places because the materiality of the city and the concreteness of our tasks often prompted these men and women to make observations that
would not come up in the kitchen, over a cup of tea. (And yet, of course, I could not overlook
the “kitchen talk” either—see Ries 1997—and many conversations were recorded at parties
in people’s homes.)

I transcribed verbatim the whole body of my recordings, going through several rounds of
coding and re-coding, until, as I explained above, the passions and the hesitations, the turns
and the twists of the dialogues and monologues (and sometimes polylogues), the tropes
within and the echoes between conversations, congealed into a set of ideas/concepts that I
then further generalised with the framework of “vernacular Marxism.” Colloquial Russian (as
perhaps colloquial anything) is hard to translate, but I have tried my best to preserve not only
the meaning of utterances but the affect behind them. At the same time, I tried to keep
linguistic and other “conversational-mechanical” markings limited, since this study does not
aspire to be a “conversation analysis.” It is, rather, an ethnography in speaking. Finally, my
main concern at all times was to convey the presences—the voices—of the people who
shared so much with me. It is to their reflexivity and eloquence that I owe the majority of my
insights, and the pleasure of doing fieldwork among them, the pleasure and the insights of
which I hope to share with readers.
Chapter 1
Dangers of Articulation: Watching People Talk

In her 2006 discussion on the Russian politics of language, Caroline Humphrey noted how the ideological usages of language in Soviet Union resulted in the creation of what she called its “occult” effects:23

To the extent that the ‘unsayable’ was left unsaid and the right words aroused the right emotions (as with ‘October’), the Soviet linguistic experiment was successful—but it always was a battle. In this complex situation, ordinary speakers had to be ultra cautious about the kinds of effects their words produced in particular circumstances. Here, by ‘effects’, I am referring not only to illocutionary acts or performatives, but also to what we might call the occult or mythic effects attributed to language by its users. For the authorities themselves were engaged in creating the mystic meanings of communism on behalf of the people, in swamping the everyday connotations of words with definite and unavoidable ideological-emotional propositions. (Humphrey 2006:381)

The material in this chapter focuses on the convergence, rather than divergence, of the “illocutionary powers” of language and its “mythical” or “occult” effects. Today, when occult ideologies have practically won the day in Russia, the “mythical”—or mystical—illocutionary and perlocutionary powers of language are the focus of language ideologies. For the most part, the usage of language remains a practical reflexivity. But there are also some commonly known doctrines of what can be called a “metaphysics of communication.” They outline the relations between “matter,” thoughts, words, and actions as a continuous material process, an exchange of “energies” happening within the economy of life force. As a philosophy of “linguistic vulnerability” (Humphrey 2006:381), they often prescribe combative stances, and the rather lonely business of defence against the dangers of the pollution, un/predictability, volubility, and violence of everyday communication. Ethical exchange requires mastering a certain art of “mental” or “moral” hygiene, which may include not only the “uncertaining” of talk, but the uncertaining of “think”—cleansing the mind from

23 Catriona Kelly (2005) gives an overview of the nature and the “magic” of language in Russian folklore, along with the contemporary struggles of historians and anthropologists in deciding to what extent the Soviet state had inherited/mis/appropriated these “traditional” sensibilities.
the dangers of symbolic mediation. Messages are carefully constructed to avoid declaring an opinion on, or even knowledge of, actual social contexts (Nafus 2006), or making claims to (the knowledge of) “general truths.”

These could not be the effects of state-censoring ideologies, because at the time of my fieldwork, there were hardly any. (As one of my “laymen” told me, “You can stand in the middle of the street and call Putin a ‘cunt.’ No one cares, and it won’t change anything,” an assessment that would hardly be true in 2015). This “metaphysics” also reflects—and betrays—a very post-Soviet anxiety about the continuing absence of consensus on social norms, a consensus that would align effective communication with the task of negotiating social distance, intimacy, and power. By the end of 2000s, this anxiety was deepened by the fact that the process of radical social differentiation in Russia continued, while the avenues for upward social mobility, which were relatively open in the 1990s and even in the beginning of the 2000s, started to close up.

Nonetheless, it is also ironic to see how this metaphysics is underpinned, as I argue, by the vernacular-Marxist “grammar” of agency, power, intimacy, and conflict that perseveres, and even thrives, in the present-day environment of beliefs in magic, imported psychobabble, and religious revitalisation. Contextual reasons for such developments may be numerous; among the most certain is the “neoliberal” focus on self-sufficiency and individuation. The focus on the psyche is promoted by the development of psychological-therapeutic cultures (Salmenniemi 2012; Lerner 2011; Matza, 2009, 2010), but also by the surge of belief in magic and the influence of esoteric movements (Lindquist 2006, 2001), which, although subsiding under the aggressive siege by the Orthodox Church, is still a vastly influential symbolic field and a market. The proliferation of conspiratorial thinking can be traced back, perhaps, to the perestroika and post-perestroika “chernukha” news (lit., “blackening or smearing,” or dark revelations24) and the “war of compromising materials” (Roudakova

24 Sergei Prozorov (2009:133–34) aptly compares chernukha news to pornography: “Rather than reveal anything new or secret, pornography attracts its audience precisely by daring to represent the sexual reality ‘as it is’, in its brute facticity, without any concealment or dressing up, with the proviso that it is precisely the ‘as-it-is’ of the pornographic image that is inaccessible to the actual experience of sexual activity, which obviously cannot attain its own representation in the course of its unfolding. In the very same manner, the revelations of the evident in the campaigns for glasnost during the late
The “negative” aspects of Marxism, its suspicion of the “social norms,” fit well in a
metaphysics that legitimises abdicating certainty, clarity, transparency, and formality as a
moral way to be. Communication through/of opacity, lacunas, and vagueness, which once
upon a time could have been, and was, attributed to the censoring effects of Soviet state
power, continues today as an ethical pressure to conceal the effects of power in everyday
communication—and this ethics is driven by an anti-representationalist, activity-oriented,
materialist sensibility.

In this way, “new” anxieties both reflect and reject the “old” scales of measuring social and
ethical distance against in/articulation. On one hand, the vernacular-Marxist imaginaries
remain salient. On the other, the “translation” of existing social forms into the Collective and
Communitas is difficult, which leaves one mute, or, alternatively, talking anxiously and
incessantly about the dangers and uncertainties of talking. What are the guidelines that
govern communication at “public” or “official” sobraniye (appointed/official) meetings, or at
the “official,” even “modern” (sovremenniy, meaning, contemporary, modern, and
fashionable), and yet quite liminal in its self-conscious promotion of Communitas, space of
the office party (korporativ)? What does it mean, today, to go on a blind date, or to start a
long-distance intimate relationship where one’s “energies” will have to go over the phone?
What does it mean to start a very personal conversation with a co-traveller on a train, while
making no mutual introductions—is it an ethical intimacy celebrating the co-liminality of
travellers thrown together, for a short while, by an unknowable fate, or is it an expression of

1980s derived their force not from their content, which was well-known to most of the Soviet
population, but from the perceived audacity of its public representation that was entirely alien to the
usual practices of the Soviet public sphere.”

I have noted that postsocialist studies focused prominently on various metaphors of uncertainty,
chaos, and disorder. In regards to communication, Sergei Oushakine (2000) in particular has
presented an interesting formalist analysis of the “broken” nature of “the symbolic” in Russia—a
special condition of “aphasia” and “symbolic deficit” characterised by the lack of communicative and
symbolic means to express arising meanings. Though telling us little about how the speakers
themselves might have interpreted these dislocations in daily communicative ethics—that is, how
talking about uncertainty was not only a practice but also an ideology of uncertainty—these studies
illustrate well what Michael Urban (1998:978–79) calls the (postsocialist) condition of a “verbal
battlefield in contradictory nonsense.”
vigilance in a time when no one can be trusted? What is the meaning of “modern” (meaning, “Western”) communication that shares no energy, no affect, but “just information”?

1 Words That (Are) Matter: The Economy of Life Force and the Materiality of Language

One day I felt that my share of troubles was larger than usual, and I complained about it to Tatiana (a sales agent, b. 1974), a friend of many years, over a meal we shared at a supermarket canteen. She said that the reason behind my trouble was simple: I talked to people with little caution. Thoughts and words were, she warned, material’nye, “having material substance,” and so they affect objective reality just like any physical matter would. Some people can influence reality through words and thoughts on purpose, and she was one of them. In her case, she added, it should not be a surprise, since she has always been both a genuine Orthodox believer and a magus. But people with no special skills, or beliefs, can also harm me, she said, especially if they feel strongly when they talk or even think of me. I may have become a target of banal envy because people are gullible, and they have been brainwashed to believe that anyone living abroad was rich. She hastened to add that such people are seriously deluded, considering that I was childless, poor, and still at university studying “God knows what” while looking at the prospect of my fortieth birthday. But I was also to blame because I did not take sufficient care about what I “put out there,” in the exchange between myself and the wider universe:

My sole explanation—someone got envious of you. Maybe even here in Russia, you met someone [who is magically potent]. You never put up any defenses, obschayeshsya [perform obscheniye, communion]; you tell people everything [that is on your mind]. There are people like me who do not care—a person lives abroad, so what? But there are people who would want to do you [to magically harm you]. You need to go to church to cleanse yourself, even if you are a nonbeliever. By the way, you are a grownup now, you should take care of yourself and get baptised. It is not a big deal, people [born into the antireligious Soviet regime] do it all the time. There are also other ways to clean your energies—those you can find on the Internet. Because I do not think that it is your own attitude to life that has changed. If there is such fignya [stuff] in your aura, in your okruzheniye [environment, also social circles], that should be cured. And hurry—you have to resolve it quickly because this depressnyak [“depression,” but with an altered suffix, -nyak, this indicates a general state rather than a concrete name of a medical condition] will suck you in. Someone got envious of you, probably for money. … And even if you do not believe [in God],
stop saying, like you often do, “If I am lucky...”! You can say that, too, but better to say instead—dai bog! [God willing!] Let them there up above know what you hope for, because if you hope, He cannot but help!

Tatiana successfully cultivated the image of a woman who was always in control. In the 1990s, she left her “useless” university degree in philology to build a career in wholesaling consumer goods, putting her social skills and personal charm to great use and general success. Some of this success could have even been magical. Tatiana herself identified as a “doer,” that is, as a magician, and also an Orthodox, being a living example of the notoriously syncretic Russian popular orthodoxy. Her magical abilities came from Tatiana’s granny, also a woman of control and a remarkable survivalist who passed away in her late nineties after living through the tumultuous Russian twentieth century almost in its entirety. Tatiana, named after her grandmother, once announced solemnly that the old Tatiana “would still be here” if it were not for her fierce independence—and an accident of the kind that, sooner or later, is bound to happen to everyone. Her granny was too frail to recover after breaking her hip and being stranded outside, in the dirt, overnight, when she went out to dig beets at her remote countryside dwelling. But granny’s magic notwithstanding, the family saw themselves as Christians, indeed, as some of the few authentic Christians because of their recent and unforgotten rural roots.

Initially, I coded this explanation of “communication metaphysics” as “magic/religion,” a kind of Malinowskian “rationality in context.” But later it turned out that this metaphysics reflected rather common views, which were rarely explicitly affiliated with any kind of magic. One of my interlocutors has noticed that this metaphysics cannot be entirely unscientific because “everyone knows that human body is a battery,” and therefore, there could be “some sort of stuff exuding from us into the world.” Individuals obtain, conserve, cleanse, or defend their vitality, their “mental” or “moral” “health,” in the process of daily exchange of something not entirely tangible, but neither just “words” nor “information.”
Affects\textsuperscript{26} and attitudes charge everyday communication, like some sort of particles in physics, with \textit{pozitiv} or \textit{negativ}.\textsuperscript{27} The essences of \textit{pozitiv} and \textit{negativ}—upbeat and optimistic, or depressed and gloomy—were applied often, and to everything: people, places, emotions, thoughts, words. In communication, Tatiana opined, \textit{negativ} was far more likely. The fantasy of \textit{obshcheniye}, of some ideal presence and perfect carefree communication/communion, was still there. But most commonly, communication is filled with insidious agendas, unpleasant surprises, threats of “brainwashing,” puzzlements, and losses that, of course, are not all that surprising to the savvy.

For this reason, private/personal/sentimental/intimate boundaries should be drawn much more “inwardly,” closer to the truly “individual” psyche. I emanated too widely by “talking too much.” The zone of trust and comfort, the line behind which one can be less careless about the exchange of “stuff,” was no longer the circle of \textit{svoi}—the “ours,” meaning one’s fully trusted friends and family (as in Yurchak 2005; also see Kharkhordin 1999 on the intersection of state, privacy, and friendship). Even friends and relatives can harm. Intentions may play a role in this: for instance, explicitly wishing somebody bad fortune (as opposed to, for example, merely obscene name-calling) is a serious assault. But life is hard, and feelings are hard to control, and no one can expect people to keep their “stuff,” envious thoughts especially, completely “off the channels.” It requires stepping lightly, with self-care and vigilance—or, ultimately, cutting off communication altogether.

\section{The Etiquette of the Non-Polluting Message}

I had not seen Piotr (b. 1974, self-employed) for many years, during which his early passion for yoga—which he started to practice in the late 1980s, when the “schools of yoga” just started to emerge from the Soviet underground to meet popular demand—transformed into a

\textsuperscript{26} See the recent book on affect by Brennan (2004), who combines the “theory” of affect with a quite materialistic view on what affect is.

\textsuperscript{27} These are, very likely, the popular echoes of the imports of positive psychology self-help ideas into Russian psychotherapeutic markets.
life-long vocation. We took a streetcar ride to see Svetlana, a mutual acquaintance (b. 1975, electrical engineer). There was a lot to catch up on, so we started catching up early, on our way, trying to hold ourselves upright on the shaky streetcar and to talk over the rattle of windowpanes loose in their frames. I must have gotten carried away, because when we arrived, Piotr chastised me, though not very harshly:

Piotr: Why, why on the streetcar? Why do you burden people [with your stuff]? Here, they stand and ride all by themselves, in their own world, not thinking of anything. And here you are! With your colourful voice! I, myself, when people around me in public transport are talking, my ears start to flare up—whether I want it or not. [So on that streetcar], at least six people around fixirovali! [lit. “secretly listened/observed, and took notes,” as in spying]

AK: But what I was saying was not rude, or a secret –

Svetlana (who was not on the streetcar): But it was excessive/redundant [lishnyaa] information for them! It could blow their brains up!

AK: So what is it that you are worried about, these people’s well-being, that I will harm them? Or that they will harm us somehow, by listening in?

Piotr: No, it is not exactly that. My point is that every person exudes into the space around him something, some emotions [emozit], whether he wants to or not. So we should not create this, you know, mess [kucha, lit. “heap,” also “mess”] around us. [When I choose to talk to you], I want to tell you simple things that will enter your consciousness [soznaniye] smoothly, but in public transport they won’t enter smoothly because many tovarischy [comrades (ironic)] will somehow participate in this process. They will spoil it [our conversation, our exchange] by putting their own something their own kasha [lit. “porridge,” also “mess,” “chaos”] on top!

This was another friendly lesson in affective and semiotic hygiene. Piotr did not appeal to Soviet ideals of civility, the “culturedness” of conduct in public setting (on the concept of culturedness, civilised behaviour, and good taste, see Kelly 2001; Kelly and Volkov 1998). Though such an appeal would, understandably, have been an insult, there were ways to avoid it (by joking, for instance). Instead, he translated the situation into the framework of an ethics of communicative safety, and a warning about the dangers of pollution. This view stemmed from the common knowledge (which I obviously lacked) that everyone was at the end of their vital resources, so the topics, registers, and sounds of conversations should be chosen with care and sensitively kept “clean/empty.” The ethical way would be helping each other “to not think of anything,” thus saving the scarce resource of vitality.
What constituted “clean” echoed another concept to which I was sometimes pointed: “burdening” (gruzit’, as in “to load/burden a truck”). The harm could have been self-inflicted: one form of advice was ne gruzis’, ne zamorachivaiya—do not brood, do not put morok (darkness, trouble, or illusion in old Russian)—on yourself. These were not formulaic equivalents of the Euro-American advice “you should take it easy,” but solemn pronouncements, often followed with an offer of help. In communication, the request to “not burden” referred to both a mode and the content of the message. Performatively, as a mode, it lay in the registers of pathos, in declarative attitudes, and the use of conceptual or abstract language. Content-wise, burdening was reference to or extensive dwelling on topics that were too far from the “here-and-now,” “you and I” (or others present), and our personal concerns. I admit to having violated these rules afterward a couple of times intentionally, in a spirit of Garfinkel and ethnomethodology, and these experiments were similarly nipped in the bud with requests to “not burden” (ne gruzi). Burdening was a demand on someone to accept something inside as significant, a demand on their scarce resources for caring—when they already were stretched thin by worrying, puzzling, but mostly worrying, about “stuff.”

Figure 1. T-shirt pattern: “Warning: Brains at Work!”

28 In the representational economy described here, the common genre of complaint, or “laments” about work, sex, children, romance, friendship—and even more negativ ones, such as crime, corruption, alcohol and drug use—may be seen in a somewhat different light than it is usually discussed in the “scholarship of lament” (Ries 1997; see also the materials for the conference “Complaints: Cultures of Grievance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia,” held at Princeton University, March 2013, at http://culturesofgrievance.wordpress.com; and the special issue of Laboratorium, entitled “Cultures of Complaint in Russia and Eastern Europe” (Bogdanova 2014), at http://www.soclabo.org/index.php/laboratorium/issue/view/17). The negativity of their subject matter can be balanced out by their meanings as moral acts: they “keep it real,” maintaining the ethical proximity to everyday concerns.
3 Ideology and “the Real Reality”

The economies and the mechanics of everyday lies and manipulations were a ready matter of discussion. Having a drink at Svetlana’s with another mutual acquaintance, Stepan, I referred, rather carelessly, to a “Soviet ideology.” Stepan (b. 1975, a policeman with a bachelor’s degree in history) and Svetlana were in favour of the resurrection of the Soviet system, savouring the nostalgia for its glory and the security of their childhoods. My application of the word “Soviet” to something as dirty as “ideology” struck a nerve. Ideologiia, said Stepan, is something crafted specifically to penetrate the inner world of others. Movies and books in the Soviet Union were not ideological because they “just stated the facts”:

Svetlana: There is not any posyl [message] in Soviet movies! The authors there never wanted to “say something”! They did not want to delat’ “messidž” [create a message; note the Anglicism]. They prosto [merely, but also simply]—tupo [dull, but also candid]—stated the facts!

Stepan: Look, I watched with great pleasure [film X]. And then those cretins at work told me it is “Soviet ideology.” I said to this person, “Listen to me, you honduras [“Honduras”; idiot, savage]. I will bring the book [from which the film was adapted] to you to prove it. … Simonov described zhestko [harshly, but also truthfully] and ruthlessly someone who is killed by the protagonist. He kills a soldier who stirs panic, and he kills him accidentally. When the civilians are killed because they are suspected to be spies, it happens because there is chaos and panic about, and it is impossible to see [what is what and who is who]. And then a crowd of running Red Army soldiers is shot and killed and the detachment is disarmed, and then squashed to death by tanks. You want to say it is “ideology”? It is just the zhestki and merciless realities of war!

AK: So, if the writer describes a “merciless reality,” there can be no ideology in it?

Svetlana: No, there is no ideology in it! It is not a flag or a banner on a parade, it is left to your own perception. How you will understand it is your own personal [business].

In a curious “emic confirmation” of Yurchak’s thesis about the ritualistic performativity—what I would call here volubility—of the late Soviet symbolic order, Stepan and Svetlana also affirmed that ideology is how it does: in being pathetic, declarative, the “banner.”

29 Konstantin Simonov, an author of several novels about WWII that were adapted for the silver screen.
refusal to participate in “the ideological” or “the political” (see Yurchak 2008 on “necrorealists”), the sensibility most strongly developed in the late Soviet Union, may be unsurprisingly strong in the “perestroika teenagers.” What struck me was that “Soviet” was not associated with the “flag or banner on a parade”—it was associated with the “real reality” of the war. Soviet, in other words, was not the Collective but Communitas. Volubility—“ideology”—on the contrary, was clearly located in the present, in particular, in the (anglicised) language of business and advertising from which the “message” (delat’ messidzh), in Svetlana’s words, was clearly derived. The bright and the upbeat, pozitiv genre of the commercials and their clear-cut “messidzh” rendered the supposedly “private,” “popular,” or even “mass” sphere of consumption into a manifestation of a voluble Collective. Consumption was ideological/is a lie; Soviet movies—especially the zhestki, tough/fierce, movies about war—were not.

Nowadays, the ideology of “ideology” blends with the metaphysics of “mental hygiene.” They are reproduced in later generations: Sasha, a twenty-four-year-old journalist, replied to my question about his political sympathies saying (only half-jokingly) that he was “not nearly drunk enough to be for, or against, any politician in particular.” Making claims to “political truths” can only be excused by drunkenness. Moreover, political convictions that are articulated ethically are not sets of propositions but rather changes in affective register, in attitude, to which alcohol is a great help; they are, in a word, performative and situational, and not denotative and permanent.

The etiquette of the unpolluted message relies on the habitual, yet not entirely unselfconscious, usages of indexicality to create vagueness: uncertain-ing rather than uncertainty. The above-described talk about the working of (inter)subjectivity is a prime example of such caution, displayed through a sort of nonchalance about conceptual meanings. “Chunks” of various discourses—brains, depresnyak, comrades—were presented as if they were portable, unrelated to discursive context. I could speculate about their provenance, such as, for instance, the “psychological science” that provided the wording for Tatiana (“attitude,” ‘state of mind”) and Piotr (“consciousness”). Svetlana (above) and
Marina (in a vignette below) described the psyche physiologically, as “brains.” Tatiana talked of magical attacks and Piotr played with what is known as “speaking Bolshevik”\textsuperscript{30} when they warned me about the dangers of talking to/at strangers—potential jinx-casters, or eavesdropping “comrades” who also could not but help “fixate” and therefore contaminate—all around. References came from yoga and from Orthodox moral religiosity (“them” and “He,” “up above” in Tatiana’s speech). Roman (below) viewed his ideas as entirely science-based, saying that “the most important thing” he learnt at university, in a medical program he did not complete because “things always happen,” was what he called “scientific human psychology.” The mechanistic language of “neurolinguistic programming”\textsuperscript{31}—the slippery, elongated tube [tubes] and concealed, under-lying padding [paddings] that insinuate their way into his head (see full quote below)—he also saw as scientific.

But my speculations about the provenance of meanings would turn out to be irrelevant. The descriptions of relations and interactions between actors emphasised not the depth of the meaning (or the depth of anything, I should add), but the density and volatility—the physics—of the relations. The concern was less with the “depth” of psychology and more with surfaces, or, interfaces—the facades, contaminations, and significances resulting from even the shallowest and most fleeting of contacts. “Soul” (dusha), a term from the moralising discourse of Russian literature, was conspicuously absent. Many words, like the “Bolshevik-speak” in Piotr’s speech, were used very consciously as floating signifiers, without insistence on their claim to truth. Nouns could be substituted by pronouns, and their effects by motions, impressions, positionalities, scales, accumulations, and vectors of movement: “it,” “they,” “stuff,” “out there,” “exudes,” “mess,” “heap,” “load,” “on top,” “blow up their brains,” “fix (in place),” “portals.” “Energies” was the most suitable, and ubiquitous, term to both describe experience and make a claim to the authenticity of this experience. How they mattered was more important than what they meant. Alaina Lemon (2008:242) remarks on the “algebraic” character of contemporary Russian moral discourse: “The main variables were Love,

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\textsuperscript{31} Neurolinguistic programming was one of the earlier and more successful self-help methodologies imported to the post-Soviet therapies market. Its success, I would argue, can be partially attributed to the similarities between its social-interactionist and combative philosophy, on one hand, and the dialectics of vernacular Marxism on the other.
Time/Space, and Value. …What was interesting to me was that people tried to fix shifting categories less through descriptive classification as by alignment and combination, as if to solve for more than one by joining them algebraically. … ‘You can’t buy Love.’ ‘Love takes Time.’ ‘You better shop around.’ … [W]e could catalog and compare such statements endlessly” (emphasis added).

The language of my respondents was, perhaps, closer to physics than “algebra”—it was about vectors, projectiles, sneaky moves. But its material, experiential, and indexical foci also allowed an avoidance of semantic “truths” about anything that could be called epiphenomenal, like “love,” or something that was not felt strongly, almost bodily—the “fierce,” “tough,” or “dull.” One should not “think too much” about the nature of “comrades” or the forces “up above.” God and strangers matter because of what their potential interference could be.

![Figure 2. ‘Test yourself: Are you really Russian? What is common to these objects?’](image)

This playful “test” asserts that, regardless of one’s proficiency in Russian, one can always discover the degree of how “truly” Russian one is by taking this test. “Untrue” Russians will 1. see the picture as a collection of abstract (that is, “burdening”) objects—such as religious or geometrical symbols (a star, a triangle), and 2. try to approach the picture analytically, parsing the picture, that is, indeed looking for “commonalities” between the four signs. “True Russians” will see it as a gestalt picture, where the geometrical symbols form a word with a message to which they are conditioned to be attuned: ПОЖА = , lit. “backside,” rude slang for “we are screwed.” Preference for the “gestalt,” “holistic,” or, perhaps, connectivist,

32 This has become an Internet meme, see, for instance, here: [http://www.e34.su/forum/topic/77649-test-na-russkost/](http://www.e34.su/forum/topic/77649-test-na-russkost/), or here [http://yana-anders.livejournal.com/152236.html](http://yana-anders.livejournal.com/152236.html).
perception + being always attuned to the prospect of a disaster = “really Russian.” I failed the test.

4 “Moral Health”: The Ideal of an Unpolluted Mind

This “nonchalance,” these “physical” or “algebraic” modes of talk, can be called an etiquette; an agreed-upon way to choose the manner and the themes of interactions with sensitivity and concern for others. It functions akin to “small talk” in presenting the speaker as pointedly mature, sensitive to “what matters,” and avoiding potentially divisive topics and positions. I should add that, once the parties’ moral character and good intentions were established, they could move from talk about their latest communicative exchanges (and disasters, and dangers) to actual exchanges. Then, the “indexical/physics” registers were cast aside to reveal strong(er) “truths” (see the condemnation of “ideology” above).

An interesting implication of the etiquette about “loading” and its economy or representation is the ideal of an unpolluted mind/psyche. Thinking, after all, is a form of (self-) communication, and therefore is also a precarious enterprise. Keeping thoughts light with pozitiv, considering how much negativ one encounters in everyday life, is hard. But it is especially hard because it is tricky: negativ, as any “substance,” materialises in reality as a misfortune, and causes one to brood more, developing into a vicious circle of depresnyak (as in the case of Tatiana, above). And worse, the very mobilisation to control one’s affect, thoughts, desires, and interactions is in itself a burden (“the burdens of compelled will,” as Lauren Berlant (2007a:757) might call it), and therefore a negativ.

Any premeditation is therefore a dubious act, practically but also ethically. Once, I was told that pretence to virtuous—unpolluted—spontaneity (that is, a lack of premeditation), as displayed in the act of communion, was coy and merely a power trip. Sociable Svetlana, I was told by a mutual acquaintance, is not so carefree as I might have been led to believe, because she “controls very zhestko [firmly, strictly] who sits at her kitchen table. And these are mostly younger people who rejuvenate her brains with their energies! [svoyey energiyey obnovlyayut ey mozg].”
Apart from the already too-familiar point about my naiveté, this statement revealed anxiety: Is communion still communion if it is “controlled”? Or if used for purposes that are, ultimately, vampiric?

Considering the tenets of hygiene, the most practical approach would be to keep one’s interiority empty/clean of any specific, and especially gripping/tenacious, thoughts at all, while at the same time keeping positiv. Feisty Marina (chemical engineer, b. 1976) explained to me how a carefully optimistic/hopeful disposition can consider an object of desire, but does not fixate on it too much. Such a technology of self is hard to master, but it can be helped by circumstances, and it does pay off. In her case, it was success in getting pregnant:

Imagine! — The money I spent! They tried to look at my body [in all possible ways]! And I got pregnant only after I came to the fertility center and they told me—here! Here is the list of the tests you need to do. It was four pages in small font! And all of them cost money! When I saw how much it would cost, I laughed! Hysterically! My husband asked, “Really, that much?! Well, let’s wait,” he said, “let’s get our wages first, and then we will try.” And so we put it on hold. So I would say that it was the moment when I relaxed and naplevale [lit. “spit on it,” stopped caring]. And — in a week I was pregnant! Vot [here, witness]—mozgi [brains]! If you want something too much, you won’t get it!

Renata, a single, sociable forty-something woman whom I had known for more than a decade, found this precarity of longing, of desire, laughable but nevertheless true. She added that it is therefore best to keep one’s desires to oneself: “You can only talk about your desires [zhelaniya] to yourself, in private. Like, sitting on a toilet and daydreaming!”

Cultivating an empty, or rather carefree, mind is a blessing, if not an easy self-practice by any means. And still, emptiness had certain risks attached. Roman (born 1975, supervised machine-tool operations at a high-tech factory), also a childhood friend, told me that emptiness of mind, though generally an asset, can be a vulnerability—because, as in physics and in nature, it is the open and unprotected void that is most easily filled with (potentially, harmful) flows. He saw himself most prone to attack when he relaxed in front of the TV:

AK: So, do you watch TV at all these days?

Roman: I do. The news. Don’t know why (apologetically). Maybe it is aging—I got interested in news—but I like entertaining programs. Discovery Channel. Tupo
[dull/simple] entertaining programs, like Dom-2. I prefer to watch TV alone. Though I realize it is bad. Because when I watch it, my portaly [portals, a term used in neurolinguistic programming] are open. When someone is in astral [v. astrale; in Roman’s use, it indicates a state of nonreflexive openness to the world], you can slip some tubusy [a neurolinguistic programming term; in common Russian, a cylindrical case] into him. So this news, it is flowing into me — good news, bad news. Maybe the government wants to sneak past my guard some sort of podkladka [lit. “lining” or “padding,” something underlying something]. Make me a zombie [zombirovat’]. But, honestly, I do not want to worry about it [zamorachivat’sya; put morok, cloud or darkness, on myself] about it either. I do not know what they want. I do not understand what they want! Honestly, I see no logic; I can only see the results. And what I see, see myself, right here, is that my wife and I had another baby, we did not plan or expect it — and they gave us 350,000 roubles. In a certificate. We will use it in some way.

Maksim (b. 1976), an entrepreneur and by far the most self-admittedly reckless and risk-prone among my friends, saw the media in a similar light of being highly and intentionally polluting. He was defiant, rather than defensive, about it. He said once how much he loved taking naps in the middle of the day, and that he usually did so to the sound of TV, “one of those scientific-popular programs, you know, where they always blabber in droning voices [govoryat zanudnym golosom]. They make my naps extra sound!” It was simultaneously an affirmation of his virtuous concern with small demobilisatory pleasures in life (more on this in Chapter 2) and a declaration of courage—since not only did he defy the hypnotic and the didactic properties of “the zombifying box,” but tricked them to enhance the sweetness of his naps.

5 Dumb and Dumber: Mourning the Loss of Reflexivity

From these cautions emerges an ideal of unmediated mind, imagined as neutral or “natural,” perhaps idle, or daydreaming, or napping, “not thinking about anything.” Thinking about concrete and pleasant things that one cannot get (like pregnancy), thinking about conceptual

33 This concern echoes the popular belief that one should not drink alcohol alone (another type of potentially dangerous in-flow) lest one becomes an alcoholic—because drinking alone is a true sign of alcoholism spiraling out of control. In Roman’s monologue, it is interesting how the risk of pollution echoes the risks of addiction, as it is especially risky to watch TV alone.
and abstract things (burdening), thinking about concrete but unpleasant things (like a scary movie), and thinking about how one is doing something when one is doing something (exemplified in a vignette below), all blended conceptually together in the problematisation of reflexivity in general.

These ideas of ordinary ethics found their inevitable echoes in the forever-heated grounds of Russian “intellectualist” public discourse. Throughout the 2000s, there has been an ongoing concern with the “dumbing down” of the Russian population. The culprits were as predictable as they were diverse: the unsophisticated, conspicuous consumerism rising in the relative prosperity of the 2000s; the “anti-intellectual” influence of American TV; the conspiratorial efforts of the ruling elite, who prefer an uneducated, and therefore docile, workforce (and cannon fodder) to reflexive, and potentially democracy-loving, citizens.

Evgenii (b. 1975), a lecturer at a university, was also concerned about the increase in tupost’, “dumbness”:

Imagine! I was standing in line to a teller. So I ask the woman ahead of me, “Are you the last one in the line to teller number 31?” She says, “Maybe.” I say, “Well, can you at least tell me if you are in line to teller number 31 or 32?” She says, “What is the difference?” It drove me mad! Well, I told her, “At the very least, there is a difference between 31 and 32!” You know what she replied?! She said, “Really? Does one or the other bring bad luck?”

The, obviously, elementary task of enumeration became too “burdening.” The line between “down-to-earth” and “abstract,” relevant and irrelevant, has been drawn so close to “down-to-earth” (in this case, the life-force economy and its the concern with jinxing and “bad luck”), that the whole division has lost its meaning.

And yet, Evgenii also voiced another common opinion that decreased reflexivity is one sure way to increase one’s vitality—and therefore one’s social success:

I have a [female] neighbor who is a journalist. … She also wrote fiction—she wrote with a huge number of errors, both grammatical and stylistic. But she is one of those people who know that there are rules for doing things, but who do not care. You and I, we are both burdened by our education. We were told that this and that are not correct, and this is correct. Only this narrow way of doing things is correct. And there
are people who don’t care to know anything at all, so they just do it—and get things done because they idut naprolom [go forward breaking through, like a tank].

Education, “thinking too much,” is a limitation: it limits the will with rules and doubts when the most effectual way is to act without meditation, simply and forcefully. With this proposition, Evgenii gave us a common ground for being educated and therefore “socially disadvantaged”—indoctrinated into thinking about rules. We were lucky to be unlucky.

The pronouncement was, of course, rather coy. A successful and ambitious young academic, Evgenii was content with his career choices, and his worries were less about the toll of intellectualism on his vitality than about the purity of the intelligentsia ranks. But not many of my interlocutors were content with the dis/continuity in their careers. In the 1990s, vocational colleges and trades were still seen as lowly in terms of class and social capital, and many chose to get university diplomas while tuition was still free of charge. Many of these newly minted teachers, engineers, historians, philologists, doctors, and economists, had to take jobs in sales, security, clerical, and manual work. Nadezhda (b. 1974), spent five years completing her bachelor degree in history, and then held a very low-paying secretarial position at a local factory. She, however, was also concerned with the “dumbing down” of Russia, and her complaint about it was also ambivalent:

They told me to draw the engine drafts, imagine? I don’t have any training in this. Good God, historians are made to draft airplane engines! I am scared to think about those who fly on these planes. Though, you know, they say my drafts turned out to be better than those made by the specially trained people — because I have no idea what I am drawing; I simply copy each line as precisely as possible, that is all.

Her explanation allowed upholding the value of educated modern citizenship and disappointment in the unfulfilled Soviet promise of infinite social mobility, a “better tomorrow” filled with increasingly creative, white-collar occupations. And yet, it also replicated the justification given by Marina for “not thinking about pregnancy”: unthinking—

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34 Disappointment in education is typical when my respondents talk about their own education, but not when it comes to their children. With the shrinking opportunities for class mobility in Russia (as elsewhere), education, despite the uncertainty of its future value, is still seen as the only (moral) road to upward mobility. No expense is spared in getting the kids to the best available kindergartens and schools.

35 To this day, this is a common perception, according to Charles Walker’s Learning to Labour in Post-Soviet Russia (2010).
the spontaneous, unpremeditated way of doing things, absenting “irrelevant” contexts and concepts from both one’s speech and one’s thought—is not only ethical, but also efficient.

6 “Vagueness” and Is Power: Contestations

6.1 Love and Alcohol

During my time in Perm’, I was a confidant to the developments in a very dramatic love affair. The woman, as she told me, knew that the man was in a troubled marriage, but so was she. The affair lasted almost two years; during all this time both partners abided by the unwritten codes of ethical communication, emphasising “the here and now,” and never making a straightforward effort to contextualise their relationship in terms of the future or a change in their social status. This covenant of vagueness, from her account, included family members on both sides. She met his parents and was received quite warmly, no questions asked, and he was introduced to her mother in the same way. They often met at her place, so the relationship was not a secret to her children, either. The affair blossomed in the climate of moral acceptance of “you and I” and the “here and now,” and the nondisclosure and vagueness in this “physics” of communication; but finally, the acceptance failed to conceal the cynicism and banality of the situation. The man’s wife, it turned out, never saw her marriage as “troubled,” and declared this publicly and in no vague terms. He “remained silent,” that is, did not say or do anything to dispute it.

The story may be banal in all times and ages, but it made me wonder how this “presentist,” “here-and-now” communicative ethics works, not least by masking structural power imbalances. The shortage of eligible bachelors, especially older than thirty, is an axiom that both men and women live by in Perm’ (and in Russia at large, see Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002; Patico 2010; Utrata 2015). To what extent is this masking a public secret? Another female acquaintance described her personal experiences with men, pointing out how the consensus of “unpolluted messages” and “absenting context” became the instrument of disempowerment in relations. Looking for marriage, she met a potential beau online:
I met this man online, a smart, good-hearted man [khoroshiy], a lawyer. I learned [when we met on a date] that he was married. I asked, “Why did you not say so when we talked online? Why did you not mention it in your profile account?” He said, “Ne sut’” [lit. “it is of no substance, or importance”]. I said, “Well, it may be ne sut’ to some, but to me…” We have not met again, of course.

She did not see him as immoral—the man was “good hearted,” khoroshiy. The disagreement came from him implying that she was being superficial, or not entirely ethical, by insisting on declaring social status and intentions in the intimate “here-and-now” situation of a romantic encounter. She, recognising how such codes put her at a (further) disadvantage, refused to acknowledge them.

The ideology of spontaneity and “down-to-earthness,” of the presentism of “here-and-now,” interplays with other means of structuring everyday time and space. Webb Keane (2003, 2006) proposes the idea of a “semiotic ideology” to incorporate the matter of materiality into the realm of (local) ideologies about language and communication, and the next example, I hope, makes a good use of this idea. Alcohol is often stereotyped as one of the “traditional” elements of Russian mythology (“vodka, bathhouses, and Pushkin—our traditional values,” a joker would remark). The matter of alcohol, and alcoholic substances, matter profusely in everyday communication, and are played up for both their symbolic and material qualities. I suggest that alcohol is so prominent because it allows some subtle, strategic games in masking and unmasking certainties and powers. One can play up alcohol’s affiliation with voiceful inarticulation to say nothing, if necessary, and one may also rely on it to justify blunt openness (or even a “political” opinion). People consciously point out how they use alcohol to slow down and speed up time (“you drink it up, and everything is bystro-bystro-bystro,” or quickly-quickly-quickly); to privatise, or appropriate, a public space (as described in Chapter 2); or to create a sort of “third” space outside the pressures of work and of home. Inebriation is therefore a versatile, and a rather foolproof, tool in shaping experiences and interactions.

For Nadezhda—the historian and secretary who, occasionally, copied the drafts of super jet engines—the inherent quality of alcohol as a shifter that allows manipulation, in particular, of intimacy and sincerity, presented a particular conundrum. She was in a long-term, long-
distance relationship with D., who lived in a faraway city but maintained daily contact with her and her ten-year-old daughter Lina. When he came to visit, Nadezhda was excited but never sure where their relationship was going. Part of the confusion was the semiotic codes of vagueness and the licence to presentism, to the “here-and-now,” juxtaposed with alcohol and being drunk. According to the old cliché, drinking inspires truthfulness: “What sober men think, drunk men say” (чto у трезвого на уме, то у пьяного на языке). But when I used this cliché in reply to her grievances, Nadezhda said emphatically, “Not true! What a sober man thinks, a drunk has already done!”, thereby drawing a familiar outward-oriented “extension” from thought to words to deeds. And yet, Nadezhda was both sure and not sure if the veritas was indeed in vino, at least as far as D. was concerned:

I do not get very hung up on his drinking. He is not loud or violent when he drinks. But the bullshit he says when he is drunk! And then he goes to sleep—and I understand that he says the truth [правду говорит, he speaks his mind/speaks the truth]. —Or does he? When he is drunk, then I think that he is useless, he just puts holes in my brain [мозги мне композирует, leads me on]. He says, “Let us get back to the stage where we were before. Lina started to call me ‘daddy’; it is no good, because if we go our separate ways, she will suffer.” But in the morning he remembers nothing! I sat him down in the kitchen and told him: “Only people who are together can really ‘go their separate ways,’ and we are not together, as I see it.” He says, “What are you talking about?” I say, “Didn’t you tell me that we have to ‘go back to where we were before’?” He says, “If you do not like the fact that I drink, I cannot help it.” I say, “I don’t care that you drink, but if only you could hear, or remember, what bullshit you say when you are drunk! You pour it out and go to bed! And I am left there pumping it through myself [прогоняю через себя] all night long!” But then again, he loves Lina; I think he loves her more than me. I told him we are coming to his place for vacation: he was frightened at first, but then he said, “Good decision, come here and live here for as long as you want!”

Was the alcohol only the vehicle of meaning—that is, the facilitator, the channel through which the sincere opinion has flowed out as the alcohol was flowing in; or, in Keane’s terms, was it an agent, a determiner of meaning, and therefore, perhaps, a source of a lie? D. made contradictory statements, and had a repertoire of devices to defend his continuing to do so: the “here-and-now” etiquette of intimacy, the change of consciousness licensed by alcohol, plus the general “do not burden” ideology of the time. Nadezhda refused to accept it, citing the damage to her vitality and to her “nerves” (пeregzhivat’, anxiety and emotional torment).

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36 I use initials for people whom I did not know personally.
6.2 Workplaces and Swearwords

In general, there seems to be a growing suspicion that this vagueness and the ethics and etiquette of “uncertainty,” “simplicity,” and “presentism”—however honoured by history, or culture—became dangerously abused in the absence of the formal, rigid, “rational,” “cultured,” and often didactic symbolicity of the Collective, the structure against which the representational economy of uncertainty had emerged (see Pedersen and Hojer 2008). Men often complained about the lack of clarity at work, not necessarily because there were no official contracts regulating work relations, or that these contracts meant little since no one could hope to enforce them—that was a matter of course. Putting imprecise task descriptions in contracts was a favourite way, according to Maksim (see above—entrepreneur, b. 1976), to demand a discount after the work had been completed—on the pretence that it had not been “what was wanted.” A more serious grievance was that the codes of intimacy, in particular those embodied in drinking sessions, failed to translate into real patronage. The amount of compensation had to be negotiated, or aggressively demanded, again and again, sometimes in the morning after a night spent with the boss, in the bathhouse, in “unloaded” sessions of idle banter. Just as Nadezhda could not understand why sober D.’s desires were not drunk D.’s desires, it was hard to accept that the rituals of communion in the bathhouse were so separate from the actual flows of money. And yet, on another day Maksim said, almost smugly, that the completion of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards (the epitome of articulation: sophisticated technological quality described in statistically precise form!) at his company changed nothing: the assignments and standards were negotiated as usual, orally and often in the indexical terms of “here,” “there,” and “stuff,” because “you know, people are too used to that, and no one has time for these terms and forms.”

On the other hand, expressing disagreement about vagueness—that is, defending the proper, coherent, clear communication at work—was a way to quit with dignity, too. Svetlana, for instance, had been unemployed for a couple of months, after only two months of employment. She half-quit, half-lost her job because everything was nechetko (unclear) and for unsavoury reasons, rather than being “cosily” or “pragmatically” (or even “traditionally”) casual:
They told me I had to pick up a project from a young girl who left, and that it was “mostly done.” So I agreed. And then on my first day, I looked at the documents she “handed over”—they were awful! After I saw the working site with my own eyes, I had to throw all these documents out. They were all useless. It was easier to redo it all myself. I asked for the description of the technical assignment written by the client—and it was all phrased like, “The contractor is to complete the work on the site.” What “work”? Are you crazy to write assignments like that? I could have, well, swept the grounds with a broom—that would count as “work,” wouldn’t it?! So instead of the two weeks they gave me, I had to work on this assignment for two months, and they kept complaining about the time it was taking. And they “forgot” to tell me that I was on a “trial period,” so my salary for those two months was actually half of what I expected! Sneaky bastards.

A particular case of voiceful inarticulation was aggressive communication: stern glances, threats, swearwords, and other aggressive performances (more on this in Chapter 4). Russian swearwords, mat, while being conceptually monotonous (mostly related to sex), are morphologically inexhaustible, and constitute the epitome of semantic imprecision and affective charge—which are combined, as it is often noticed, with remarkable communicative effectiveness (Erofeev 2003; Humphrey 2006). According to Erofeev, in Soviet times mat was used to indicate particularly strong intent, the “real” aboutness and directness on the part of the speaker. One needs little persuasion to agree that the “emotional blows”37 of mat “have substance”—and are an efficient way to transform other people’s subjectivity, forcing people to follow orders or pay attention. As such, mat was used even by the intelligentsia who would especially enjoy an occasional performance of mat morphological inflections—a performance built, naturally, on their trained memory and linguistic ability.

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37 Alaina Lemon (2004) describes in detail the rationale and the particular relationship between performativity and psychology that stipulate the exercise of what she calls (after her informants, the teachers of Russian theater) “emotional blows.” I engage with this article in greater detail in Chapter 4.
Figure 3. “The rules of speaking Russian on the production site”

Note: A short humorous manual, also an internet meme, that explains how to translate mat (on the left, shown only indicatively, that is, uncertainly, in accordance with the rules of censorship) in the semantically articulate (and perfectly, if exceedingly, polite) speech (on the right). The left column is hard to translate, for the very reason of mat's a-semantic character. The “translations” on the right read: “My God!”; “Your sense of responsibility leaves much to be desired”; “I am so shaken”; “It looks like we have made a mistake”; “The result is not up to expectations”; “Pardon me, but you are too insistent”; “Your behaviour breaks with my expectations”; “I am filled with emotions,” etc. The humour showcases the obviously utopic nature of the manual (it is hard to imagine anyone using such articulations, such formal politeness, even at work), but also illustrates the inherent paradoxes of mat's inarticulate efficiencies (or efficiencies of inarticulation).

Mat, therefore, may be seen as “clean,” an ethical, if not always appropriate, message/communication. A deluge of swearwords is rarely premeditated, and its semantic load is nil. But genuine mat is voiceful inarticulation, and it requires the presence and the expenditure of vitality on the part of the speaker.

Under the present circumstances of the scarcity of life force, swearing and other performative aggressive motions (more on aggression in Chapter 4) were often no longer an option. This is how Irina (b. 1975, paediatrician, and a life-long friend), described the stages of “descending” from the articulation of polite exchange, to the inarticulation of mat, to the cutting, for the lack of affective means, off of communication altogether—and replacing it with physical withdrawal:
I have spoilt myself rotten recently [that is, I care about my vitality]. If I do not like a person for any reason, any reason at all! I don’t even tell him to fuck off [posylayu ego, using mat]. I simply turn and walk away. I don’t care if I need something from that person, or this person needs something from me. My moral health, a popular umbrella word for, roughly, psychological well-being is more important than that!

On the other hand, the reason for this may be that in terms of their ability to carry voice, swearwords have fallen victims to inflation. They became too common at corporate meetings and parliamentary speeches, and hence, voluble. Lilia (b. 1978, a human resources manager) told me about “a girl” who got too accustomed to, first, what can be called “informative/locutionary” and second, “civilised” communication, as opposed to the “substantive’affective/nonconceptual registers of communication, while working at an American company in Moscow. Lured to provincial Perm’ by a lucrative job offer, the “girl” faced a deluge of personal aggression and mat swearwords at her very first business briefing at the Perm’ establishment, where the practice, according to Lilia, was the norm. The girl got “hysterical,” Lilia added with a chuckle.

The morality of the story, like the morality of the story of the “uncertain flat” in the Introduction, was not that certain. On one hand, Lilia disapproved of this aggressive and emotionally draining inarticulation at work. But the point of story was not about her preferences for registers. She criticised the psychologically exhausting ways of her workplace, and yet upheld them as real. What she meant was that Muscovites as a class of people have gotten “too soft”—unused to the energy-carrying “emotional blows” of “true” Russian communication. To be truly efficient in communication, one has to idti naproloam [go forward breaking through, like a tank, quoting Evgenii above]. One has to be a survivor. “The girl” got too foreign, too advanced along what could be marked as a voluble Collective. We have never been modern, says Lilia’s story; so is it smart, or ethical, to pretend that we are? But paradoxically, “the girl” could also be seen as lagging behind in time, precisely because for her, the swearwords were still a sensitive matter, like in the times of Soviet culturedness (at least as Lilia imagined it was). Those truly savvy about the present-day situation knew that the vitalistic, voiceful efficiency of swearwords had been decimated through too much use. Swearwords could be seen as practically harmless motility rather than a blow these days, when life in Russia has become so zhestki [tough, harsh]. What in the
Anglo-American tradition would be called “professional” and task-oriented, was made a part of vernacular Marxism, which made its own claims to dis/connecting formality, virtue, efficiency, truth, as well as class and geographical location.

Ekaterina, Maksim’s wife (b. 1982 and younger than the majority of my friends, and a brand manager in a medium-sized corporation), was definitively in favour of “neutralising” or “dematerialising” the relations in her office, which felt, like at Lilia’s, very “material” in their simultaneously unclear semantics and aggressive affect. One day, after being a target of one more “emotional blow” peppered with nasty psychological manipulation, she broke down and cried right in front of her superior. The manager changed her tone to one more caring, motherly even, and explained to Ekaterina that my vse na nervakh—literally, “we are all using our nerves.” She further implied that this was the way of the corporate world, the privilege of it, because the corporate world is the epitome of efficiency, and engaging “nerves” is the only path of true efficiency. The manager saw her aggression as moral—a sign of her vital potency that she expended on behalf, and for the benefit, of the company.

Ekaterina, who quit after the incident, added, first, that never again would she work in a company where her boss-to-be was a woman, because women are “more insecure” (ne uvereny v sebe) and therefore prone to these “emotional” approaches. Women are inarticulate. Second, and contrary to the boss’s claim to corporate modernity (some would say, corporate “neoliberal” “postmodernity”), Ekaterina saw her as clearly belonging to Soviet culture, as a person who does not know that true efficiency requires not “nerves” and the inarticulation of mat, but the precision of semantic meanings, calm neutrality, professionalism, and cultivation of good work-life balance habits (all of them Ekaterina counted among her competencies). Using the line from a popular perestroika-era song38 that poetically criticised the lives and the values of Soviet Union dwellers, her boss, Ekaterina said, “measured her work by her tiredness” (that is, by her vitalistic exhaustion). The irony is that, perhaps, her boss was indeed following the latest prescriptions of “Western” neoliberal corporate culture—and not the principles that Ekaterina learnt from the Harvard textbooks on

38 The 1984 song, by Nautilus Pompilius, a rock band whose popularity peaked in the late 1980s, is entitled “Chained by One Chain,” and it is an explicit dissident critique.
marketing in her school years in the early 2000s. The “affective turn” is popular not only with anthropologists; harnessing affect as an additional source of capital value is all the rage in the cutting-edge corporate endeavour that appears to have worked all the possible bottom line out of “neutrality.”

Maksim had his own ideas about when to use, and when not to use, emphatic blows. He is very much a people person, and I would consider his approach among the most pragmatic. He balanced between the ethics and in/efficiency of vagueness, emotional blows, presentism, etc. With a boss who was his long-time friend, both in and outside of the workplace, he chose to “clear the air” through periodic sessions of “shouting” (naorali): “We shouted at each other and there was peace and quiet (between us) for another month.” Another colleague presented a dilemma. The catharsis/exchange in energies through shouting was impossible because there was already a lot of underlying mutual dislike as well as disagreements on the task at hand. And yet they had to communicate on an everyday basis, and exacerbating this hostility by introducing “cold,” procedural, cultured etiquette—volubility that would stand in especially stark contrast against the “shouting” intimacies with another guy—was not an option either. What was left was careful pussyfooting, the kind of speech that I described above as nonpolluting, noncommittal communication filled with the (ironic?) distancing from positionalities and beliefs. Another way to communicate, identified entirely by Maksim and not by myself, was what anthropologists call “affective labor”: faking, or working up, Stanislavski-style, sincere personal concern when he talked with clients: “I know I am good at that, remembering their dogs and children’s hobbies, but God, I am tired of this! There is just one client I like in particular—she keeps it stern, zhestko, and to the point, but she always pays the bills.”

Against “affective labor,” the situation of an open conflict (“shouting at each other”) could be, theoretically, considered a relief, if it was not, again, an almost everyday occurrence—

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39 Compare with the British sitcom The Office, which is a comedic call for the return of “neutrality” in communication. The comedic effect of the show centers on the behaviour of the obnoxious boss who attempts to increase productivity by “engaging” his staff with crude, personal, and “spontaneous” remarks—which translates into nothing but major embarrassments and the cynicism of the workers.
and not only with friends but also, and mostly, strangers. Therefore, he once mused out loud, partially in surprise at his own surprise, about the time he met a relationally distant client (a stranger) expecting an exchange of blows, but the client chose a register that seemed cordial enough—and yet, formulaic, informational, merely a procedure, nothing personal. It was unusual; it was an experience worth remembering, and retelling. He concluded that this unusual turn of events must have been informed by an absolutely final realization, on the part of everyone, that “nerves” (“moods,” nastroyeniye, was his word) had become a resource so scarce it was time to shut all the “flows of energy” rather than continue “exchanging blows” in hope of getting an upper hand (or merely out of cultural habit):

We here got some “happy mail” [ironic; “lucky chain-letter,” a genre of Internet spamming; and a common euphemism for any letter-headed mail from which one expects no good news] from our clients. They want to sue us because we shitted through the deadlines [did not fulfill our contract obligations in time]. So I went to their office and talked with them, and you know, actually, we milo pobesedovali [had a pleasant conversation; with the words miliy (charming) and pobesedovali (polite conversation) indicative of nineteenth-century Russian etiquette as it is portrayed in literature]! You know why? Because people these days finally understand that if everything is so kherovo [fucked up], what is the point in spoiling each other’s moods even more?

Maksim could explain the function of “blows,” rationalise vagueness, critique affective labor. Here, he argued—what can justify entirely voluble, impersonal, perfunctory politeness? Formal etiquette, it turns out, does not articulate morality, but it can support morale!

Tatiana (who talked above about magic in her family, and in everyday communication), was least uncertain about communicational uncertainties. She simply knew how to handle these matters. She had vitality to spare, and was very adroit and aware about her adroitness, in using both the inarticulation of mat and the articulation of “cultured” wording, according to need. Enjoying her forceful temper and a flare for drama, she told me about the scenes she cooked up. One of her clients was a “Soviet” middle-aged woman, a “typical eight-by-seven blob with a beehive” on whom much depended but of whom other distributors were mortally afraid—so formidable, negativ, and dismissive were her ways. Tatiana “did not give a damn,” because after all, “my ne raby, raby ne my” (we are not slaves and slaves are not us, a quote from a Soviet children’s alphabet book). She entered the office of the “blob” with the grace of culturedness, smiling and looking her in the eyes and asking permission to sit down,
“like a good Young Pioneer girl.” The “Soviet blob” was charmed by such presentation of voiceful articulation, of the Collective, and Tatiana never missed a sale with her.

Another client was tardy with the payment, and Tatiana left a message on the answering machine threatening her in mat. The debtor chose to call Tatiana back when she was in the process of charming a male client, this time using her femininity. Femininity—in itself a matter of enigmas, demure understatements, showing-without-telling—could only benefit by a little show of voice, and therefore a bit of mat, especially if it looked provoked rather than a habit. Tatiana, excusing herself, picked the phone and gave the debtor another earful of mat—right in front of her male client. After she put down the phone, he, having witnessed this vital expenditure on her part, expressed polite concern about Tatiana’s “nerves” and offered her valerian drops (a popular sedative). Tatiana’s reply was: “Thank you very much, but it is that bitch I talked to who needs valerian drops! Myself, I feel like having a gun right now!”

6.3 Empty Mind, Negative Agency: Declaring Pofigizm

A declaration of refusal to think or to act, to respond to the world or “burdening” demands, is sometimes described as pofigizm. Here is a particular story that portrays dramatically such a declaration—first as fear, or weakness; then, without a pause, as strength and liberation:

Lyubov’: I have known X. for a long time. He was studying at the university, not like normal people do, for five years—no, he had been studying for ten. So we were drinking together at 5 am in the morning. So he said, out of the blue—because I did not know much about [his studies]—as we were finishing [our drinking session], so he said, “Listen, it is five now and I have an examination at nine.” I said, “Are you mad [obaldei; got yourself in a state of stunned stupor]?” Imagine: he sat here drunk, so drunk, and just four hours left. And these were finals [on which graduation depended]. I said to him: “Napryagis’! [lit. “mobilise, focus, get yourself together,” articulate yourself] I will get you some coffee.” But he said he was ashamed—what if he could not answer the [exam] question? What if? I said, “What if you now spring yourself up [vospryanesh’], and draw a particularly easy exam question?” What if

40 Examinations are often held like lucky draws, when questions are written on pieces of paper and scattered on the examiner’s desk, face down. Students pick up a random question upon entering the room.
you will pass the exam, even if na troyak [with a minimal passing score]?” He says, “Pokhuy!” [fuck it; a coarser synonym of pofig from which pofigizm is a derivative]. And he was in sostoyaniye nesostoyania [the state of no-stature, unwell to the point of falling off his feet; very drunk]. Well, pofig is usually said in the state-of-no-stature—otherwise people, like, want something.

AK: So why is it pofigizm sometimes, and why is it nado—necessity—other times?

Lyubov’: Sostoyaniye! It is [just a state of mind]. For instance, look around, at the room we are in. It is all bright and clean now—and it was dirty and filled with garbage bags this morning—and then, in the morning, I was sitting on this windowsill and laughed at all this! Because there is nado [necessity, demand]—but there is also pofig!”

The story was told by Lyubov’ (b. 1975, a single real estate agent), over some red wine in the kitchen of an apartment she recently rented for herself and her twelve-year-old daughter Ksenia. The kitchen was clean, but the lady of the house hardly needed excuses if it were not.

The days before our meeting were stressful, frustrating, and almost surreal in their developments, so she was almost delirious with fatigue and lack of sleep. A sense of crisis conditioned the existentialist turn of our conversation: Lyubov’ was asking, as I see it, a very anthropological question about the nature of agency, by examining her own experience of what could be called negative agency. In her story, the decision to refuse caring, and doing, was clearly conditioned by fear, fatigue, despair, or alcohol—and nonetheless, it was a decision; and how empowering can such a decision feel!

Theorising the political nature of negative agency is exciting, as it turns out, both to anthropologists and to their informants. Alexei Yurchak (2008), for instance, asks similar questions by examining “the politics of negative agency” in the ideologies, and productions, of a “necrorealist” artist group in the 1970s. Necrorealists declared themselves dead, and insisted specifically that their existence could not be defined in terms of agency, politics, or other such, what anthropologists would call (very offensively for necrorealists, I presume) “life-forms.” Listening to Lyubov’, I also got excited about the paradoxes of negative agency—mostly, for what I see as its affinity with the ethics of vagueness, withdrawal, understatement, and uncertainty, described above. I got a feeling that somehow, right at that moment, I would be enlightened about these affinities. It did not happen, perhaps because these affinities had only formed in my mind, perhaps my desire was too inarticulate (I should have said “God willing!” as Tatiana recommended) or, on the contrary, perhaps it was too
intense (“Brains! If you want it too badly, you will not get it!” warned Marina). But also I think the enlightening explanation did not materialise because the message of Lyubov’s story was, in itself, about the comfort and meaning that people find in uncertainty—in this case, in the *slippage* of the human condition, in the variety of human experiential “states” (“there is *nado*—but there is also *pofig!*”).
Chapter 2
Sensory Utopia in the Time of Cultural Revolution:
The Pleasures and Unpleasantries of Meaning

My film is a crash course in non-scientific communism. … Fact is, we never had the communism described in the [social] science doctrines. But we had the non-scientific communism. It is when you do not have to think about daily bread, have a sea of vodka and nothing to worry about, that is the non-scientific communism.

– Aleksandr Rogozhkin on Peculiarities of the National Hunt, a film he directed in 1995

In the present chapter, I describe the city that the majority of my respondents call home, its history, its controversial image as a soulless industrial giant, and the recent attempts on the part of local authorities to change this image. I use this backdrop—of a city, and these attempts—to showcase how particular local assumptions about the workings of meaning and representation, both in public space and in general, complicate such familiar frameworks of social analysis as “the production of meaning” and “the politics of representation.”

1 Perm’, “the City of No Distinction”

My childhood friend Batyr (b. 1974), an enterprising man and an “ethnically visible” Permiak of Tatar ancestry, asked me once, jeering: “Those people abroad, what do they know about the Urals? Do they really think that bears walk in our streets?” International stereotypes of Russia are indeed unimaginative, and he was right to sneer. But to be fair, domestic stereotypes about the majority of Russian cities are equally unimaginative. Seventeen million Russians, about 12 percent of the country’s total population, live in so-called millionniki—cities with populations of around one million (700,000–1,500,000). Despite their size, the millionniki are often products of the Soviet industrial revolution, and
do not enjoy the romantic connotations that come with being rooted in medieval history, as are, for instance, the smaller towns of Vologda or Pskov.

And yet Perm’ has an unenviable reputation for being a particularly characterless, homely millionnik. Whatever happened in the city’s history is interpreted as contributing to its “boring,” undifferentiated character. Russian intellectuals have reflected on the soulless, bureaucratic emptiness of Perm’ since the moment of its founding three hundred-something years ago, calling the city a “reluctant growth” around a state-sponsored copper factory that was itself but a “whim” of the absolutist state. Romantics, they have deemed Perm’ an impostor with no connection to the land it was set to rule over: a romantic land of the old, craggy, and moss-encrusted part of the Ural Mountains, well known and loved by historians, and populated by exotically pagan Finno-Ugric tribes (Abashev 2000).

An escape to Moscow or St. Petersburg takes twenty hours by train. In local understandings of distance, this is not far but also hardly a casual journey. This location makes Perm’ neither a part of the civilised centre nor a part of the empire’s exotic eastern periphery. A Muscovite or a Siberian would, perhaps, recall how they stopped for twenty minutes in Perm’ when travelling on a trans-Siberian train. This is not insignificant: on a line that covers several thousand kilometres in about a week, twenty-minute stops are the few and precious breaks where one can stretch one’s legs and replenish one’s cigarette supply. And yet the geographical, and geopolitical, in-betweenness of Perm’ has engendered what anthropologists would call a lack of friction (as in Tsing 2004).

During World War II, Perm’ s remoteness from the country’s capitals made her a destination for urgently relocated factories, museums, and the famous Mariinski ballet company. Perm’ s inhabitants, frequently no more than one generation removed from the village (see Rogers 2009 on the history of urbanization of the Perm’ region), worked at these factories to supply, among other things, more than half of the Soviet wartime artillery power. (“My grandmother told me that when they were falling asleep at their machine tools, they

41 The gendered morphology of Russian language makes Perm’, symbolically significantly, a “she.” Moscow, for instance, is also a “she,” and St. Petersburg is a “he.”
tied their long [peasant] braids to the machines to jolt them out of sleep when they fell!”

Svetlana told me, two months into her own unemployment.) But the supporting, rather than heroic, role the city played in the war reinforced its image as a backwater hinterland. The concentration of military, chemical, and aviation plants, and the postwar construction of GULAG prisons in the dense Uralian woods, sealed the city’s reputation. Perm’ was “closed” off; marked as requiring special permission to access, especially for foreigners.

The poets who were commissioned to write panegyrics for the city’s jubilees in the 1970s cemented clichés of “the working city” on “the labouring Kama River.” During perestroika, enterprising local brand-makers had some success in mining the archaic connotations of ancient Permian land. These stories built mysterious connections between the mountains’ chthonic depths, the “force-fields of power” in the forests where pagans “performed their rites,” and outer space (see Rogers 2012 on how this mythology works in the “materiality” of contemporary Perm’ corporations). They had moderate success, on which half the trade in local souvenir shops depends to this day, but that was all. Here is how Inna (b. 1980), a manager in the cultural industry, described the city’s attempts to market its distinction, a difference in style—and with it, a difference in voice and in fate:

[A]fter perestroika it became clear that no [state] military purchase orders would follow—here was no cash for anything. For wars, either. These were the 1990s! No one wanted the machine tools made in Perm’; no one cared for our bicycles because imported bicycles were better. However you thought about it, the gradoobrazuyuschiy [vital to local economic prosperity; lit. “city-forming”] plants had closed, i vse! [and that’s all!] What would you do? So narod [people] got thinking. Good thing we had Lukoil [a large oil refiner]—well, it was only good in some ways, of course—but everything else sank into economic depression. And perestroika somehow, somewhat, had all but dissipated—everyone whose ships are now afloat [economically speaking] have earned their money by buying and selling stuff! The whole country! So the [local] authorities tried to find some sort of identity, a way to stand out among other cities. First, everyone just tried to painstakingly crawl their way out [from the economic collapse]—and then nachalos’! [it began!] “The attractiveness of the region,” “investments,” ta-ta-ta [blah-blah-blah]. The Perm’ Trade Fair was organised, but everything was somehow not right and did not work. I mean, just look [witness]!—We have the [wood-rich] forests! And nothing comes out of it. But look again—we have the oil!—and again, it makes no one any happier. And Uralkali [a large fertiliser producer] is coming back into force—but somehow things still do not work out. I mean, we are, like, an industrial city—but the gun just does not shoot!
In my notes, Inna’s rendition of Perm’s recent history is marked as similar to Sergey’s story about the “uncertain flat,” as recounted in the Introduction. I marked the plain-clothed sarcasm; the quick succession of the bewilderment, uncertainty, and certitude; the tides of expectation and frustration conveyed by terms like “started thinking,” “tried to,” “and that’s that!” and “it began!”; and her choice of physical, organic metaphors to describe political and economic realities (sank into depression, crawl out of crisis, all but dissipated). Her story was also coded as “the pre-history to the cultural revolution” that Perm’ went through in 2008–2012.

To be precise, a revolutionary spirit had been on the minds of city planners at least since 2005, when Perm’s unfortunate layout came to attention as a possible culprit for its “indistinction.” Permiaks dwell in a disjunctive conglomeration of factories and residential quarters, several large parks, and a few shopping streets, all stretching in a narrow line for seventy kilometres along the Kama River. In 2005, the city administration hired foreign architects to revise the city plan. (Local pundits reported that, after much examination, the architects still could not locate what Permiaks saw as “downtown.”) But in 2008, the city became known throughout Russia and beyond its borders (with coverage in the *New York Times*, see Jones 2011) for a more ambitious project. A state-sponsored managerial team declared that Perm’ was to become “the cultural capital of Europe.” This status was to be achieved through a wide-reaching reorganisation of local cultural industries.42 Sophisticated governance of cultural resources, according to the “Project,” would harness the power of artistic expression, creativity, and aesthetic pluralism, in order to bring prosperity, public awareness, and the joys of “modern” and “global” consumption to an apathetic population.

The most visible aspect of this project was the installation of a number of novel art objects in public places. One such was the word “POWER” (*vlast’*) cast in concrete on the ground in front of the marble-clad Perm’ Krai regional parliament.

The sculpture was designed to question boundaries, to bring “the people closer to power,” as the author of the piece, sculptor Mikhail Ridnyi, explained to the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*: “The location of the monument is not a coincidence, as you might have noticed. It is intended to bring down the barriers between the power and people (*narod*). It is a metaphor. In reality, people are distanced from power. And here, people can sit on it” (Entzov 2010). One could ask why, in an allegedly democratic state, people are expected to get “closer to power” through mechanisms of subversion rather than representation. These “revolutionaries” insisted that the city authorities did not censor, but rather only commissioned, the project—a hard-to-believe statement in the eyes of postsocialist populations who continue (not without a good reason) to see the state as responsible for everything going on in public space (Fehervary 2009). The “subversive” *POWER*, produced by power, occupied the very position from which power could be critiqued, but without critiquing it—and thus making the critique impossible for others to do.

But for all their transgressions, the creators of “the bench” of *POWER* were not unaware of the importance of demobilisatory *sitting well* to Permiaks. In local speech, benches and beer, *lavochka* and *pivasik*, are often rendered in their diminutive, endearing linguistic forms—little bench, little beer—and often appear together. Legally, the consumption of alcohol in public space is forbidden; the local TV station documented a police inquiry into a little bench-party, an inquiry that revellers met with a characteristic “*A gde nam eshche*”
otdokhnut’? (Where else are we supposed to take a wee rest?)” When I described this documentary to Svetlana, she scoffed at the whole idea and said the footage was staged. She drank openly in the parks and backyards of Perm’, and never had any trouble, she said, because policemen recognise an adult person’s “right to rest,” with a bottle, on a public bench (or at least a brevnyshko, a wooden log, or a kachel’ka, a piece of a children’s playground structure). Svetlana declared, “I have seen myself how they [policemen] passed by—and even nodded!—towards the groups of sensible people, like myself, and only bothered those noisy teens. Because they know!”

Figure 5. Log bench on the Kama River embankment. The inscription reads both poetically and ironically: “The Log, It’s Mine!”

And yet, despite being a bench to sit on, POWER drew mostly sarcastic remarks. One friend mockingly complained that power (again!) offered a subpar product in terms of comfort, giving people the opportunity to sit on rough, cold, and dirty blocks of concrete. Another suggestion was that POWER, to be a bench, should have been covered in wood (which is perceived as a warm, soft, and sensual material in Russia), but that would make it look even more ridiculous. (Wooden covers were, actually, added to the bench later, at the expense of the “modern” aesthetics of POWER). Another noticed gleefully that, in the absence of rubbish bins near this “bench,” it was easy to see which letters, given their suitable shape, would become filled with garbage—quite appropriately for a representation of power, he added. But in any case, the barren expanse of Perm’s central square, right under the windows of chinovniki (bureaucrats), is not where he would want to sit down and enjoy a beer.
Common to these remarks was the pointed refusal to discuss the “meaning,” the artistic merit, or even the “subversive character” of POWER, evaluating it instead in terms of pleasurable experience, particularly bodily experience, or the lack thereof. This tactical and ethical choice of the concrete over the abstract, “body” over “mind,” echoes the “decontextualising” and “unloading” sensibilities described in Chapter 1.

In this chapter, I chart how this economy of experience—the need to account for the balance of pain and pleasure, anxiety and certainty—works as an ethical and aesthetic regime for evaluating representations. The evaluations I observed and recorded followed the familiar scales of mobilization and articulation: the imaginaries of demobilisatory Communitas were understood as “pleasure” and the call of the Collective was “labour.” But if such evaluation, the work of interpretation, of sense making, required harder than normal effort—guessing, thinking—it was also labour. The whole process of the production of meaning—both creation and interpretation—was therefore perceived in terms of labour, or the rewards for labour. Labour and rewards had to be divided according to agreed-upon rules, a social contract between the state, who had the monopoly on the production of meaning, and “the people,” who had an implicit obligation to consume these meanings in laborious acts of interpretation in order to sustain the (always fragile) social cohesion. An ethical state/producer of meaningful representations, therefore, should be responsible, and allocate both pleasure and labour with an eye to the overall experiential resources of the population: the amount of “energy” or vitality that can be taxed by labour.

2 The Production of Meaning and the Politics of Pleasure

What could be the genealogy of this “representational pleasure economy”? The obligatory cultural reference here is the ideal of simplicity, prostota. Prostota is about “conceptual and material simplicity, the morality of enjoying simple pleasures, being unpretentious as opposed to paying (too much) attention to the matters of manners, intelligence, education, erudition, and worldliness” (Pesmen 2000:91; see also examples of prostota in drinking rituals in Koester 2003). It is a very Epicurean philosophy of balance, of enjoying material
and conceptual presences, but not too much; of being cultured/educated/sophisticated, but again, to a highly negotiated degree (the “burdening” described in the previous chapter). A very important, and often overlooked, dimension of prostota is the morally justified pleasure of having no internal discipline—of being unconstrained, unreserved, and, ideally, unworried. From an aesthetic point of view, it can be interpreted as the simplicity of “good taste.” And yet, from the view of Soviet class politics, it is an ideal that reflects the state politics that declared the “unpretentiousness” of the working and the poor to be one of its cultural policy guidelines.

Some other references come from cultural history. All art in the Soviet Union was, in a sense, public, because cultural production was yet another industry among other public industries; and all artists—at least those recognised as such—were paid workers of the state. It also meant that art in the Soviet Union could not be “commercial,” “democratic,” or “mass-market,” but it could certainly be populist, to cater “to the masses.” The Stalinist politics of “culturedness” was particularly known for legitimating socialist realism, whereas conceptual and abstract paintings were banned or restricted. But apart from the censorship of aesthetic pluralism, and the ideological and political contrivances that were infused into socialist realism, the style indeed had an immediate appeal to the “masses.” Susan Buck-Morss (2000:119–20) describes this appeal, and the way in which the grand utopia of communism colonised the Soviet popular imagination:

[I]n the daily-life contexts of extreme cold, dark days, epidemics of disease, and wartime suffering of the Soviet Union, all of the attributes of organic “life” (zhizn’)—light, movement, sun, air, water—had utopian appeal. … Their visual style of representing bodily comfort—life over death, health over illness, plenty over want—appealed to the people on the somatic level which had little to do with their ideologically contrived content.

It should be noted that Buck-Morss, in refusing to see ideology as the sole engine of life in Soviet Union, takes a position that was rarely found among scholars of the Soviet Union until recently. Only in the past decade or so, a number of studies have turned a spotlight on the production of meanings and aesthetic ideals as processes fraught with ideological dilemmas, political inconsistencies, geographical diffusions, and bargains with power. They describe how, for instance, in the sphere of consumption, the so-called Soviet dictatorship of needs (Feher, Heller, and Marcus 1983) balanced precariously between the austere
transcendentalism of the Soviet modernity project, the reality of permanent shortages of consumer goods in the planned economy, and the need to compete with Western consumerism, prompted also by a growing internal consumerist pressure (Fehervary 2009; Humphrey 1995; Kelly and Volkov 1998; Kelly 2001; Gronow 2003).

As Buck-Morss notices, the appeal of “organic life” worked outside of ideology, and yet this very “outside of ideology” appeal was itself made ideological. The ease and redundancy of aesthetic education served to justify to the populace the superiority of “organic life” and socialist realism. It seems unremarkable until we realise that this, along with the top-down imposition of meanings and representations, made it possible for the populace to think about the consumption of meanings and representations as a kind of labour, as a social contract that measured meaning against pleasure. People agreed to accept some amount of education and mental strain in interpreting, deciphering, and remembering the “meaning”—which usually meant the ideological messages—of art, only if it was carefully allocated along, or interspersed with, what they themselves perceived as its pleasurable “parts.” This bargain about the artistic production of meanings was part of the overall social contract (often defined as paternalistic) that measured all pleasure, or promise of pleasure, on one side, and labour and patience—including the patience to put up with all the “ideology”—engaged in the fulfilling of this promise, on the other. Opinions about the “novelties” in Perm’s streets demonstrate the persistence of certain aesthetic ideals. Beauty is found in that which is realistic, sensual, narrative, and biomorphic, and that which fulfills the classicist canons. When I asked my interlocutors what they would like their city to look like, the recently extensively renovated Sverdlov park (see fig. below) was at the top of their minds:

Ekaterina: I love forests. More greenery!

Maksim: More flowerbeds! Let them hang flowerpots on the posts!

Ekaterina: Let them cover [little, cute] boardwalks with [little, cute] tiles! And put out rubbish bins! And a few benches, and that would be all that I want. No need for any sculptures.

43 By “narrative” I mean having a plot, a story, as opposed to abstract or conceptual; “biomorphic” reminds of live, organic forms; and “classicist” refers to the canons of beauty characteristic of Europe from antiquity to the Renaissance.
Maksim: Especially sculptures that do not have any meaning [niciohemnyi, lit. “about nothing”]!

Ekaterina: Here, see, they upgraded [oblagorodili, lit. “en-nobled”] Sverdlov Park. I really like it. Indeed! The only money that was spent well is what they did in the Park. So many people live in that district, and for once, they have a place to stroll. On foot, and with children, and with baby carriages, and with their doggies!

Figure 6. Municipality billboard reports the completion of Sverdlov Park.

Love for the forest and flowerbeds continues to conquer all ages. Elena Trubina (2008), a geographer and a philosopher of urbanism, studied imaginaries of public space among university undergraduates (17–22 years old) in Ekaterinburg, and found what she called a “puzzling,” in its strength and ubiquity, “obsession” with greenery. The historical economies of representation, the “obsessions with greenery,” converge today in environmental concerns. The air and water in the “working city” on a “labouring river” taste of salt and iron, which are still relatively harmless pollutants in comparison with the smelly puffs coming on a regular and yet unpredictable basis (like the floods in the “uncertain flat”) from the local chemical factories. “Please help yourself to the water,” I was told by one of my hosts, “in this jar—the water is purchased, and then boiled, so it is drinkable; and in this one, there is tap water that we boiled for technical uses.” Lately, unregulated private development and a manifold increase in the number of private automobiles have aggravated the problem. And
yet, the taken-for-granted responsibility of the state to deliver “organic life”—along with an almost obligatory appreciation of that life—come together in this comment by Pavel:

Take, for instance, Tchaikovsky [a city in Perm’ Krai]. How beautiful it is! I was shocked [ya byl v shoke]! I was stunned by that beauty [obaldet krasota kakaya]! Lanterns along the roads—they all have flowerpots on them! They have cleaner air, and this means they have better food. The federal government sognali [mandated, lit. “herded in,” like cattle] some geodesists to drill the city’s own well, so they have better water, too. And everything is in top-notch condition. Benches are painted, grass is green, shop windows are beautiful. I was shocked! And here (points outswards), everything is just grey. Where is the inspiration?

Pavel (b. 1975), one of my key informants, grew up in a working-class family where relations were warm but haunted by alcoholism. Both of his parents had passed away a year earlier, while still in their fifties and within several months of each other. Pavel, however, made good for himself, becoming an electrical engineer mostly through apprenticeship and self-education. Though not wealthy, he had a steady income at the higher end of my sample range, and was always looking for better paying jobs. The “creative” art novelties, apparently, did not inspire Pavel. His sentiment was mirrored in the relocation of the city’s rich who took their “inspiration”—and their money—to suburban gated communities where they could enjoy greenery, water, and cleaner air.

Figure 7. The Angel of Kama River by Dmitrii Postnikov

Note: The sensual biomorphism of the sculpture is countered by the use of scrap iron, reminding of Perm’iaks’ ecological concerns: the Kama River is known to be polluted with industrial refuse to the point that apocryphal stories are told about Japanese businesses offering to clean the river bed for the price of taking the trash they remove.
But even more curious is the juxtaposition, the economy of meaning/ideology and pleasure that resounds in the way Ekaterina and Maksim describe Sverdlov Park. Sculptures are a form of decorative art and therefore of “culturedness.” They are okay in as far as they do not interfere with the sensual utopia, the somatic, “organic” pleasurability of the place. There is really no real need for sculptures because greenery alone would have been sufficient for “resting”; but there is especially “no need” for the sculptures that “mean nothing” (are abstract or conceptual, not narrative), because they destroy the restorative potential of the place.

This “en-nobled” Sverdlov Park utopia resembles the idealised notion of “English gardens” that Marina (the chemical engineer we met in Chapter 1) considered the main attraction of Agatha Christie’s Poirot, the British detective TV series. When she discussed the series, it fascinated me that she spontaneously counterpoised the “intellectual” and the “aesthetic” sides of the series, the whodunit plot and the mindless, “eye-candy” pleasure of quaint English villages and British etiquette so abundantly portrayed in the series. Marina said she “did not even follow the investigation,” because she merely (prosto) enjoyed “all these beautiful gardens, how people talk, how they walk in these beautiful environments—not like ours, where there is too much fat on a slice of cheap sausage!” Here, the “tastefulness” (“no cheap fat!”), the “culturedness” of the villages and the etiquette, was experienced by her as “pleasure” and not as “labour,” and marked her as intelligentsia. Others, sometimes apologetically, and sometimes defiantly (like Maksim), did not endorse even “culturedness” or “tastefulness” as they were already too “burdening.” They said that their TV preferences lay with tupiye (stupid, trashy) comedies and the Discovery Channel (I assume they meant situation comedies and programs about architectural marvels or animals that do not require the viewer to follow any plot at all, let alone a detective plot). They watched “just for laughs” (chisto porzhat’) and as a way of “resting” (otdokhnut’).

Other reactions to the “revolutionary” art in Perm’ similarly converged on the balance of meaning, pleasure, displeasure, and the obligations to reward or to endure. Maksim’s special grudge against these “about-nothing” sculptures was they seemed to have demanded a deciphering of sort, a care, a worry; in other words, they called for mental and affective labour instead of mental and affective pleasure.
Assigning meaning to a floating signifier may be an easier (or more pleasurable) task. One city legend, the story of a “monument that never was,” celebrated the full suspension of the top-down imposition of meanings that allowed for an object’s ready appropriation. The municipality placed a rough piece of stone to mark the beginning of the construction of a monument to something or someone that people did not care to remember. Meanwhile, newlyweds started coming to break bottles of fizzy spirits against the stone in celebration of their unions. The stone was “about nothing,” but in semiotic terms, it was indexical. People appropriated this floating signifier. The stone marking the place for some future monument became a very present meaningful object (something like a lucky stone). City bureaucrats eventually decided to remove the stone because it became an “uncultured,” littered space.

The people in my study refused to accept that art should be educational, especially if it was educational by provoking displeasure and anxiety. Dystopic and irony-laden contemporary art was seen as a particularly aggressive violation of one’s peace of mind. Inna, the curator of a local theatre, brought this sentiment to light by describing the taste for dystopias as a privilege—and simultaneously a reflection of the guilty conscience of the privileged—of those who have peace of mind (and other resources) in abundance. Art of this kind, she said, is not popular, and cannot be popular, in Perm’ yet:

These things they are showing to us in the theatres, in the museums—cheap, lowly things that expose the deficiencies and fatalities of the world. They think they are messiahs; they show how this world is ugly, shity, hopeless. Somewhere in Germany it is justified because they have another social situation. Those burzhua [bourgeois] need a reminder of universal suffering. And here, the aesthetics of corpses is met with deep resentment because there is no class [klass] in Perm’ that would reflect on it in the same way. The young want joyful things, and if there is a “middle” class of twenty-five- to thirty-five-year-old people, they have neither time nor the disposition for German bourgeois reflexivity! They already suffer! They have to delo delat’ [do business], and watch out so that they are not jailed! They spend nights at work, and they do not have guilty social consciences!

Inna is an expert, and her explanation could be quoted in a journal of aesthetics. But it also echoes Lilia’s very vernacular opinion of one theatrical production. She told me how education, dystopia, and the labour of meaning making were all imposed on her and her colleagues in a very direct way—a way that makes nostalgia for Stalin’s populism quite understandable:
So, our company was the sponsor for this theatrical performance. So they gave us six hundred tickets to the show. At first, we thought, we will reward the best with the tickets! (laughs) It turned out no one wanted to see the show. We could hardly gather the required number; we asked people to bring families, we pushed, like in Soviet times, through secretaries, giving the departments quotas to fill! All right, they came. Now, everyone gossips about each other’s wives and husbands [she contrasts the Collective, “high-culture” purpose of the outing—theatre—with the Communitas results: no one was interested in the play, but they took they opportunity to evaluate each others’ spouses]. But the play was awful! No meaning, and not funny either. Like, two men, two chairs and a table. They live in a communal apartment. They both got married and were afraid to tell each other of the fact. The theatre was half empty. After one and a half hours, I thought, finally, time to go home! So I went to the lobby and started daubing my lips [fixing her makeup]. And they told me, hey, it was only the intermission! The only thing that helped a bit was in the second part, when they added some guy in red pants to the scene! He stirred up a bit all of that boring bullshit (razvel nemnogo etu mutoten’)! The irony was that not only was the organization of the outing entirely Soviet in its “pushing” to fulfil “quotas,” but the play itself was also apparently didactic: it intended to show the indignities of “Soviet” living through a portrayal of the so-called communal flat, that clichéd metaphor for Soviet life (see Utekhin 2004 for a compendium on the subject).

What Lilia’s story showed was, first, that the majority of Russians might actually see such reminders as insulting; they know from experience the indignity and the suffering of poor living arrangements. Lilia herself was born in a neighbourhood that was infamous for its rotting wooden dwellings, lack of amenities, and drunkard denizens. Being forced to relive the indignities and the suffering under a pretext of a “cultured outing in the city” must have been infuriating. Growing up, she chose her career smartly, and worked hard on it. Now, she was proud to choose her pleasures, including her pointedly anti-intellectualist pleasures: “daubing my lips,” the “red pants,” gossiping about husbands and wives, using pointedly vulgar expressions (“boring bullshit”—like Tatiana, Lilia masters all sorts of registers described in Chapter 1). These were all counterpoints to the play’s didacticism, its obscure conceptual load, its unjustifiable demands.

And yet, the question of “pleasure versus meaning” is judged differently in the case of representations that can be called “politically correct,” because they are meant to strengthen the absence of worry, the sense of security, by expressing the strength of the symbolic order and social solidarity. In Soviet times, such politically correct representations could be easily identified merely by their size, canonical posture, or the height of the pedestal (Boitsova
2008). The proliferation of small-scale, more realistic, and narrative sculptures (for example, representing scenes from popular movies) made such differentiation more difficult. Congruity with surroundings seems to play a bigger role today: if an object is an endorsement of solidarity or nationalism—the Collective—it better be placed where its “burdening” rhetoric will not clash with the pleasurable character of the place. The sensual river embankment was deemed a bad place for the otherwise “legit” statues of Pushkin and Gogol, monuments to national pride in Russian literature. Tatiana mocked the insensitivity on the part of the authorities: “Что к чему?” “What comes to what; how is it becoming?” was her appraisal of that (il)logic. An example of correct placement was the figure of St. Nicholas that was erected in front of the Perm’ Orthodox cathedral. Jones (2011), writing in the New York Times, calls the statue “tubular” (and misidentifies it as St. Stephen), and indeed, though very iconic, the statue of St. Nicholas is neither very sensual nor particularly realistic. Nevertheless, I have not heard anyone disapprove of the statue. The rightful emplacement of St. Nicholas appeared to be appreciated in comments about a traffic incident that happened in 2010. On one of the city’s busiest streets, a bus with broken brakes went on a wild ride down, and then up, the hill, catching and hauling along dozens of vehicles. The bus came to rest at St. Nicholas’ pedestal: people said that the “rabid beast” was “tamed at St. Nicholas’ feet.”

3 Strolling, Resting: Embodiment and the Unburdened Mind

The poetics and politics of pleasure, and their inevitable relation to class and leisure, are a rare subject in ethnographic writing on contemporary Russia (but see Caldwell 2010), dominated as it has been by other concerns (see Wanner 2011, for an overview). An interesting inference, however, can be made from the work of sociologists. Hilary Pilkington et al. (2002) outlined the class economies of leisure—a traditional sociological subject—in their study of self-identified “progressive” and “normal” young Russian urbanites. The young progressives took delight in cultural savvy, and especially in global cultural products. The
(obviously more numerous) normals were attached to the embodied pleasures of *pogulyat’* and *otdokhnut’*—taking strolls through the city and “resting.”

Though it satisfies as a sort of operative model, it would be hard to discern such a separation between “progressives” and “normals” among my respondents. “Cultural savvy” and “resting and strolling” are class habits and dispositions, but they are also very keenly sensed as such, so they are also resources to use in games of representation, in the ethical judgements that also serve situational, social, and representational purposes. My suspicion is that the cultural “revolution” in the city, growing inequality, and memories of the “working class” and peasants as the anti-elitist guardians of the morally good “simplicity,” provoke people to declare more support for “normality” (that is, for things and pursuits deemed “trashy” or “mindless”) than their upbringing—or their convictions—would merit. What interests me, however, is how the divisions described by Pilkington reproduce the vernacular Marxist, mind/body, immediacy/mediation, etc., scales and divisions in “the meaning of meaning.”

Resting and strolling focus on the art of letting go of any strain of intentionality, physical or mental, and on a re-orientation from tasks to processes. When the question of what resting and strolling were about was asked, “doing nothing” and “hanging out” was often the response. One of the pleasures of walking is the movement itself, and the ordinary bodily practice of strolling refutes the tyranny of destination, of purposefulness. Strolling fosters, and reflects, a sense of wonder that looks forward to being pleasantly surprised. But before the images of a Parisian flaneur come to the reader’s mind, they should be forestalled by the understanding that strolling is a communal practice rooted in what could have been described perhaps as the main cultural form, the ritual, of the Russian peasantry. To celebrate special occasions, but also to simply mark the end of a day of strenuous labour, they organised communal walkabouts with music and dancing (Gromyko 1991). These were the rituals that served to strengthen relations in groups that could not afford any discord, given the life-or-death necessity to produce everything through collective effort in the few short months of summer.

Strolling in company is therefore the pleasure of intimacy, of friendship, of maintaining communal spirit (in space that is neither “public” nor “private,” precisely because it is
marked by such communal but intimate and informal practices). Groups of teenagers grow larger on their strolls as they absorb others whom they meet on the way, relishing the spontaneity of the meetings and the event as a whole. Grown-ups suggest strolling at the first opportunity, though for them such opportunities are much less frequent than for the carefree teenagers; and though acquaintances are often bumped into in the streets, it is rare to find them in the same relaxed mode.

Strolling and resting *na ulitse* (lit. “in the street,” meaning not at home) are also bastions, a holding ground (literally) against the privatisation of the city commons. There is a definitive lack of affordable indoor “third spaces” (spaces outside of work and home) in Russian cities, so the lack of “restful” outdoor public space was a hot topic (“where are we supposed to take a wee rest?”), highlighted further by the tutelage of “revolutionary” planning projects. It is therefore easy to recognise the subversive spirit of communal strolling: walking along, stepping out, and gazing around in a group—even though it is emphatically “about nothing,” it is always a parade and a demonstration of power.44

In the context of the revolution’s developments, strolling became inspection. My friends pointed indignantly at the incongruity between “art” and its “uncultured” surroundings. Installations were placed next to a heap of rubbish, a crumbling wall, or streaks of soot on unwashed concrete. I was showed with glee how behind the “cultured” façade of the PERM’M museum was its own unsightly littered backyard—a backyard that added insult to injury because it was a part of the most sensual, most “restful” place in Perm’: the Kama River embankment. The incongruity between the object and its surroundings was, perhaps, another “postmodern” or “contemporary” “artistic device” for the “progressives” who designed the space; or perhaps the artists hoped that the objects would be appreciated in their singularity. But the very practice of strolling, of walking along and around the piece, produced a mode of attention that resisted the separation of the object from its environment.

44 See de Certeau’s (1984) essay “Walking in the City” on walking as an act of empowerment.
The bodies of “art” could not be separate from the bodies of the viewers, either. If the “about-nothing” sculptures violated the social contract by offering labour instead of pleasure, “ugly” and “scary” objects violated the viewers directly: they were deemed physically shocking, making people shiver and shudder, just as beautiful objects were stunning. Assessments, in other words, focused on the objects’ power to interfere not only with one’s mind but one’s body. Spectators who maintained a child-like immediacy of perceptions— their moral openness, their trust in exchanging “energies” with the world (see Chapter 1)— were brutally assaulted. Svetlana said, “This art, it gave me the shivers. I have a right, you know, not to be shocked when I turn around the corner and see these scary figures! Let there be scary things, but in “specially designated places [spetzial’no otvedennykh mestakh].” This view of art emphasises that aesthetic violence and aesthetic pleasure are not simply matters
of taste or cultural reference: they are part of an overwhelming bodily reality that forestalls reflexivity or distancing. And there is nothing wrong with the bodily appropriation of pleasant objects, either. Tatiana showed me the photos of her vacation in a town where there were many sculptures of fishes, mermaids, and so on. She mounted all that could be mounted, and laughingly scolded her partner for just mounting, and not engaging more sensually, with a “mermaid”: “I told him, ‘You are sitting on a woman; you should at least grab her by the tits!’” The main attractions of the city, however, were the squirrels that also participated in the utopia of pleasurable, organic abundance: “They just run around on the ground, just like that. But they are spoilt; they do not eat sunflower seeds. People go to the stores for them, to get nuts for them!” Squirrels were almost out of line, committing a transgression by preferring fancy and expensive nuts to “simple” sunflower seeds, but they were excused.

Kirov Street was turned into a pedestrian street and a small arts market in an attempt to emulate the famous Arbat Street in Moscow. Myself, Irina (paediatrician, b. 1975), and her husband Dmitry (mechanic, born in the late 1960s) went for a stroll to investigate. Irina and Dmitry were disappointed: the art pieces did little to “sensualise” the street, which was dusty and lacking green space as ever, but they took some pictures with a cute cast iron gnome figurine, and a “fat monk” with a beer in his hand. Irina was determined to have a kebab in the open air, but the only local café with a patio turned out to be closed because of construction. Finally, Irina and Dmitry called to me, “Come on, have a look at what we found!” Their discovery was the façade of a house, hidden from open view from the street, covered in ivy leaves and flowers overflowing from window baskets. We stood and admired it for a while.

We failed to procure kebabs in the city centre, and our trip inadvertently ended up on the embankment, on the shabby wooden veranda of one of the cafés that filled the air with thick and greasy charcoal barbeque smoke. The veranda offered free entertainment—a place to dance and two girls in strippers’ attire who energetically performed moves to 1990s music hits. Irina got nostalgic: she recalled, with a chuckle, how she danced on the veranda when she was “young,” but also how worried she was not to break the heels of her shoes that always got stuck between the wooden planks. At some point we, “the girls,” left Dmitry to
enjoy the show, and stood in the line leading to the toilets, a row of little wooden outhouses. The mood of people in line was relaxed and cheerful. A middle-aged stranger, looking at shapely Irina, attempted a pickup: “Hey, don’t you agree, it is such a relief sometimes to reach this little cabin? Just the moment when you at last run in, into this, hardly a square meter…! What do you say, should we save time and go together?” Irina refused with the demure remark that the cabin was too small for two. When we got closer and the stench of the place became quite noticeable, she commented:

Wow, that is some smell. Seems like we have to do it like in an x-ray room: exhale and do not breathe! And we have to pay ten roubles for using the place. Which reminds me of that girl I saw once in a cabin like that: she was sick and puked over and over, we could hear it. She was there for a while! The keeper of the toilet, a large guy, knocked on the door. She opened and shouted, ‘What? I paid for it, so you wait.’ And she went on puking! Like a queen!

On one hand, one can admire the lattices and the cast iron sculptures of Sverdlov park. But there is also a lurking understanding that public space is, more often than not, inimical to pleasure. Pleasure has to be found, like the ivy-covered house in bloom on the back street, or carved for oneself against the indifference, or the didactic labour contracts, that “they” impose. Confronting or getting around this animosity is its own type of pleasure. The revolutionaries, by creating the “artsy” space downtown, have certainly intensified the sensory significance of the space down the river—the two spaces that we linked in a half-day’s stroll. On the river, one can connect with strangers in the contained carnival of sex talk, bodily functions, charred meat, and the materiality of broken heels; a triumph of Communitas against the backdrop of imposing, didactic, hierarchical Collective public (re)presentation.

4 The Happy Childhood: Whose Creativity?

The value of unmediated, or immediate, pleasures carried the implication that if children could not enjoy art, it was not good art (that is, not art at all). Marina told me how she had promised her seven-year-old son a visit to see the dinosaurs in the PERM’M museum, but the family mixed up the dates and walked into another exhibit instead. The objects were “something sculptured. What do they call them—installiatzii (installations). I don’t understand.” Marina’s son had run impatiently around the vast halls of the former boat
station housing PERM’M before he cried out: “Nu che tut smotret’-to? (“So, what is there to look at?”) In this one exclamation, he conveyed that he had prepared for his attention to be caught, and when this did not happen, he grudgingly realised that he had to exert some contemplative effort, and was unsure which object he was supposed to do that with. The grudging tone (and the irony, apparent in Marina’s story) was not lost on his parents, who took him instead to the nearby oldie but goodie, the Perm’ State Art Gallery, boasting a prized collection of delightfully pagan Christian wooden sculptures. Both Marina’s son and her husband were thrilled, not for the first time, to see the Mongolian-eyed, life-size figurines of brightly painted Jesuses, though Marina herself did not go because she “always found them too scary.”

For Inna, a theatre curator who grew up in a family of musicians, the talk about beauty led very naturally to ballet. Good ballet, she said, is an example how something associated with “culturedness” and class, or with “Sovietness” and therefore the older generation—in other words, with the Collective—is alive and well because a good ballet can be eye-candy, a utopia, something pleasurably scary or pleasurably beautiful:

Inna: When people come to the theatre, they say, “Give us skazka [a fairy tale]!” Why do you think ballets are so popular? They say in these very words: “We want a fairy tale!” Why do I need all this [dystopic or depressing things], I have enough of it already [in everyday life]. I want the beauty, the fairy tale, these—English gardens that you told me about! They want Piero! They want Hollywood!

AK: I don’t think English gardens are very close aesthetically to Hollywood—

Inna: Well, here, you see, ballet is good both for those who want Hollywood, and those who like English gardens. And the young people find it interesting, too.

This statement reiterates once more that hierarchies of “culturedness,” and their relation to an economy of pleasure and pain, is by no means cast in stone. The “tasteful” and “cultured” ballet, like “tasteful” English gardens, can be a pleasantly gripping personal experience.

I found particularly interesting how Inna (and theatrogoers, according to her) repeatedly used the word “skazka”—the (children’s) fairy tale—to express precisely what the contemporary

45 More generally, a character from Italian comedy del arte, and to local “laymen,” a character from “Buratino,” a story by Alexei Tolstoy.
public wants to experience. Both Marina’s and Inna’s stories made me think of an argument that often arises in discussions of the “mindlessness” and the “anti-intellectualist” spirit of postsocialist times. This is the argument that Kremlin political technologists purposefully wiped out the political and the ideological by replacing them with “infantile” and “archaic” meanings. I would say that the “political” could not be simply “replaced” with “infantile” or “archaic” meanings because all three categories are themselves already parts of a complicated topography of vernacular Marxism and of a social contract. The pathos and the playfulness, the security of childhood and the paternalism of the state, reflects a particular economy of meaning and representation and their role in the social contract. Childhood may assume not the absence of knowledge, but rather the certainty of it, and the pleasure that comes from this certainty: “the happiness or contentment born of security, familiarity, a sense of certainty and a sense of purpose” (Kelly 2009:17). In the same way, childhood was not at all apolitical, neither in meaning nor in practice—children’s games and children’s organizations in the Soviet Union often imitated adults’ political and military organizations (see Dimke 2012). When some of my interlocutors used the trope of childhood in a negative way, they were not indicating disapproval of political naiveté, archaic themes, or fantastical elements, but rather qualities of being unimpressive, cheaply made, or lacking signs of careful craftsmanship. The sculptures with the red Lego men (figure 11, below) were scorned by Maksim because “These sorts of pursuits are only worthy of a primary school pupil!”

46 Bruce Grant (2001) in particular argues that the “cartoonish,” “grotesque,” and “archaic” elements of monuments erected in Moscow in the 1990s were meant to deploy the aesthetics of childhood and innocence to “infantilise” post-Soviet urban space. “Infantilization” cast the historic sense of Muscovites to the prehistoric, and therefore politically “innocent,” chronotope where no responsibility for the past could be attributed to the powerful. Grant’s use of “childish” and “innocence” assumes them to be “objective,” “meta” categories, and leaves aside the complex local meanings and economies of “childhood.” I also suspect that outside the circle of elite intelligentsia critics, whose opinions feature in Grant’s analysis, the little river embellished with the realistic bronze animals built in the Kremlin area (Russian Fairy Tales, an art composition that Grant calls “a petting zoo”) is quite popular, and its pleasurability in the eyes of the Epicurean public outweighs the question of whether bears are guilty of being “innocent” and thus facilitate a political technology. Another question is whether people see the “petting zoo” as representing anyone’s “innocence,” or, perhaps, the animals, which are placed in the most iconic place of power, may be “read” as a gesture of submission on the part of the powerful who gave some of the Collective space to pleasurable consumerist art. And yet, Grant’s main argument—that the use of the pleasurable skazka (fairy tale) could distract from, or mask, the questions of “historical” responsibility—is valid.
From this point of view, being like a (spoilt) child is a position of power, of privilege within the social contract, compared to (the “grown-up”) producers of art who cannot be unconditionally, freely, or naively creative—on the contrary, they must be disciplined and worried. The freedom and pleasure of certainty belong to the consumer who need not make an effort to appreciate or understand art. While art was deemed good if it inspired the public to be like children—that is, pleased and spoiled by skazka, by the utopia of organic life, by the certainty of meanings—the practice of representing people as children, or assuming that people are children, is not looked upon kindly. Sergei, the entertainment entrepreneur told the story about the “uncertain” flat, was infuriated at the choice of fonts for the posters advertising the biggest city cultural festival “Perm’, Alive”: 47 “Why do they always use these doodling fonts for these posters? The fonts, they mean something—do they think that Permiaks are children who cannot write properly?” “Doodling” was denounced when it officially represented the collective (or the Collective) identity of Permiaks as a part of an ongoing political campaign. Sergei did not mind, however, the cartoonish Salty Ears bronze piece in the city centre that anecdotally—unofficially—represented Permiaks, pointing to the city dwellers’ ability to be like children, to enjoy Communitas, to play. (Besides, “salty ears” is the historical nickname for the residents of the Perm’ region that is most known for salt mining, and, cartoonish or not, it portrayed Permiaks positively as honest labourers carrying “the salt of the earth” on their backs.) Why were the posters not understood the same way? Because they were part of a bigger, “ideological,” highly public campaign promoting a “serious” Perm’s identity. The posters were the Collective, “the face” of the city; Salty Ears was a pleasurable conversation piece, something to show your friend, chuckling, on the stroll through the city centre.

47 The name, “Zhivaya Perm’,” also drew critique (“What do they think, that apart from the festival time, Perm’ is dead?”).
The End of the Revolution

A large number of my respondents did not have favourable opinions of the “art” recently installed in the city of Perm’. And yet, sometimes, after the initial shock subsided, people accepted the novelties more readily—especially if some inherent features of the installation allowed for “organic” enjoyment and simple, utopic, interpretations. The POWER bench, I have heard, is still favoured more by “noisy teens” at night than by “sensible people” during the day. But the cheerfully red Lego men sculptures, despite their a-sensual formalism, had better luck. A reviewer of an earlier version of this chapter told me of some Perm’iaks who were initially very critical of the “red men” but whose opinion was transformed with time: “Now I say hello to the red men on rainy days when I go to work—they’re so bright and always there, waving good morning!” Similarly, Lilia did not care much for the tall representation of the letter Ы (for Perm’, Пермь), calling it “a rather messy pile of wood,” and noted sarcastically that it wouldn’t be long before someone set fire to it. This was while we examined the thing from afar. But when we drew closer to investigate, she stroked the raw wooden logs piled up into Ы, and noticed that they smelled really nice, and had some drops of liquid sap still on their surfaces.

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48 *Perm’s Gates* by Nikolai Polissky, image posted at:
http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D0%BC%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B0
I wish to add that the values of representations in the representational economy continue to shift. Pavel (see above, electrical engineer, b.1975) described his surprise when he found how some attributions of what is pleasurable, and what is simply obligatory, replaced each other in his mind. He said that “before,” he did not like New Year yolochka children’s matinees—“with [children dressed up as] bunnies and snowflakes, and a lit-up Christmas tree!”—but now, having taken part in one with his little son, he loved it, and was surprised at the fact that he loved this epitome of volubility, the hackneyed Soviet scenario of yolochka. It might have been, as he pondered, the influence of his son, but “maybe not.” The issue was that yolochka became, as he said, “klassika” (something classic)—it acquired a sense of meaningful, intimate, voiceful tradition. (Such surprises prompt how curiously non-nostalgic the “nostalgia for Soviet times” may be; Pavel was very aware that he was not “transported” to the “horrible” yolochkas of his childhood—it is the yolochka, without changing its form, that has acquired pleasurable significance.)

The “cultural revolution” project was scrapped in June 2012. Mr. Oleg Chirkunov, Perm’ Krai governor and the main sponsor of the “cultural revolution,” was removed from his position soon after Putin’s inauguration as the new (old) Russian president. There were rumours of investigations into the use of public funds. Nevertheless, the festivals, cultural
exchange programs, theatre productions, and art exhibitions continued, to some relief among those of my friends who I am tempted, recalling Pilkington’s et al.’s (2002) study, to call “the progressives.” The most disillusioned concluded that the whole thing was a carefully arranged long-term provocation on the part of now-President Putin, confirming once more his great ability to stage long-term political gambits. “Revolution,” I was told, was allowed to happen under Medvedev’s presidency in order to stir up negative public sentiment—in other words, to ostentatiously violate implicit understandings of the social contract and make people long for a saviour. My less cynical view would be that such violations of the contract may also remind the people, most ostentatiously, that there still is a social contract to violate, and that if this contract is to be put on the table in earnest, the demand for pleasure on behalf of the majority may constitute the very platform for social solidarity.

6 Making Sense of the “Politics of Meaning”

The entanglement of meanings in (social) context was the core message of Marxist-Leninist ideology, virtually indoctrinating laymen in the “fact” that all meanings are political. Meanings were, in a way, naturalised as political. Furthermore, the “is” and the “ought” of meanings collapsed into each other: meanings not only always were political, but always ought to have been political. The (correct) political intent—a utopian promise, a hierarchy of taste, a criteria of citizenship and the exclusion from it—was to be inherent in any “text.” It was especially true of the “texts” produced by the “artists” and ready for the extraction by (or the immediate effect on) the “masses,” if the artist was to keep her job.

On one hand, we can say that the developments in Perm’ are an example of “the politics of meaning.” In Perm’s public space, we can observe contestation among actors about what does, and what does not, make sense. But attention to the “politics of meaning” contains an unexamined and, from the “local” point of view, bothersome premise: that the very process of meaning making, or sense making, is “natural”—that is, it is not a type of labour, or a burdensome responsibility. Meanwhile, locals may see the production and interpretation of “the signal” and “the noise” (Larkin 2008), the work of semiotic mediation, as exactly that, production and work. In the aftermath of Soviet didacticism and vernacular Marxism,
semiotic mediation is not only politics but also a political economy (see the 2007 book by Dobrenko, *The Political Economy of Socialist Realism*), a site of labour and exchange, in which some meanings are about labour and some about pleasure, and some require less labour or produce more pleasure than others. The “populism” of sensory utopia is part of the bigger bargain between the state (*vlast*, “power”) and the people, being and becoming, mobilisation and demobilisation. Not just meaning but meaning making may be quantifiable per se, just like labour is quantifiable—in the hours spent doing it, in the materials used, in the exhaustion it engenders. This labour is divisible between parties. The state is obligated to control the division and the production of meanings/labour with consideration of what is laborious and what is pleasurable. On the other hand, people agree to labour to produce/absorb meanings (“signals,” interpellations) bodily/affectively, if absorption is their part in the process of sustaining the (always fragile) cohesion of society.49

The encounters in Perm’s public space opened up insight into the contemporary operation of this moral economy of meaning. What transactional scenarios were offered? Some centrally located, open-air, and therefore unavoidable representations carried the “old,” Soviet messages of mobilisation. They could be absorbed in a habitual way. Their “unpleasant ugliness,” if any, did not matter (much) because they were “politically correct,” representing the values of societal cohesion. If their form “taxed the nerves” a bit too much, that is, unfairly, an effort could have been made to stop the absorption. Tatiana dragged me away from the monument to the heroic sailors and soldiers—an overbearing group composition the size of a two-storey house, cast, like a gravestone, in mournful black material: “Let’s go away, why should we look at those scary men.” Indeed, we had neither use nor a particular obligation, to look at them. She did not feel compelled, however, to be particularly indignant about the “scary men”; it was merely an unpleasant but politically correct part of the landscape.

49 It could be said that by the time of the late socialism, such labour was very much automated on both sides. Yurchak (2005) calls this turn ritualistic, or “performative”: production followed a set of well-developed canons, and the absorption, if I read Yurchak’s testimonies correctly, was automated as well—the Soviet “masses” followed the affective structures of mobilisation as if it was a habitus.
The contemporary “about-nothing” art, however, afforded some other scenarios of contract development. Some questionable “new” representations, such as the use of swearwords (*mat*, ref. Chapter 1) in graffiti on objects were deemed irresponsible by some but ignored by most if they were in the “specially designated places” of an indoor museum (again, I shall repeat that the situation may be already different in 2015). Open-air street sculpture was different. One could not avoid seeing these pieces. Neither narrative nor sensory-organic, they claimed mobilisation by the fact of their size, the pompousness of their publicity, and the centrality of their public, open-air location. These were all the unmistakable indexes and registers of being a message about the Collective that could not be deemed merely a part of the (already existing politically correct) landscape. But the message—mobilisation towards what?—was unclear. Taxpayers’ money, and, more importantly, “nervous energy” spent in the attempts to comprehend the message, were felt to be wasted on “art” that neither pleased nor united. Spectators felt either robbed or unfairly worked.

7 Meaning and Modernity

Corporate parties, celebrations of professional identities (Medical Worker’s Day, Oil Industry Worker’s Day, Teacher’s Day, etc.), and birthdays, are deemed best (and cheapest) if spent together on creaky pleasure boats offered for hire at the old city harbour. It was June, and we, carrying a huge strawberry cake, got on board to celebrate Ekaterina’s thirtieth birthday. The red bricks and the black towers of factories and plants came into view as we left behind the pink and yellow nineteenth-century mansions, now occupied by a bank, a strip club called “City Cats,” and a ridiculously expensive café, “Boris Pasternak.” We puffed along the low-lying riverbanks, past the loose conglomerations of buildings. I did not know their names, let alone their purpose. I have grown up in downtown Perm’. But I had a willing guide: a strong, bald, stout man in his fifties, nicknamed “Pirate” for his love of river-rafting and general joie de vivre. We watched Perm’ go by. Pirate dug with gusto into his piece of the cake.
AK: What is this thing, Pirate?

Pirate: This is a wheat elevator. Naturally. And this is a concrete-and-iron wares plant.

AK: How do you know?

Pirate: How would I not, I—live in this city! Heh! This is the plant where they make the supporting structures for the bridges. That one is the boat building plant. And the next is the commodities port.

AK: And there, several condominiums smack in the middle of what looks like a wasteland—with nothing around them?

Pirate: Where, among those trees? Do not believe your eyes! There, in the woods, these are all sorts of zakrityie [regulated access] factories, zakrityie zones, things like that.

AK: Like those “secret military reserves of canned meat” you told me about?

Pirate: Yes, and those too! You think it is a joke but it is true! Right there in the forest, for instance, there is a brigada gosrezerva (state-owned military supply brigade). We have two of them in the outskirts of the city. And there, that is the Navy base.

AK: And this little red house?

Pirate: Blochnaya (“Blocks of Concrete”) railway station.

AK: And behind it?

Pirate: Same, the concrete-and-iron wares plant. It is a very long building.

AK: And the huge chimney?

Pirate: City boiler station, naturally.

AK: You are making it up!

Pirate: Me? Never! I worked at this station once. I loaded those containers myself! Here is the TorgMash [Machine Trade] factory, then …ah, this is the furniture factory. Korpusa (buildings) of Dzerzhinsky Factory.

I felt somewhat ashamed. I forgot that a factory block was called a korpus, literally a body. The words “korpusa,” “brigada gosrezerva,” and “elevator” brought to mind old movies where white-toothed workers touted the poetics of collective achievement. They were totally Bolshevik-speak, and yet when uttered by Pirate, they sounded voiceful, solid. For Pirate,
Perm’ was not “a city of indistinction” that had no charm or mystery because it was industrial. On the contrary, it was the materiality of these factories, their interdependent complexity, their everyday life—often mysterious and contradictory and absurd, with goings-on that happened unbeknownst to both ordinary citizens and those who were in charge—that he found interesting. In his presentation, the very “grey totalitarian Soviet modernity” became awesome exactly in the way it was both embodied and transcendental, its poetics of achievement, modernization, militarization, and nuclear science mixed in with the absurdity and the incompetence of the fools who dreamt it up, and with banal necessities like steam and hot water. There was also the game of concealment and revelation in his stories: outside the factories, there were mysteries, the treasures of warehouses and the catacombs, the huge hoards of canned meat preserved by the secret order of the military. Watching these factories and Pirate eating his cake, I felt that the playful postmodernism of the “contemporary art” of the red Lego men, or the interpellation—the prehistoric echo—of the archaic nativity novels of “the Ural Master,” were little competition for the material and the materialist, palpable weight and presence of these factories (“naturally!”). In the times of privatization the “people,” in Sergey’s words, “did not see which way the chips were flying.” Today, they learnt that these factories and plants were the real stuff “to grab” when, as Batyr said, “the grabbing was all what mattered.”

And yet, Pirate was suspect in his affirmations and his certainty. Pirate’s world had been more secure, both symbolically and materially. He had never been rich but his small enterprise, a family-based company that he ran in a rather laissez-faire fashion, gave him a degree of independence. He grew up in the ’60s, a time of inspiration, and thus at least one generation removed from the majority of my interlocutors in the field. None of my “population sample” presented the same surety of knowing what was what. Batyr tries “to grab,” in a small way, not attracting too much attention, by reselling stuff that he buys cheaply. Olga works in a factory, and tells me of colleagues on the factory floor who lose their hearing from the unbearable, safety-be-damned, noise. Roman is proud of the “realness” of his job and his wages at the aviation plant, but is uneasy about his unfinished medical

50 A nickname for Alexei Ivanov, the author of novels praising the “archaic” poetics of the Uralian land.
degree and the diminishing prospect of ever completing that “economic education,” seeing how his growing children tax all his resources. When I, playing the “taxonomy” approach, asked him casually, “What kinds of people are there in Perm’?” he replied that Perm’s population was now firmly divided between *shtriban* and *kommers*. *Shtriban*, he said, is German slang, meaning “working man”; but “here,” it means both working man and man of the old, Soviet ways. Roman defined “*shtriban*” as a blue-collar worker who “works at a factory” and whose only diversion is “drinking on weekends.” He, by his own admission, was a *shtriban*; but he “was not too upset” about it. With a sceptical smile, he said that in the 1990s, he used to be a *kommers*—someone savvy in the “new ways,” savvy about money. He sold stuff, “walking from door to door,” “manipulating” people—very successfully, because he knew neurolinguistic programming!—into “buying this crap,” though he never stopped wondering why they were buying it. Now he is (he says, with a confused smile) undoubtedly a *shtriban* because his life is working all week and drinking on Fridays. The *kommerses* won; they rule the city and do as they please; they put their stupid sculptures left and right. Maksim, after spending a decade trying to become a *kommers* (not without success), viewed material production as (the only) moral way to go. He wants to retire, not as a *kommers* but not as a *shtriban* either; he sees a third and moral way in being a creator, and an owner, of a factory that would make products so good they would bear a fair cost for consumers, and require little or nothing of the voluble marketing, advertising, or branding.
Chapter 3
Affective Bankruptcies: The Social Condition of Desire

AK: Where does it come from, the “I want”?
Piotr: Where do you think it comes from? It is a quality of dusha [soul]. It wants to know itself, to expand one’s vozmozhnosti [capacities/possibilities].
AK: And if “the want” is not there?
Piotr: Now, that is impossible. A man without desires is a dead man. If you have burnt through all your desires, you won’t have any energies left. Such a human might still move his legs, but is in fact a living corpse. And the decomposition of such a corpse goes very fast…
Stepan: I came across such people myself! It was so creepy!
Alexei: Yes. They are like automat. By the time they are thirty, they don’t know what to want. Everything is the same.

– Fieldnotes, June 2010

Barack Obama came to power with a slogan: “Yes, We Can”! In Russia, we need a slogan: “Yes, We Want”! Our society should be enticed towards the basic act of desire, including erotic desire.


Chapter 1, on the “dangers of articulation,” explored the strategies and rationales to avoid articulation, and, with it, to ethically mitigate the effects of power in everyday communication. But it also pointed out concerns about the abuses of inarticulation, and the anxiety that descent and dissolution into the inarticulate, existential, and negative, may go too deep, beyond some point of no return where, like the pottery analogy in the Introduction, the “clay” loses any capacity to become a “pot.” Where is the line that separates “indexical” meanings from the absence of meaning, or distinguishes a comfortable silence of communal understanding from being alone, despite being together? When does the concern with the present and immediately relevant go beyond mitigating the prescriptive, imposing power of language—to destroy the very subjectivity of a subject?
In this chapter, I show how the concerns about indistinction and inarticulateness translate into calls to mobilise and to restore (at least some of the) articulation. Central to them is the trope of “boredom.” In the history of ideas and history of emotions, “boredom” is a well-trodden subject. “Boredom” appears as part of the experience of European modernisation (see Musharbash 2007 for an overview of this conceptualization of boredom). Contemporary anthropology, to the contrary, connects “boredom” with demodernisation and postindustrialism, especially in postcolonial spaces (Shielke 2008, in Egypt; Mains 2007, in Ethiopia; Jeffrey 2010, in India), but also postsocialist ones (in Romania, O’Neill 2014). Like the works that explain boredom by reference to modernity, these studies tend to explain boredom as a symptom of other “problems”: the unemployment, and the precariousness, that accompany the usual culprits of capitalism or “neoliberalism.” While generally making a valid argument, they tend to ignore the historical particularities of “boredom” in/as a local (politics of) desire. A phenomenological approach may resolve the seeming paradox of how boredom is the symptom of both modernisation and demodernisation. In phenomenology and psychology, what the “laymen” call “boredom,” is in fact suppressed anxiety, especially in a situation where all alternatives for action are unacceptable for some reason (Nuckolls 2007; compare Bateson on the “double bind” or Crapanzano 1985 on “whites” “waiting” in South Africa). From that point of view, “boredom” may be a condition that accompanies not just modernization or demodernisation, but any deep shift in life-worlds (Musharbash 2007). A fruitful juxtaposition to such a “change-induced” boredom, is a “boredom” that is theorised as a feeling of crisis that is both acute and chronic—for instance, the “boredom” experienced under the siege of perpetual conflict (Kelly 2008; see also Vigh 2008 on “chronic crisis”).

These are postcultural anthropological approaches to boredom that read local experience in terms of the general human condition—which, in turn, often become generalised as the “global condition,” “neoliberal condition,” or “condition of any crisis or conflict.” I wish to combine these understandings with an old-fashioned, for anthropology, attention to the
particularities of local constructions of feeling, intimacy, and desire.\footnote{This presents its own difficulties in terms of intellectual histories. Numerous cultural studies analyse “Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet” 
\textit{toska} (roughly, melancholy or longing) and its role in the politics of emotion and politics of state (Fitzpatrick 2004; Flatley 2001; Washburn 2008), and 
\textit{poshlost’} (roughly, the fear of everything banal, ordinary, and middlebrow, see Svetlana Boym 1994:2). As a type of symbolic analysis, they are of great utility. At the same time, they remain curiously moralising: Boym, for instance, seems to simultaneously be horrified about \textit{poshlost’} and horrified at the ideological uses to which the critique of \textit{poshlost’} was put in Soviet Union.} In Russia, this is not a big leap to make since the intense and perplexing personal experience of “boredom” is understood—by “laymen” themselves—as intrinsically social and historical. Boredom is “the spirit of the time”; complaints about boredom always connect isolation, lack of purpose, or lack of engaging activities with a type of social topography and the social condition of the bored. These complaints, as well, are informed by vernacular-Marxist theories of desire. As such, they are also concerned specifically with alienation, and with the fetishistic substitution of “true” desire with a “false” one (that is, volubility).

“Boredom” comes from not being embedded in social life; therefore, moving between scales of analysis, between individual and social/institutional time, is in itself a way to configure moral experience. The collectivist and materialist ethos is focused on the specifics of personal ethical work within the limits of institutions. Boredom, in particular, comes from being embedded in a type of an institution that is voluble—a typology that, I argue, curiously transcends (post)socialist divisions by drawing (very Foucauldian) parallels between the disciplinary spaces of the “Soviet” school and the “post-Soviet” transnational capitalist corporation. This, in my view, calls for an inquiry: what parallels, and dislocations, arise if we compare this local “sociology” of “boredom” with some of the (“Western,” poststructuralist) social theories that also focus on the social condition of desire?
1 Of Boiling Kettles and Rotting Swamps

In 2010, the interiors of Perm’s streetcars and buses were pasted over with inspirational quotes, part of a project sponsored by the municipality, entitled “The Wisdom of the World.” Through the quotes chosen for the project, municipal authorities condemned many sins, but most prominently the ones that signified inaction (see insert). I imagined how Marina (the chemical engineer whom we encountered in Chapters 1 and 2) must have read these invariably didactic snippets calling for being active and taking firmer moral stances, as she stood motionless, squeezed on a crowded bus during her daily commute to the factory.

But, like many others, she was not at all averse to the values expressed in this public project. When Marina, her friend Olga who worked on a factory assembly line, and I all sat down in winter 2010 to catch up on things and to celebrate Olga’s thirty-fifth birthday, Marina answered my question of “How was work?” by heaping scorn on people who “want change, but don’t want to do anything for it.” Perm’ has always been a “swamp,” she told me, but lately the “inertia” had become unbearable. People “rot on the inside,” allowing their burnout and fatigue to take over and stand in the way of their enthusiasm for life, for openness and movement, for the new things, and especially for charitable attitudes towards others:

Marina: [Perm’ is] one huge inertnost’ [inertia]—indeed, global’naya [lit. “global, all-encompassing”]!

AK: I recall someone called Perm’ city “a pit” [proval].

“The Wisdom of the World”

To live every day as if it was one’s last day; never to hasten, never to display indifference, never to make theatrical gestures—this is the perfection of personal character. – Marcus Aurelius

All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. – Edmund Burke

The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis. – Dante

Nothing will go to a man’s account but his action. Only in action can a man be seen in his true life. – The Quran

All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. – Edmund Burke

The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis. – Dante

Nothing will go to a man’s account but his action. Only in action can a man be seen in his true life. – The Quran

If you have no power to burn and shed the
Marina: No, it is not a pit. It is a swamp. Even if there is an inflow of some sort, it gets dissolved and stagnant, at some point. Yes, tak i est’! [this is the truth]. Nothing changes in here! No-thing!

AK: But maybe it is good that nothing changes?

Marina: On one hand, it is good. Maybe it is good. On the other hand, the quality of the swamp itself is changing! Because nothing is happening, it rots from within. And this internal discontent—this, how to put it—like our Mrs Ivanova, God give more health to that bitch! [ironically combining the imperative not to jinx other people with a direct curse with her dislike for the person]. It is a [middle-aged] woman at work.

Olga: Not just her! They are all like that!

Marina: Yes, they are all like that! Yes! When they age, with the passage of time, they all start to rot from the inside! The swamp is the human factor [chelovecheskiy faktor, an expression popularly used by the media in connection to some disaster and the accompanying distribution of blame and responsibility]. It is not the landscape to blame, not the wind, not the— I don’t know— not the Kama River! It is the people who live here.

AK: These women, are they your age?

Marina: No, no, they are considerably older. Considerably! Like, fifty years old, plus or minus five years. You see, nothing, nothing changes when they are around.

Olga: Not just that. Look at their zloba [anger, meanness]!

Marina: And nothing changes inside them, either. Nothing moves. They want changes but they don’t want to make any effort to bring them about. And the zhelch’ [bile, bitterness], it grows inside them!

AK: So do they treat you badly?

Marina: No—but they walk around you like—you know, like kettles! Like boiling kettles. The water is boiling in the kettle, steam whistles out, and whoever stands near her, gets burnt. Family, colleagues, whoever.

Olga: They come to work and start splashing it about—they just come in—and at once, there is so much negativ!

Marina: Yes, just the manner itself, how they enter the room—it is already enough [to get burnt]! But you see, it is like that everywhere. Though I can only talk about Perm’—but this swappiness, it is so swampy! Maybe before, it was different. Maybe it had frogs chirruping, it was sunny.

AK: You mean, it was lively?

Marina: Yes! And now—it is the rot, the stink!

AK: And when did this “now” start?
Marina: About ten years ago.

Olga: Yes, something like ten years! Before that, the whole factory was living *druzhno* [in harmony, lit. “like friends”].

Marina: Now, it has been stinking for ten years. I have been working there for five years. And before, I was teaching at school. And it was the same story in school. With age, with time, if people do nothing about themselves, then it happens.

Olga: Among people of our age, some care, some don’t— I don’t give a shit about this work.

Marina: But what can one do about it? Nothing. This is provinciality. This is what they show in “The Real Chavs” show.52 This very thick stratum of society [prosloika], in Perm’ and the Perm’ region, the inertia, the rotting— it drives me mad!

This was a common resentment, or warning, that revolved around tropes of indeterminacy and diffusion, lack of momentum and force: *bezrazlichiiye* (indifference), *stupor* (stupor), *inertzia* (inertia), *tupost’* (dullness, stupidity), *apatiya* (apathy), “people do not want/need anything,” *letargiya* (lethargy), *boloto* (swamp), *pofigizm* (whatever-being of Chapter 1, but also indifference), *len’* (sloth), and *nekhot’* (lit. “no-want”; see Rezunkov 2009; this was declared the “2008 neologism of the year” in Epstein 2009:10–11). In the present chapter, I suggest looking at these “boredoms” in terms of a sociocentric ontology of desire, of the equation of virtue with desiring subjectivity, and the possession of such subjectivity as a condition of personal existence.

The word “desire” is inconveniently burdened with psychoanalytic overtones, and I discuss the significance of this fact in the concluding section of this chapter. Sexual drive, however, is imagined to be an important, but not the only, example of what it is precisely that “boredom” kills in people. Desirous subjectivity is productive, and therefore *loving* (generating energy outward) rather than *wanting* (feeling a lack of something, a void to fill), —loving *agentically*, almost aggressively. Being “bored,” undesirous, from time to time is a sign of virtuous attention to the stoppages in the flow of desire. It is simultaneously a call for action, for countermeasures for becoming un-bored, because by accepting or suppressing

52 *Real’niye Patzany* was a curious Permian TV production that combined scripted storylines with some elements of reality TV, and achieved wide acclaim on national television. I would define the main themes of the show as class, the economy, youth, and ethnic relations.
anxiety and gloom one faces the danger of becoming spiritually dead. But energy is also a finite resource that can be lost entirely, beyond restoration (the point of no return). Desire requires constant and vigilant cultivation, and, in particular, knowledge of its “sociological” conditions—the conditions connected to kinds of people, gender, ethnicity, class, and institutions—which my informants, in their everyday conversations, gladly shared with me and with each other.

Among other vernacular-Marxist sensibilities, the tales of boredom, as I see them, warn against the danger that fetishism posits for desire. Fetishism, in a Žižekian and Marxist sense, is a misrecognition of desire: an attachment to the things or ideas that are not/should not be the true objects of desire, but are merely their substitutes. To explicate his (Marxist and psychoanalytical) take on fetishism, Slavoj Žižek (1989) famously depicts a man who, on the surface of it, seem to stoically endure the sorrow of the death of his father while becoming “suspiciously” attached to his dog. When the death of the dog brings about his psychological breakdown, the fetishistic—transference—nature of his attachment is revealed. The love for the father was substituted with the love for the dog.

Russian school curriculum, in its literary parts, may be seen as replete with similar examples. Chekhov’s “Gooseberries,” for instance, is a story of a man whose dreams converged so poignantly, and so pathetically, onto the fantasy of growing these translucent green berries (almost but not entirely as seductive as absinthe, if made into jam, some think), for private and mindless—“simple,” sensory, utopic—dacha pasttimes. The desire, of course, was misrecognised: his true longing was/should have been for active and fulfilling social participation. “Simple” materiality, thusly, could also be denounced as a fetish.

The subtleties and difficulties in recognising the “good desire” may be associated specifically with the intelligentsia ethos (and its own fetish, Russian classical literature), but in my deliberation on boredom within the frame of vernacular Marxism, I suggest that its uses, and its social base, are much wider. (One can say that, perhaps, that intelligentsia merely have more articulate means to talk about it.) “Boredom” was accessible for everyone—as a claim to authenticity, symbolic capital, a moral practice, a way to frame the experience of one’s
social milieu, and a way to navigate the tight space of contradiction between the virtues of articulation and inarticulation, “simplicity” and “culturedness.”

2 “Men Got Lazy”—Pavel and Stepan

So who was “bored” in Perm’, and how so? Apart from the “older women” in Marina’s story, able-bodied men, curiously, claimed boredom most often. One day, Pavel (my long-time friend, whom we met previously) and I sat on the patio of a local eatery, drinking brandy and coffee, respectively, and watching people enjoy a summer evening of strolling and resting. A young and pretty girl passed by one way, and returned and passed by again going the other way, within half an hour. Pavel disapproved of what he saw as anaemic sexual dispositions on the part of the (local) men who obviously were not pursuing the girl:

Look, here: poor girl—when we sat down [in this café], she walked this way, and now she is walking back. In her short skirt, so lonely. Her head so low—skuchno ei [she is bored]. No tvar’ [lit. “no living creature”] wants to chat her up. (AK: Why? Too leniviy [lazy]?) Yes, they are! I recall I walked the street the other day and saw a girl—beautiful, so tanned, so slender. She was dressed literally in lingerie, in something transparent and pink. I saw two guys walking after her, drinking beer, at a distance. I laughed and asked them, “Are you trailing the girl?” They smirked, “Yes, we are!” But they did not make any attempt to chat her up. They just enjoyed the show, as if in a strip bar—nakhalyavu! [without giving anything in exchange].

Observing the girl’s tan and mascara, the work that went into her appearance, I thought about the persistence of mobilisation and articulation in the face of failure. She was walking to the radio-blasted voice of the sex-symbol songstress whose choice of lyrics and stage name, “Vera (Faith) Brezhneva” (the surname of the head of state in the 1970s), point to the success in which intimacy and nostalgia are affectively merged in contemporary Russia. In one song, she sings: “I know the secret code (indexing intimacy and inarticulation), I can see the direction (a phrase reminiscent of Bolshevik-speak, the Collective), I believe that love will save the world (a reference to the famous sentence by Dostoyevsky, “beauty will save the world”). I have not heard, however, the word “love” in any voiceful setting of personal communication—only in the “public” sphere of songs, newspaper ads (see Lemon, 2008), talk shows (Lerner 2011; Matza 2009), and advertising slogans. Even some teen girls on the bus talked about falling in love in peculiarly self-distancing terms: “So, when do you think
you fell in love with him? Right away?” “No, I don’t think so. Maybe a month after we met. Certainly no longer than two months.” Was this postsocialist “cynicism,” or was it a display of an appropriately materialistic, antifetishist approach to desire—that is, to “love”?

Lauren Berlant (2007b:287) might point out that this song and this mobilisation of articulated sexuality are performances of “affective avarice,” “a demand for a feeling fix” that injects “a sense of normality” and “being intelligible” into our shared precarious neoliberal condition. The “demand,” however, went unheeded. Pavel’s explanation for this was that “the guys” did not have enough desire to answer sexual articulation with equally articulate gestures. Performing sexuality was mobilisation, a type of labour, a currency that should have been rewarded with attention. But, apparently, unfair as it was, the girl’s labour and her currency were cheap these days. “The guys” took what they could (“like going to a strip bar for free”), without giving anything.

Pavel recognised the “social fact” of the imbalanced “gendered energies” market, reiterating at the same time the long-standing discourse of emasculation of Russian men (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002). These (unfair) exchanges were common knowledge, and common conversation. Elena (b. 1974, works in tourism) said bitterly that she had almost abandoned hope to marry. She learnt to play poker and went to poker parties, predominantly male, “to absorb some male energy.” At the same time, when a couple of men confided in me about their infidelities (Ries [1997:37] presents such stories as a “common genre of male mischief”), they framed them as a virtuous pursuit of simple pleasures (see Chapter Two), but also as a sort of embodied therapeutic/moral charity—as generosity with their male “energies.” Stepan (a policeman), who took pride in his athletic physique and gift of gab, told me with a mixture of pride and irony how he was “picked up” (snyala, which also applies to prostitution) by a very wealthy woman: “She asked me, ‘Do you drink cognac?’ I came to her apartment.” I interjected, “For a ‘cup of tea’?” “Yes!” he responded, laughing, “I had never seen such a palace before.” The affair lasted for a while. His interpretation of it was that he saved a nearly “lost” woman from the crisis of her generative (sexual) desire, from the irrevocable affective point of no return that haunts imaginaries of the final stages of “boredom.” He made it possible for her to maintain this drive until she found a “good” man to marry, but, as he told me proudly, he still receives her respectful appreciation on every
February 24th, initially the “Day of the Army” but later a celebration of “men in general” since all men, theoretically, undergo one-year mandatory military service. (This day counterbalances March 8th, International Women’s Day.) Despite her higher status, she was wise enough to appreciate the exchange as equal, or even profitable, for her.

Stepan’s story shows how the “old” understandings of virtuous desirous exchange, of (true) love (and charity) for the world and men (and women), get refurbished to articulate, and to somewhat even out, the widening inequities in the Russian class landscape. Pavel was more modest than Stepan about the “net value” of his contributions to his mistresses—not because he was stingier in his “energies,” but rather because he acknowledged the unfairness of the exchange in a market where his virile looks, and masculine but supportive sentimentality, commanded such high prices. (He earned significantly more than Stepan, too.) “In a land with so much negativ,” and “so many single women,” as Pavel said, his “male energy” was equally if not more sought after than his handiness with high-voltage electric boards. “Every second woman here is a single mom,” or, you know, v polurazvode (semi-divorced),” he said, “and all what they want is just some personal attention… and a toy to play with.” It was not clear if by “toy” he referred to himself, or to the common custom to express sentiment not with voluble words but with simple material tokens, especially flowers and stuffed toys. Pharmacies and the flower stalls fill Russian cities with the frequency usually reserved for convenience shops: no one has the “long-term” in mind, creating a market for quick, just-in-time “fixes” for bodies and feelings. So Pavel was offered, and took, more than just casual pleasure. Many of his life opportunities—loans in time of need, contractual favours, great advice—came from women who rewarded him for his articulations. He charted out his relationship with them as multisided equations: good sex he found with every woman, but one of them was a particularly good listener to his troubles, another cooked, yet another was “a very, very good person, smart and kind,” in addition to being “rich and well connected.”

The pointed, if somewhat bitter, equanimity with which Pavel accounted for the transvaluation between the bodily, interpersonal, social, financial, and ethical qualities of these relationships was in itself a type of morality. The situation was not ideal; it was not

53 See the recent ethnography of single female parents in Russia (Utrata 2015).
even normative. It was “normal”—as good as one could reasonably expect it to be. It was “normal” in the sense that he could not name a male friend or an acquaintance whom he knew to be loyal to his partner, or a woman who would not eventually skip the pretence of “casual pleasure” (see the “decontextualisation” in relationships described in Chapter 1) to demand more. What made them not only normal but also moral, in Pavel’s eyes, is that he and his lovers did all they could under the generally “fucked up” circumstances of being “born in this country.” They remained virtuous because they preserved desire by performing it—something that the “lazy” men in the street failed to do.

After that conversation, I began to ask around about “male energy” in Perm’. The subject was always relevant, never “burdening.” In light of some of the answers, I came to see Pavel’s and Stepan’s view on things as a feminism of a sort, for they were convinced that under no circumstance should men forgo the responsibility to share their energies, even if this obligation was limited to displaying sexual gallantry. “The appropriative male gaze,” the subject of copious feminist critique, simply was insufficient (“just enjoyed the show, like in a strip bar”). Other men asserted vehemently that the tales of men’s sexual apathy were not true; or, more often, they agreed that they might be true, but that men were justified in being “lazy” because of their stress, their almost unavoidable alcoholism, and the growing loss of “truly” feminine affective “energies” in women.

3  “Men Got Lazy”—Tatiana

Tatiana espoused the same “pragmatic virtue” view on desire. Money was hard to come by, but at least its sources were known, and she worked hard to mine them. True “male energy”

54 A few aspects of Pavel’s relationships are exemplary of the continuous, pre- and postsocialist discourses of gender and family that represent males as a precious species endangered by modernisation, wars, and alcoholism, etc. (for an analysis of the particularities of the local “emasculation” discourses beginning from the 1970s, and their dis/similarities with similar “global” themes, see Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002). The discourse on the “emasculaton of men” and “masculinisation of women” became more overt in the 1990s (overview in Patico 2010). A general “kinship crisis,” as Patico defines it, were also exacerbated after perestroika, when family contracts came under strain precisely because they were deemed the last bastion amidst total “disintegration” and “moral degradation” (Shevchenko 2009).
was a different matter. She claimed that she declared, in no vague terms, to her prospective beaus that she sought no marriage but only casual sex—but she would tolerate no excuses for the quality of the latter. And yet the majority of men simply failed to desire enough to satisfy her femininity. To find those who behaved with bold and manly articulateness, she had to suffer through many unpleasant dates:

Yes, he said that he wanted it. But this was just *pizdetz* [a popular mat profanity indicating something irredeemably disgraceful]. Anya! I cannot be around such men. He talked and talked and talked—It was okay when he talked to tell me compliments. I say—sure, tell me more! But when he started this—I don’t know—I said, “Yes, I got what you mean already. I got you.” That was all, enough, you can move on [to something more articulate]! On! I could not stand it!

The traditional and sanctified “rituals of talk,” of communion, may be performative, but they obviously were not performing enough for Tatiana. Like the “boiling kettles” at Marina’s work, the suitor “wanted it,” but suppressed the “true”—bodily, physical—articulation of desire. Unlike them, he substituted his desire with the useless outpouring of words, annulling (the commonly understood ideal of) his masculinity and therefore, his (hu)manhood, causing Tatiana to writhe in almost physical disgust. Her ideas of manliness were inseparable from forceful action and the imposition of will:

I want a man who can smash his fist on the table! So I shall *potryaslas* ’-*potryaslas*’ [lit. “shook-shook,” got afraid, though the tense and the repetition highlights the temporary nature of the fear]. … Yes, I keep an appearance of being unavailable. This is because I like men who take risks. Those who take the risk, get rewarded (chuckles)!

The intellectual distancing that she put between herself and her emotion, the portrayal of fear as a temporarily thrill (“shook a little”), pointed out that “male energy” was very much a ritual, a convincing, voiceful performance of machismo, rather than real violence. Such affective artists were few and far between. The love of her life, in her own words (and she never mentioned the “I” word ever again), was a man of “ethnic” descent whose desire was abundant and straightforward. Tatiana was quite aware of her lover’s difference, and was not disinclined to speculate on this “racial” difference in explaining why he had abundance where others lacked. The question was not some “biology” but rather his Muslimness, which she perceived to be a straightening, focusing, articulating influence in his life (although he was a type of Muslim who drank a lot). The generally more “fervent” religiosity of “ethnic” men, in comparison with the religious uncertainty of Russian men, may be “backward” in
“civilizational” terms, but it makes for a very certain platform from which agency—desire—could spring easily. This was a not uncommon view, held by women as well as men: Alexei (b. 1973, contractor) asked me once, “Is it true that if a nation has many taboos, they have more energy? Take the Arabs, for instance. They have many strict prohibitions, so they don’t waste energy—that is why they are a strong nation, by the looks of it.” Indeed, Islamic laws enforced/allowed what would be, from my interlocutors’ point of view, an unthinkable efficacy of articulation: imagine a bureaucratic procedure of divorce to be shortened to simply, merely a few words of divorce declaration!

These views on ethnic/religious difference as an articulating—and therefore agentic—force, mirrored some discourses surrounding the realities of immigration in the 2000s when “southern labourers,” often visibly ethnically different, flowed increasingly into financially resurgent but demographically troubled Russian cities, stirring new anxieties in the sex and marriage markets. Increasingly, the scarce resource of (Russian) male energy was rejected in favour of the unencumbered and the abundant incoming desire. An informative Internet discussion on the LiveJournal platform—over five hundred comments—formed in reply to a provocation from a user who presented herself as a young and desirable female on her way to marry a man from Tajikistan, explicitly for the value of his powerful sexuality. The comments contained many predictably xenophobic outcries about the “betrayal” on the part of the “black man’s whore.” Another response was the familiar “whatever” of pofigizm on the part of some male participants in the discussion. Pofigizm was framed as mock generosity, and as a familiar denigration of women, who are a “resource” of no value precisely because it seems to be in endless supply in Russia. But there were also attempts to problematise such relations as the “(pseudo)sociology of desire.” In this, self-identification with the virtues of “simplicity,” materialism, and antifetishism, were no longer viable. Reminiscent of Evgenii’s lament in Chapter 1 about the limitations of education (both his and mine), some stated that Russian men “suffer” from their class privilege—from their

55 Compare Robbins (2010) on the “pleasures of culpability” and the argument that there is a growing trend in the world to choose “sterner” religions.
56 Incomers are often referred to as “blacks,” initially in reference to the darker hair of Georgians, Armenians, and other people from the Caucasus, and then to the darker skin of people from Central Asia.
education and their “white-collar jobs,” which “blacks” do not have: “brains, as everyone knows, are an obstacle to good sex. Horny sailors and soldiers are the proof.” Furthermore, the “sociology of desire” circumscribed the expressions of racism in cultural, historical, and class-based terms. There was no “natural” strength of “black” bodies, or “natural” weakness of “black” minds. Neither their “religiosity” nor their “lack of education” were in any way a fault, a choice, or an achievement. It was understood that through the twists of history the “gift of modernity,” which the Soviet state “presented” to its subjects (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003, 2006), did not reach the southern republics fast enough, or did not stay there long enough, to ensure common secularism, cerebral acumen, or other “modern advancements” of the local education systems, and local men.

“Structural violence” is one term in anthropology that is sufficiently established not to require either quotation marks or references. Aside from particular nuances, it is commonly understood as the systematic and often invisible ways in which social structures disadvantage individuals. Structural violence is hard to attribute to a particular actor. Applications of the term rarely make claim to originality, but it is a useful theoretical “shorthand” or “signpost” for many studies. The examples above, as I see them, showcase how the social imaginary, and social commentary, also can be centred on “structural violence”—while simultaneously having none of the usual moralising force of the term. All personal conditions are socially determined. Both the gendered, ubiquitous, and symbolically unequivocal disadvantages of women and the structural violence of the migrants’ situation were seen as precisely that—as structural and historically determined: no one person could be held responsible, and no one person could aspire to change. This, in turn, makes the presumed “invisibility” of structural violence a difficult question: on one hand, it is presented as not only visible, but also as the framework that supports positionalities in discussions on love and desire. And yet, it was invisible in another way—a context, rather than the text, to consider—in the more important enterprise of maintaining the virtue of desire. In this manner, the economy of desire, the economy of life-force, runs through the social structure but simultaneously somewhat parallel to it, allowing a different interpretation of people’s actions—and making possible, in fact, all-important, personal moral agency while acknowledging that everything personal is, in fact, socially and historically determined.
4 The Displacement of Desire: “Women Got Greedy”—Pavel

Accusations of “boredom” (being boring, spreading “the swamp”), like accusations of witchcraft, may be used to frame the experience of conflict with affine kin. Considering the imbalance in the gender market, it became more common for a woman’s family of somewhat higher social or material standing to “accept” as her husband a man who was not entirely up to her parents’ standards. Desirous subjectivity—the affective, materialist, and antifetishist value that, through its denunciation of the fetishisation of status and wealth, could lay claim to both egalitarianism and to symbolic capital—was helpful in framing familial rifts.

Consider this monologue on the part of a taxi driver (in his fifties, but “still having a glass of vodka every day”):

My daughter is a problem. She went out [skhodila, a verb in an emphatically temporary tense—as in “went out to fetch milk”] to marry. Came back in a year. Learnt to drink, to smoke, and to swear. Became zloy [evil, angry], nedobraya [unkind]. All her interest now is in Chinese Shar-Pei dogs, cats, those sphinx cats, phew. And before, she used to say, “I won’t drink, because I will have to bear a child one day.” So why would she not bear a child? Her former husband, himself, is sick, a psycho, sits at those computers all day…

The driver was disappointed that his daughter did not fulfil his expectations in finding a “more suitable” partner. He did not, however, claim any “social norm,” or filial duty, as a justification that his version of “the good life” was correct. If one is to tell a moral tale in which one is a moral actor, the ultimate “proof” should always be presented as experiential: “going astray” did not make her happy, more desirous, more open to the world and people, either. Her anxiety (or anger, zlaya) betrayed that the objects of her desire were illusory, just

57 This is an absolute conjecture on my part; I cannot offer any statistics to support it, only logic and my own observations. The problem is also that gender studies in Russia are largely feminist, and therefore predominantly concerned with the (“real”) inequalities suffered by women. Oushakine’s (2002) “On Masculinity” is a great breakthrough, but it does deal predominantly with the conundrums of the symbolism of masculinity and male models, and not with the marriage market. Patico’s (2009 and 2010) analyses of international matchmaking and the work of Utrata (2015) on single mothers gives a perspective on the structure of expectations, and the disappointment, of women in looking for a partner.

58 He, in a way, quotes Zizek’s example of fetishistic transference almost verbatim.
like her agency was illusory—she did not choose but was “led astray” by the wayward husband who himself was rather more afflicted (“sick,” “a psycho”) than at fault.

Pavel, in describing his marriage rifts, was similarly blaming and excusing of his in-laws. He was on his second marriage, which he firmly believed by then to be loveless. He was sad at the prospect of divorce, which his wife was likely to initiate, taking with her the two children born in this marriage. Pavel’s wife was, as he saw it, beyond the zloy, the “boiling kettle” or suppressed anxiety, stage of “boredom.” She “did not want anything any more.” (But he kept prilichniy, decorum, diligently purging incriminating SMS messages from his phone and partitioning his social circles.) In time, it transpired how he saw the material expressions of her no-want. The tale started, as it often did, with some bragging. Pavel’s in-laws had a dacha (summerhouse) of which he seemed, at first, to have been proud:

There at our dacha, it is nothing short of a khozyaistvo [lit. “a homestead”; a self-sustaining economic unit]. We have a hundred rabbits, maybe forty egg-bearing hens. Three cockerels. Rams. Sheep—one should lamb soon. Then the geese, maybe twenty of those. (AK: How much land do you have?) I have no idea, I have trouble counting. Three dogs, two cats. A whole khozyaistvo!

I thought that Pavel was appreciative of his family’s virtuously obtained economic success. It was not achieved through being what Roman in the previous chapter called “kommers,” “speculators” or re-sellers, or other “managers”; his in-laws were honest, down-to-earth, hard-working workers, shtribans. He called it “our” dacha, thus identifying with all this bleating and quacking, the hustle and bustle and the abundance of “simple” goodness. All this was in addition to the secure job of Pavel’s wife, her and her mother’s small but lucrative business in making fur accessories, her father’s pension, and Pavel’s own salary.

But the situation at the dacha was deeply troubled. Despite the relative economic stability, strolling and resting did not happen much at the dacha: his relatives toiled from dawn to dusk, churning out agricultural produce. The real turn of the tale happened when I dropped in for tea at the apartment that he still shared with his wife. She was a hoarder, and the dacha was the main excuse for the addiction to continue. Every scrap of leftovers—milk, bread, fruit, meat, a battery of opened jars with a smudge of jam or a single pickle on the bottom—all were stored outside or in two huge overfilled fridges in the heat of summer, where they were saved “for the dacha,” to feed the animals. Scraps of building materials, heaps of old
clothing, and empty plastic bags lie around in case they might be handy, one day, at the dacha.\textsuperscript{59}

Pavel, seeing my (forcedly nonjudgmental) astonishment at the flat’s hoard, got excited, and switched to the horror story genre. His horror stories followed “boredom” and its moral predicaments, where suppressing desire—the out-bound motion of the psyche, the urge to gift, to spend, and to give away—translated into all sorts of piling, muddying, and stuffing up: in houses, in bodies, in unloving souls, and in the quite palpable mutual inarticulation (I witnessed their awkwardness on several occasions) that his marital life inevitably became. I have already shown how often relations are imagined like flows and bodies of water (or energy; see Marina’s comparison of Perm’ to a swamp). One truly hopes for a “healthy” sparkling river; an opportunity to “pour out one’s soul” to a friend, and to never “dry up”; one finds satisfactory a cosy, “lively” “swamp” where the springs, though not ebullient, are still alive; and one must defend against the stink of the rotting, dead “swamp”—the presence of a grudge. Hoarding money or possessions was a sign of “swampiness,” a psyche that is “bottled up.” There was no flow in this apartment. Pavel’s wife, gaunt and pale, always obeyed her mother’s orders and worked through the day and into the night, while her family scorned Pavel for “laziness,” presenting a contestation over what constitutes true articulation, true efficiency. They did not buy gadgets, cosmetics, clothes, inexpensive vacations abroad, or other goods that constitute the small pleasures of nascent Russian middle-class consumption (Patico 2005, 2008). Instead, they collected foodstuffs, poultry, livestock, timber, sugar—all “simple,” morally good materials, but in quantities that never got consumed. According to Pavel, the scores of eggs that the hens produced were eaten by his in-laws in enormous quantities, risking cholesterol crisis and heart failure, but still too many were left uneaten, contributing to the heaps of leftovers. Half in mirth, half in dismay, he told me how one summer he tried to throw out the frozen bodies of two “Christmas” geese that

\textsuperscript{59} Compare with the philosophy of frugality that Nancy Ries (2009) describes in her article “Potato Ontology.” She focuses on the interconnections between poverty and food shortages, traumas of hunger, frugality, security, and the actions of a violent and unpredictable state. Olga Shevchenko (2002) described the habit of buying a second fridge (and second everything) “just in case.” Sergey Oushakine (2014), more recently, identifies the Soviet economy as an economy not of shortage but of storage. My own little case here “runs alongside” all these interpretations, except one: I try to show how these practices may be understood as problematic by people themselves.
took the whole freezer, making it unusable for anything else, but was stopped by his in-laws horrified by such wastefulness.

The worst, most unforgivable part of it all was that no one “had the time” to care for his wife’s grandmother, who suffered from dementia. And yet, like the taxi driver above, Pavel both blamed and did not blame his in-laws. Pavel externalised, and explained in terms of social circumstances, the predicament for both himself—bored with his affines—but also for their own boring condition. He went on to tell how they went through traumatic times of scarcity and precarity. His father-in-law was injured at work in his fifties, and has been on disability ever since. It was, as I would interpret his musings, not surprising that they wanted their dacha, their khozaiistro, their dream of autonomy and control and the “organic life.” But the pursuit of the means to banish anxiety and to live the life of simple pleasures turned quite sour, like the milk in the half-finished sachets.

For Pavel, the discourse of the accident that befell his father-in-law and “explained,” if not engendered, their “potato ontology” (Ries 2009) echoed his own present and future traumas, equally external and “part of life,” and hence unavoidable. In 2011, the life expectancy for Russian men born in the 1970s was about sixty-two years (according to Russia’s Federal State Statistics Service60). Pavel’s knowledge of mortality was likely also influenced by the well-known decrease from that sixty-two-year life expectancy—which is itself shamefully low for a “modern” country—to only fifty-eight or fifty-nine years for those born between 1995 and 2005. It is not surprising that my interlocutors between the ages of thirty-four and forty (and especially the men) saw themselves as well past their mid-life crisis. It was also the age when many lost one or both of their parents, like Pavel, thus becoming effectively the eldest of their “clans.” Their children were always a consolation and their main concern, but personally, there was “nothing to look forward to” in old age, imagined as a merciless descent into frailty and social irrelevance. Conversations about future old age were banished as a major source of negativ (ref. Chapter 1). The present flowing of the life course was considered enough of a battle in terms of saving one’s desire, as Pavel explained:

In actuality [na samom dele], we [humans] are capable of accomplishing anything we want. But the zhelaniya (desires), motivations, they leave us. What comes is the realisation: Do you really want to take this risk? Is it worth the danger? And you know, there is also the polosy [lit. “streaks or stripes,” like white stripes are followed by black, the good in life is inevitably followed by the bad, leaving one to wait until the white one starts again] of life. But in the end, anyway, zhopa ([we’re] screwed; the word used in the test to see if you are “really Russian” discussed in Chapter 1). So here I am—especially after my parents’ death. It was a blow. I had more than I could handle. So in actuality, we are always capable of everything, but—we do not want to anymore.

He presented himself as someone who fought the death of desire through love affairs, and who reaffirmed the morally desirable ideals of pozitiv. But life’s only predictability was how easily one can slip into the no-want.

5 Rituals and Desire—Evgenii and Tatiana

Evgenii was also engaged in the moral crusade against the war his aging body was waging on his desire:

Here, I rise in the morning and go to the bathroom, and walking feels so difficult. —
But at least I escaped [the disgrace of] the vulgar (poshliy) obesity that Russian men are prone to after they get married. Do you know how awfully fat X got? Right after he got married, he lost any care for appearances. This is because there appeared a new ustanovka [something anchoring, like a party guideline or, in this case, an anchoring thought or disposition, often subconscious and expressed through action] that life had come to an end, that bol’she nichevo ne nado [nothing there to want/need any more].

This snippet also shows how the whole institution of marriage is dangerous for desire. Explanations behind such views vary. Some say it is only dangerous for men because marriage makes the lives of men easier, while women’s lives become harder (the “double burden” of the working mother)—leaving the latter no choice but to mobilise. Some say marriage makes the life of women more meaningful, hence less boring, while men lose interest in (monogamous) sex, which is, for them, the main drive to mobilisation in life, etc. Speculations on how marriage influences desire are “good to talk with,” so they abound.

61 Again, this is a word with a “thick” intellectual and cultural history, described in Boym’s (1994) Common Places.
Below, I describe the new class realities—and the speculation that marriage can be “deadly” for women, if material comfort lures them away from labour markets.

But for now, it should be noted that the dacha was also a troubled issue for Evgenii, though in a curious and telling reversal from what Pavel saw as the source of its danger, revulsion, and “boredom.” Evgenii’s in-laws did not work at the dacha, or worked very little. Instead, they performed proper simple pleasures: tea drinking (*chayevnichat*, a pointedly rustic/archaic verb) and sleeping. Practices Evgenii found disgusting and threatening on the existential level:

I prefer not to go to that dacha of theirs. Before, we used to go there more often, almost every weekend in the summer. But now, it has turned into an exile of sorts for me. Because they always push us to sleep—and to gobble, gobble, gobble!—all the time. And drink tea, they call it “*chayevnichat*”—how I hate this word! And after the tea, they want to “flop on the side,” meaning to sleep. It was horrible. I mean truly, I was scared, when I realised that I was losing the very fabric of my being.

In other conversations, however, Evgenii did not position himself as a poster boy for an exceedingly agentic disposition. He told stories of his own low-key, mindless sensory pleasures: how he enjoyed going for leisurely strolls with his little son in a buggy, and the bouts of relaxation, mindless beer drinking, and TV watching that he organised by himself, and for himself, on a whim, especially on business trips away from home. He said that sitting on a bench in a park on a good day and watching people playing cards or exercising was one of his favourite pastimes.

So what was the difference between the “moral” laziness of beer drinking in a hotel, and the “immoral,” “spiritually deadly” tea drinking at the dacha? Evgenii did not explain his abhorrence by reference to the mutual, and considerable, dislike between him and his in-laws, which he was at ease to elaborate to me in other stories. The reason was that they violated the politics of emotion/experience that required checking that “simple pleasures” are not fetishes that cover up an anxious, angry, or tense, interior states. His in-laws were beyond salvation in this regard: they were anxiously boring, performing the rituals of relaxation and good sociality—to no avail, but did not even acknowledge the fact. They were no longer “bored.” Evgenii remained true to his desires, a wholesomeness he denied to his in-laws. The same logic of displaced desire worked in both the “ritual” of Pavel’s in-laws’ “work” and the
“ritual” of Evgenii’s in-laws’ “rest.” The main trope remained that there was nothing wrong with the objects of desire, only with the desire itself: the rituals of work and leisure were not checked for voice, but instead used to patch up anxious, frightened, or morose subjectivities.

With much virtue associated with authenticity of desire—of voiceful presence—rituals are indeed a bothersome subject, even without the possibility of displacement. When someone is not “present” in an ostensibly voiceful ritual, are they bored because they are permanently bored, as in lacking energies, grudging, etc., or are they bored because they don’t perceive this ritual as voiceful? This is how I interpret something that puzzled me for a while: Tatiana told me a couple of times, and in great detail, about who cried, and who did not, at her son’s graduation party. Tears are, of course, a strong indication of voice. She witnessed it: the parents, including herself, were so awash with tears (reveli) that they could hardly speak! Most teachers, however, did not shed tears. By her reflexive intonations and pauses, I guessed that she was herself puzzled about whether she should, or should not, have been surprised by the fact. Were they permanently bored, being the part of a school system, an institution that is rarely conducive to voice (see below); or did they merely fail to see that the graduation ceremony turned out to be really moving? After some hesitation, she posited them as voicefully inarticulate. They must be, she pondered, “very moral’no ustoichiviye” (“morally stable”), which I would translate as “present, but choosing to control their articulations.” Finally, she exonerated the teachers some more by dividing their numbers, and even the quantity of tears: “most did not cry, but some of them, you know, still wiped their eyes under their glasses.”

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62 Anthropologists once entertained a question along somewhat similar lines: is it useful to differentiate between “imagistic” or “doctrinal” rituals (see the overview in Nuckolls 2007)? “Imagistic” rituals are marked by the presence, intent, and belief of their participants; they are therefore somewhat coincidental with what I call “voiceful.” Some anthropologists argue that in “doctrinal” rituals, people are “bored.” Nuckolls argued that they may be, in the language of my abstractions here, merely voicefully inarticulate.
6  “Sick from Not Realising Myself”: The Traps of Wealth—Larisa and Anastasia

In the spaces of domesticity, sensory utopia ideals often acquire a connotation of therapy, of restoring vitality. For women, an appropriate sensibility is to defend domestic chores as therapeutic. Chores provide relief from “thinking.” Their monotony, embodiment, and certainty of purpose is appreciated—to the extent that “beating the dust out of pillows” can be recommended by a psychotherapist as a treatment for depression. (Marina confessed to having gone out to beat pillows for half a year, on the advice of her therapist. Her young son—who must have been just six at the time—went out with her and also beat the pillows, because, she said, shaking her head, “the atmosphere in the kindergarten is also not very good.”) These rationalities, of course, echo the labour-centricity of vernacular Marxism and its self-care practices. They are also another example of “dislocated coincidence” between “local” and “sociological” constructions of “the ordinary” and “the everyday.” Looking at how marginalised Indian women find power and agency in managing their domesticity, Veena Das (2007), suggests that “the ordinary” helps them to continuously overcome the trauma of Indian Partition that destroyed their social (especially family) identities and made visible to them the fragility of their social and symbolic worlds. This agency and this power, however, remain silent—inarticulate—to the part of these women. Das has to “theorise”—to articulate—such sensibility on their part, thus preserving the “ordinary” character of the sensibility itself. In contrast, (post)Soviet women readily articulate this “power of the ordinary,” and explain that it is therapeutic precisely because it is (somewhat) “outside” of the social and symbolic articulations. Objectifying “the ordinary” as an aspect of life that is separate from life is, in this way, a part of their epistemological and moral vocabulary.

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63 Men also frame their leisure in terms of therapy, though they prefer their restoration to happen through the “extraordinary” logic of heroic self-expansion that often transgresses into self-sacrifice: exhaustive or dangerous play. Sometimes, however, men “borrow” from women the more readily available “therapy” of domestic chores. As Lidia told me about her acquaintance, “She has no opportunity of cooking salads at home, because only he [her husband] does it. He says, ‘I am a psycho, and when I cut something I calm down.’ So he cuts vegetables in small pieces, and makes many-component salads!”

64 Lauren Berlant (2007a) would call this agency “lateral.”
But chores performed by a wealthy housewife—one who has to do neither waged work nor chores (as domestic help is cheap)—may become a ritual of the displacement of desire. This is how Irina framed the story of Larisa, who became wealthy through marriage.

Initially, there was nothing wrong with Larisa, Irina told me. Before getting married, she had been well on her way to becoming a highly skilful seamstress and embroiderer, thus aspiring to the same proud professionalism as Irina. She could have become “big,” Irina told me; she could have become a couturier. But her husband’s wealth made her earnings seem meagre in comparison, so she decided to quit work at least temporarily to raise a family. Temporary stagnation became permanent. As a housewife, she was not desperate; her desire died completely. She became a person-of-nothingness, niochemnyi chelovek, isolated from wider social circles and concerns, from colleagues and gossip and stories of how something happened that one can carry on witnessing to others (more on this in Chapters 5 and 6).

Larisa spent her days polishing her skin (vsya takaya gladkaya, “all of her was so smooth”—which blends wonderfully the vice of too much caring about appearances with the lack of articulation, that is, something rough, a tension, a conflict in Larisa’s character). Larisa was making “all sorts of jams and pickles, and fancy ones, like, rose petals and peaches, or walnuts and, I don’t know, something.” (Larisa clearly took the ideal of “simple pleasures” too far, transgressing from the simple and approved pleasure of raspberry jam into something too sophisticated). Larisa seemed to be content—but only seemed so, according to Irina, because Larisa sought Irina’s company. And Irina was no longer ready to provide it because in the economies of communion, Larisa no longer had anything to offer: “she was just sitting there all pretty in her kitchen, like a neutered domestic cat.” Even her husband, who was initially pleased at giving her the opportunity not to work, became worried. It was too late; her spiritual state got to the point of no return, “beyond salvation,” Irina explained:

She says—here, so—her husband, he has already said to her, “Why would you not go and find a job?” That is, even her husband already wants her to go and find a job—and she says: “Who, me? For several thousand roubles?” You see, nu vse zhe! [that is it, that is the end!]! She is beyond salvation, she obrosla [lit. “has become so stagnant that grass or moss has grown over her”]. When I see her, she reminds me of a pet cat. Always fed, always lazy. Neutered cat, kotoroi nichego ne nado [who does not want/need anything]! She looks very good, so well groomed. Manicure, ringlets. She is so smooth, placid—I feel reluctant to visit her any more. She depresses me with her purring. I am bored with it. She can only sit and listen to what I tell her [with nothing to tell in exchange].
Talk of others’ wealth as an existential trap for their flow of subjectivity is not common. Moral tales presume personal experience or witnessing (the subject of Chapter 6), and with the growing income gap, there are fewer “rich friends” one can talk about. Besides, it is understandable that it is hard to avoid the accusation of jealousy when one tells such stories. And yet these tales find sympathetic listeners: Irina’s story about Larisa sounded well rehearsed, and catered to the familiar dichotomies of vernacular Marxism. The true, authentic life is in society, in the voiceful inarticulation of Communitas, and in the voiceful articulation of a Collective where a woman’s professional identity and a socially meaningful activity gives her life tension, conflict, and meaning.

For Anastasia (b. 1974), a rich housewife herself, these were absolute, and deeply vexing truths. Her boredom was serious to the point of being somatic: “I have even gotten sick from not finding myself (ne nashla sebya).” Her life story can be called a case of curiously dislocated postperestroika class reproduction. A daughter of a medium-level party functionary, she grew up to value prilichiya (decorum), “culturedness,” and the understated elegance of a lifestyle with predictable material comforts. She studied history at the local university and prepared to take a job in city administration when perestroika destroyed her plans and her family. Her parents divorced amid the turmoil, and her very steady and predictable world, upon which she reflected some fifteen years later, collapsed. Upset and confused (“my roof had flown off”), she married a man from a less illustrious background who later became quite wealthy through real estate operations.

From her stories, I understood that isolation was indeed a risk for certain wealthy women in Perm’. Perm’ s “elite” scene is small, lessening the opportunities to find agreeable companions in the same category of consumption. When I asked her once who were the ladies who constantly left lengthy, sugary, gilded, diamonded, and expensive animated “giftcards” for her in social media (the “virtual presents” one can purchase to post on other person’s “wall,” the gilded and animated varieties of which are, naturally, the most

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65 Anastasia was one of the few “rich” people in my “sample” (their income range is described in the Introduction). She thus provided evidence that many of the sensibilities I describe are more generalizable.
expensive), she was obviously slightly embarrassed and vaguely referred to “stupid wenches” (*devki-dury*). Anastasia spent her time mostly alone or with her son. But the biggest problem of her life was the absence of a legitimate professional career: “I would have been an administrator, a doctor.” Without it, her life was “so, so boring.”

Ironically, she might have been a woman of leisure, but she was hardly idle: apart from maintaining an impeccable appearance, she cared for her husband, her children, their hobbies, and her house without any domestic help. She was the leader of various PTA-style activities at the school, organising and guiding field trips, sport events, and celebrations. But these all did not count because she was not a professional, and the historical trauma, the marriage, and the unexpected wealth were to blame. All the while, she was searching for “real work” to overcome the “stupor.” Her university diploma was “useless and obsolete,” and the obvious choices, as she saw them, were a career in charity or in the glamour industry. Sadly, the absurdities, inefficiencies, and other inarticulations—the institutional “boredom”—of heavily state-regulated orphanages scared her away from social work, and she is now a consultant for an ultra-luxury brand of cosmetics.

These stories drew out another law of desire: there is no “spiritual insurance”—some sort of inherent production of desire—in any action. Being silent, nonreflexive, and *sitting well*, or “descending into the ordinary” chores of making jams and salads, were the possible venues, but not the guarantees, of what really mattered: the production of relaxed, harmonious, and desirous subjectivity. Only continuous self-care allows one to be unique in time, neither rejecting routines and customs nor fetishising them. Eating (especially very fancy) jams does not make one an Epicurean, just like giving compliments to a woman does not make one a real man. Only experience proves the presence of desire, and only the presence of desire differentiates “good” matrimonial infidelity from “bad,” or explains moral differences in the various ways of being an alcoholic (more on this below).

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66 She showed me the conspectus of the courses she took to become a social worker. It is not a glamorous career neither a well paying one --- she laughed at the money she would be getting. But it was a career of a respectable, socially meaningful sort—not a doctor, her unrealisable dream, but still. Apart from other reasons, she confessed that she gave up on the idea because she did not think she could take the psychological strain, the *negativ*, that comes with it.
7 Surviving Boring Places

7.1 The Marketplace—Oksana and Pavel

Much of the apathy was attributed to stress. A fashionable response to the question, “How was work?” was “Begovnia,” a two-fold word collapsing begat’, to run about, and “shit.” Treading endlessly in shit, like anxious rodents in a cage—“What are our lives but myshkina?” (lit. “mousy”)—deftly captured in one word the insignificance, the colourlessness, and the rat-race quality of such a life. “I do not live, I just work to pay the bills, that’s all,” Batyr jeered in response to my question of “How’s life?” And yet stories were told about how structured, undemanding, and even lucrative ways to make a living can be existentially dangerous. Working in retail was one such common story. Here is how Oksana, a thirty-six-year-old church activist and a bookstore manager, described her experience working in a store:

So here, we sold something—a jacket, for instance, for a couple of thousand roubles, or how much it was then. It was customary then to buy a bottle of wine to celebrate the sale—we did not drink, like, vodka, only wine [that is, adhered to the gender-appropriate drinks]. There was this “Golden” brand of wine that was 18 percent alcohol. So we sat there [drunk] and [dramatically] counted the snowflakes! [as they were falling]. I was lucky to get out of [that job] in time! So many people became stupefied alcoholics like that!

Among my peers, many opted for a university education in the early 1990s. But since “the whole country [then] was doing nothing but trading imported Mars and Snickers bars” (Inna, in Chapter 2), these diplomas turned out to be largely useless. This is when many tried to become kommerses (discussed by Roman in Chapter 2), make a living by standing behind a merchandise stall. The resentment of working at the market and the discontent at the indignity of buying and selling things have been described in detail, especially in the literature that connects “morality” and “poverty” in Russian ethical worlds (Ries 1997 has an overview, coining it “the mystical poverty”; Rogers 2006 and 2009 have an updated overview on the same subject).

The stories I was told, however, did not explicitly condemn the market in the “Soviet” way—in terms that it was, supposedly, a “dirty” place of “speculation,” a place fit only for swindlers and crooks. Like many others, Oksana did not see the point of positioning herself
as a moral actor by presenting trade as a lowly, “uncultured” work (her own mother was a salesperson). Neither were jackets something particularly meaningful to think about every day: back in the 1990s, she had enough ambition to acquire a degree in purchase management, and tried to establish her own clothing merchant’s stall at the same market, but was swindled out of her prospects by other merchants, a very common story. The justification for the immorality of the market was experiential: working for wages in retail was a soul killer.  

Tellingly, she recounted her story of the market while standing behind the counter of a little Christian literature bookstore. She was still in sales, but the experience of this marketplace was different. A believer herself, she was passionate about the merchandise, and about interacting with customers and competently inspiring them to make purchases. The clothing market was stifling for the lack of social and emotional involvement, and idealistic significance—even if the “trade partners” made every effort to structure time with “counting snowflakes,” or to compensate, stir up, or mimic the intensity of desirous subjectivity with the flow of alcohol.

Pavel also spent a year selling automotive parts at the market, making profits large enough for his boss to compensate him exceptionally well, and to show respect by drinking with him expensive and manly, meaning high proof, liquors. Pavel described his escape from being “sucked in” as very narrow:

There was this friend who offered me this job at the market. He said, “It will be like being on vacation!” (laughs) Indeed! I made a sad personal record at that time. I was drunk every day for seventy-two days in a row—I calculated later—because then, I could not make myself to come to work without a glass of something. I started in the morning with a beer, and ended at night with vodka and whatnot. I did not “see double” but I was drunk, all the time. People laughed at me because I was walking in zigzags!

The temptation of good money kept him in place until he was on the brink of madness and perpetual alcoholic delirium, but he found it in himself to give up the money and to remove

67 This would also be a complaint of many retail workers in, for instance, the “soulless giant” of Walmart. The difference is in how central this traumatic experience is to the lives of my “laymen,” and in how vernacular Marxism helps them interpret this experience as particularly traumatic and soul killing (literally).
himself physically from the marketplace. (He still drinks moderately every evening and heavier on weekends and holidays, and goes through occasional bouts of binge drinking, but not to the extent that would interfere with work.)

7.2 Corporations

Lilia worked in a corporation that claimed to follow “international” practices. Thus, she did not have to fraternise with her boss, whom she respected, and her pay cheque came in an envelope, regularly and in the agreed amount. She spent her days smartly dressed, running the HR department of an automobile holding, and supplemented her good though not outrageous salary by teaching courses on personal growth. She jokingly called herself an “electro-venik,” a buzzing electric broom—a metaphor evocative of the fact that she took it upon herself to “stir” or “wind up” the dusty quietude of life wherever she encountered it. Lilia was in charge of all corporate celebrations, parties, and competitions between the departments, theatre outings, etc., and she was the soul of all these activities. Her leisure was filled with fitness, self-exploratory painting, home improvement, and her boyfriend. And yet, she was anxious about boredom:

The biggest risk for me now is that I will get mad with boredom [bezumno skuchno]. Even if I get a promotion at my current job, I will leave. Because what do I get from this work, from these people, personally? If I reach the limit [of my boredom], I will leave v nikuda [lit. “into nowhere,” without first making arrangements for another job].

Social status was not a guarantee against boredom either: Lilia’s friend Anton, a wealthy and respectable forty-something lawyer, though objectively a “winner” on all accounts, could not find it in him to fight the boredom. We were walking in the park when Lilia received a call from him. As it turned out, he had called to pour out his existential angst, and to brag about his suffering. She finished talking to him and explained to me, visibly amused:

Here, it is [vot, witness]. Anton. Drunk. He says he is now horizontal [lying down]. He told me he has already finished three litres of beer and now proceeded to vodka. He is lying on his back, watching the ceiling. He says it is his favourite pastime—to lie on his back and watch the ceiling. And then he starts to call all his buddies. And me.
I must add that Anton, whom I also met, could clearly afford to drink something more expensive than vodka (and probably did), but one cannot declare virtuous boredom and confess to drinking, say, Hennessy Cognac, in the same breath.

People who were “bored” were part of the reason for Lilia’s own “boredom,” as was the general “boredom” of Perm’ as a place. Like one of Chekhov’s three sisters, Lilia was at the time thinking of moving to Moscow. She is in Moscow now, though so far it does not appear that the capital will provide her better personal fulfilment.

7.3 The Army

The condemnation of “boredom” blurs the lines between types of institutions. Marketplaces, corporations, and dull exhibitions at the PERM’M museum (discussed in Chapter 2), are condemned based on the same existentialist rationale of the death of desire.

The army experience, however, has a particular imaginary of “boredom.” Alexander, in his forties, complained to me that he found it difficult to staff his small security firm because “no one wants anything” in general, but especially so because those who would be his natural staff, military retirees, were “for the most part, walking zombies”:

You would be surprised, but we almost do not have any former military employees [in our security company]. They are all dried up [vyushenniy, “burnt out”]. They all want jobs with nothing to do, and nothing to be responsible for. They do not want/need anything [nichego ne nado]; they have dried up, especially if they had really wanted something in the service [the inertia and indifference of the institution “consumed” their energies]. The army is an idiotic and horrifying system. People moral’no vygorayat [lit. “burn out morally”; as in Irina’s reference to “moral health,” here “morally” indexes interiority as such, and can be, and often is, easily substituted with “psychologically” or “nervously”]. [All they want] is a pension, a country shack to live in, that’s all. Just as long as they can clothe themselves, you know. They do not have any nervous energy [nervnaya energiya] left, because it is too hard to endure the idiocy of the army.

Marina told an equally dramatic story to me and another female friend about her husband, who was almost driven mad with boredom when he served in the army:

I was thinking he would go mad there [in the army]. Because, my girls, he wrote me letters. Here, say, “May 22nd, noon. I went to lunch. I ate this, and this, and this. In the morning, I did this. We stood in line on the plaza. Then I got my hair cut”! (AK:
So, he wrote to you to keep his sanity?) Yes! He writes: “3:20 pm. I went there, and there, and there. Marked down the time. Soon, I will eat this and this.” So he wrote like this, each day, every day, two letters a week, four pages in his tiny handwriting! ... (AK: Did you keep those letters?) Yes, I kept them! But I cannot read them again! When I read them again, I shudder! Because I saw how close he was to the brink. He said it was scary how stupefying the army was. When he swam out of there [as after a ship disaster], he said he had one piece of grey matter left!

But being “bored” by serving in the army was, apparently, a privilege. The majority of my male respondents who shared—never very readily, but sometimes—their army experiences, told them in a genre closer to what I describe as “*anything can happen*,” discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. They were stories of absurdity, cunning, and violence. Pavel managed to avoid the draft by raising his pulse through running and drinking an insane amount of coffee, thus inducing high blood pressure (a story in its own right). Batyr (appearing for the first time in Chapter 2), a member of a visible ethnic minority, served a term and was hazed, beaten so severely that he spent half a year in hospital. The military card of the impulsive and rebellious Maksim (also an entrepreneur) was stamped “psychologically deficient,” and he was discharged ahead of time—a discharge he has been proud of ever since. (He had been assigned to a tank division, and his superiors, as a mutual acquaintance explained to me, “felt uneasy trusting a madman with a tank.”) Marina’s husband, a university graduate by the time he went to the army, apparently had a somewhat different time as a lieutenant. He was bored, and survived the nightmare of becoming boring by “pouring out” through letters to his patient wife, in an epistolary reproduction of communion—though admittedly, he had little to offer in those letters. But unlike Larisa the “neutered cat,” he detected the danger in time, and found it in himself not only to fight boredom, but also found a clever way out of it where many others failed.

Being bored is therefore a somewhat privileged way to be moral. And yet, I wondered if the stories told about the boredom of their children conveyed the assumingly universal experiences of the parents of teenagers, or if their children were replicating the habit of their parents’ existential angst—and the corresponding symbolic capital—by “not wanting anything.” Tatiana’s eldest was “indifferent to his career choice,” “sluggish”; hence, as was “the custom” in her “matriarchal” family, she “chose for him.” Irina struggled with the languid dispositions of her daughter. Maksim’s eldest was on the verge of dropping out of school because of boredom:
He did not go to school this last month at all. *Emu pofig!* [he declared the state of whatever-being, ref. Chapter 1]. He studied okay for the first quarter [of the school year] so they allowed him to join grade nine. The second quarter he went to school so-so, and in the third, he stopped going there. It is not his fault. The school is just too boring.

I can now perhaps make the case that my story about “boredom,” about indistinction, started almost two chapters back, with the custom of “decontextualising” one’s conversations, and continued with the character of Perm’ as a “boring” place. In the latter, boredom is a discourse that, among other things, positions the “progressive,” articulated population against the “normal,” inarticulate one. Alla was perhaps the most “progressive” among my respondents. Though her lecturer’s income was low, she was born into a family with money and global connections, and had rare liberal views. She had access to global knowledge and resources from an early age. Her second job was in art on the internet. With many advantages and a class emphasis on self-actualization, one would expect her life to be a voiceful one, with personal involvement and finesse. But she was exceptionally bored, barely holding it together in her fight against “the swamp,” and chiselled her personal art of acedia to perfection. Like a wounded fluffy animal (she would not be offended by the comparison; at one point her social media avatar was a hare holding a Kalashnikov rifle), she acted out her litanies in soft, whimpering tones, pausing to place her head on her arms folded on the table in front of her in a gesture of total despair. What was especially frustrating for her was that the people whom she expected to be the champions of articulation—the intelligentsia—were instead the main source of personal and institutional “blah.” “Local intelligentsia,” in Alla’s view, were the swamp, the parochial, defensive, and conservative pretenders:

Here, you see, the past few years [of the “cultural revolution”], they were okay. It was bearable to live here and do something. But I am afraid that soon it will begin—the total nightmare, when all those Permski intelligentsia will rise back up from their hell pit. This is the swamp, this is the horror. I have been to that public meeting [it was held in defence of Perm’s public space from “cultural revolutionaries”]. I just passed it, barely looking—coming back from the university, I just passed them by and took some pictures—but [even this fleeting encounter shocked me because] it was hell! Their leader, the one who gave speeches: “For the Sacred [svyatini]! For our Perm’! For Culture!” I suppose X told you what this guy does in his free time, when he is not bellowing at pickets—he is a petty market speculator [*baryga*, that is, the worst kind of kommers!]. “For our culture,” my ass!

Alla was on the side of the “cultural revolutionaries” regardless of the “quality” of their “art” or their political position, insofar as they articulated something, anything. What I was amazed
at was the underlying coherence of her “liberal-progressive” narrative with vernacular Marxism. The connection between social, cultural, or political forms and desire was a point of contention; but the social condition of desire, (true) desire as a measurement of value, and desire as a finite resource were the doxa underlying both the discourse and the experience.

8 Between Marx and Deleuze

One has to have “certain existential stamina of the soul” to fight boredom and anxiety, as Michael Taussig (2009) writes in the chapter entitled “Boredom” in *My Cocaine Museum*. Curiously and almost surreally, that chapter has some Russians in it, too. They were the mine workers lost in the Colombian jungles, lured by fables of gainful employment and, of course, by vague images of tropical paradise, the sensory utopia of eternal summer, the heat, and the sun. Taussig may have no idea about the poignancy of that dream, but he debunked it nonetheless by writing about the incessant, suffocating rain that bashed the soggy jungle and mixed with the bad beer he drank in the company of those Russians.

My whole life I had been spoilt, having an array of tools to make experience into the experience, in Victor Turner’s terms, or “being” into “Being,” in Taussig’s. I always had my little projects to complete. It is no wonder that I don’t seem to have that “existential stamina of the soul.”

I realised this one evening, when we went to Lilia’s dacha. It was five in the evening, and the city was bathed in the golden afternoon sun. We chased after the sun, completing our grocery runs for the cake and the greens and the pork, pre-marinated in the store in the large plastic buckets that fitted neatly in the car trunk, and the four litres of “alive” (draft, as opposed to “dead,” that is, bottled) beer. “Four litres for four people is just right, because I won’t let anyone get drunk. It is not what the dacha is for,” said Lilia.

After the meal, she was napping under a blanket in a large homemade swing-bench. Lilia’s father and Lilia’s boyfriend, Alexei, and I were sitting on the veranda. The sun was minutes from setting, and so was conversation. The older man rambled on about something about the fig tree he was trying to grow, some typical and usually failing dream of tropical paradise
that enticed “balcony” and dacha gardeners to plant roses and lemons and even avocados during the short Uralian summers. Alexei and I were silent in the twilight. It seemed that we were slipping into boredom. Alexei may have been anxious because the beer we bought did not give him the buzz he desired. I also felt anxious and almost astonished at my own anxiety, all the more astonished because I somehow expected it and did not see it coming at the same time. Just a moment ago, everything was fine. We were listening to how our own banter joined the pleasant banter on the radio. I was told a funny “anything can happen” (Chapter 5) story about the slow construction of the two-by-two concrete pit in the middle of the dacha plot, which was meant to become an oasis and a pool one day, and how it was interrupted indefinitely after Lilia’s dad walked out into the garden, tipsy, and fell into the pit. And then, everything just slowed down precipitously, the time started to drag, and I suddenly understood why Lilia was so stern about the vodka. I never craved vodka in my life, but I would drink it now, I thought; I would do just about anything to speed up the time, or bring us back to the space where we were before. In other words, I felt astonished, and hurt, by the inexplicable transitioning of summer’s sensory utopia into gloomy emptiness.

“Sensory utopia” and “boredom” may be incommensurable as values, but they do share an experiential proximity, a sensual place between pleasure and numbness. It is disturbing, but also enjoyable—as any uncanny feeling (or the feeling that something is uncanny). On another evening, in winter, we also sat together at Lilia’s place. The snow paralyzed the city traffic for many days around New Year’s Day, which marked the beginning of the ten days of national winter break. A couple of friends played guitar and sang for some in-home entertainment. Just like at the dacha, at some point, our efforts at merry making, conversation, and salad eating burned out. I sat in the ensuing silence, feeling almost physically the twilight of the soul. Lilia, still wearing her elegant body-hugging evening gown, stretched on the floor. Suddenly and forcefully, Lilia broke into a song:

A laundress washes all day long
Her husband is out, to buy some vodka
A little doggie with a goatee
Sits on the porch
All day long it stares bulging
Its clever little eyes
But it goes away and whimpers
If someone in the house cries.

And who is there to cry today
In the town of Tarusa?
There is someone to cry today
It is a girl, Marusya.
She cannot bear to see again
The geese and the cockerels –
Jesus, all the geese and cockerels
Roaming Tarusa!

“If only I had their feathers,
If only I had their wings,
I would fly out the door
And plunge into the wilderness!
Never again to see this world,
Never again to hear the cackling
Of geese and cockerels!”
Oh, how wretched is Marusya
In Tarusa town!
Jesus, there is nothing there
Only geese and cockerels!

The song is about “boredom,” the unbearable bottling of self-flows in a (very) provincial city. There were familiar tropes of the countryside, the provincialism, even the geese and the cockerels that featured so strongly in Pavel’s account of his wife’s familial hoarding. But I was struck how the song was pleasantly, skilfully inconsistent, masking its own sorrow into a pleasurable irony. The cadence of the circuitous melody was designed to convey the monotony of the endless rounds of domestic and peasant labour. It clashed with the expression of utter contentment on Lilia’s face and in her voice. When, later, I checked the numerous YouTube recordings of various performances of the song, “Marusya” (originally
written in 1965), I saw the same pleasurable play in all of them. The singers were equal parts bored, empathising with Marusya, and pleased to objectify her (peasant, low-class, provincial, exotic) boredom as also a sort of pleasure.

“Laymen,” not much less than anthropologists, pay attention to gaps between their experience and their language, or the gap between what could be described as “ideally” objectified emotion and actual emotions. Explorations of boredom, however, often seem to pay no attention to the relationship that people have to their own “mythologies,” their “cultural objects” and “dominant tropes.” “Theory” does not go further than “deconstructing” these “mythologies”—the immorality of riches, or the moral and social ideals of “culturedness”—to explain their social provenance, their historic origins, and their power effects.

I suggest, however, that we look instead at the totality of “laymen’s” statements at their face value, as lived experience, but also as talked-through attempts to negotiate the metaphysics of desire—its meaning, experience, and emotion in the mind, as opposed to its meaning, experience, and emotion in experience, to paraphrase Lambek (1998). Then, viewed from this angle, it can be compared with other philosophies (and not just “mythologies”) of desire—in particular, the one outlined in Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus (1977).

Deleuze and Guattari rebelled against the then reigning psychoanalytical view of desire. Manifestly and self-consciously materialist, they condemned Lacan’s school of thought as perpetuating a particular line of pernicious idealism that dominated Western philosophy since Plato. This idealism, they argued, is what made possible the replication of particular structures of oppression. Lacanian metaphors described desire through the metaphors of longing for the unattainable “Real,” reaching, and yet always failing to reach the “Real” through fantasy. These metaphors and other such imagery of “eternal pulls” and “unfillable voids,” reified, according to Deleuze and Guattari’s offensive, not the objective reality of desire, but the repressive ethos of the bourgeois family and the capitalist logic of consumptive greed.

In Deleuzian metaphysics, desire is not a desire for acquisition. Neither does it arise from alterity and difference, nor from the presence, and simultaneous ultimate unattainability, of
“the other.” Oriented outward rather than inward, desire is an ultimately productive force that people generate, naturally and continuously, towards other people. Humans, “the desiring machines,” connect to each other and the world, to form “bodies without organs”—a metaphor that furthers the replacement, with flows and connections, of the Lacanian inward-gazing analysis of individual psychological layers, and the construction of alterities and other gaps.

In some ways, Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of desire as a sociocentric and productive force, and their rejection of psychoanalytical models of desire, is not merely compatible with but expressive of the ideals that have been established by Marxist ideology and Soviet psychological “science.” Not only the vision but the very language of activity, connectivity, and production could have been accepted enthusiastically in the 1920s Soviet Union, when the curious co-development of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, theatre, and feverish industrialisation (humans as “desiring machines”? please!) defined what the desire of the “new Soviet men and women” should be like. If anything, the social-connectivist ontology of desire employed by Deleuze and Guattari may have been found not radical enough. Marxist materialist ontology called for unifying all aspects of life into unbroken chains, ultimately equivalences. In this totalising condition, desire collapses into agency, private into public, and conscience into consciousness (and, one can argue, ideology into ethics and ontology). One well-cited example is the practice of collective “unmasking” of (usually, ideologically wrong) inner dispositions. People were accused of failing to identify their own duplicity: the undesirable border, or the presence of a “mask” (Fitzpatrick 2005) between their interior (self)hood and exterior (person)hood. Such presences ought to have been exorcised, deleted so the (social) person could take over the (individual) self, usually through collective “unmasking” and shaming (Kharkhordin 1999; Fitzpatrick 2005). The curious premise of this practice posited that any “inner consciousness” that was different from the visible, material, social personhood was “false” by definition. In the light of Anti-Oedipus, and somewhat paradoxically, this infamous practice can be seen as a psychoanalytical séance, led by comrades-psychoanalysts—but a séance whose sole purpose was the removal of the “patient’s” sub/un/conscious.
Through the years, these imaginaries that connected desire with action and social contexts remained central. In the examples above, the greed of acquisition and, paradoxically, its opposite, “nichego ne nado,” “needing/wanting nothing,” is the result of repression and distance and passivity born out of the displacement of desire, or the deferral/delaying of its production. Evgenii, for instance, implies that his drinking is virtuous because it is generative—it is an expression of the abundance of his voice, his desirous energy. Drinking (whether tea or alcohol) is simultaneously an act of generating and maintaining desire, although he asserts that, in his case, desire was still ontologically prior to the act. In the language of psychology, his drinking comes from happiness, satisfaction, and a lively curiosity about the world (the fact that it is done on a business trip, in a hotel, also matters). The activities of his in-laws at the dacha, on the contrary, are only a fetish, an attempt to fill a void, a dynamic that they, lost souls, are incapable of noticing. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Evgenii connects “boredom” with the domestic space—where attempts to imitate the rituals of Communitas work to betray the absence of both Communitas and the Collective. Perhaps, unlike in Deleuze and Guattari, this critique is framed not as mere suppression but the displacement and misrecognition of desire, of not being attuned to the presence, or absence, of true value. (This anti-fetishism critique, of course, may be traced both to Marx and to Lacan.)

Throughout the last century, this early radically sociocentric ontology of desire had been somewhat off-sided, abated, and inevitably complicated by its contradictions with other ideological and political necessities. The languid aspects of the (Stalinist, populist) “sensory utopia,” for instance, do not convey the picture of actively generated desire. (Neither it is a suppression, or displacement, of desire—perhaps, just a state of stasis). The same goes for the politics of producing viable public representations described in Chapter 2: at the city plaza, audiences “want a fairy tale,” and yet audiences, in their “natural” state, are seen as inertial and static. The mysticism—the opacity—of one’s own and others’ subjectivities is eagerly entertained, although more often by women, whose femininity imperatives mandate enigmatic, iconic, and otherwise inarticulate behaviour and rhetoric. One’s own bursts of anger and other psychotic behaviour may be boasted about, as I see it, as proof of the existence of this unknowable (and hence, powerful) interiority.
And yet, the ethics and politics of generating desire, of engaging with the world in a mobilising action, remain an ontological axis. “Sensory utopia” may be not an active “generation” of desire, but it is a state of voiceful contentment, calm, and balance. The public’s “wanting” a fairy tale is not a desire to possess an object, but a desire to be pleasurably shocked—to experience how their static subjectivities are stirred and shaped by the artist’s “winding-up,” “blow-wielding” creative energy. The “depth,” or “opacity,” of the soul does not equal its void. Depth indicates the richness of inner deposits (see Rogers 2012), and hence productive potential. All these concessions about how and when one can be not actively desirous still do not allow a moral possibility for what can be called an acquisitive, as opposed to generative, desire. “Longing,” if it is even for “the Real,” is dangerously close to anxiety, *negativ*, *zloba* (anger), and finally, boredom.

So far, I have looked at the parallels between the desirous contentions of *Anti-Oedipus* and the desire of vernacular Marxism. There are, however, equally interesting differences. Although materialist, Deleuze and Guattari carefully distance themselves from Marx, whom they found at fault for an excessive and therefore distorting focus on the economic and technological “mediations” between desire and “society.” In their view, it is desire that produces matter, and not the other way around. Desire “crystallises” and becomes a factual event, or a facticity of material infrastructure—including the inertial facts of existing economics, mode of production, and level of technology.

Vernacular Marxism posits a correction to Deleuzian metaphysics that comes, I speculate, from a philosophical-realist conviction, but also from the reality of translating the mandates of “productive desire” into everyday moral practice—as opposed to merely philosophising it. To a practitioner of productive desire, the limitations of people as desiring machines are quite obvious: they come precisely from the material and social embeddedness of people and desires. Desires depend on the materiality of the body. They are expendable physical/psychic energy, and, of course, an exhaustible physical resource, rather than an inexhaustible metaphysical force. We are, indeed, machines, in full sense of the word, and all machines always lose some energy to entropy and their own imperfections. Machines are never perfectly interlocked. Machines break, they age, they get abused and overused. Maintaining desirous production is a necessary condition of keeping rust off the gears (“These men, who
become so obese once they marry!”), but there should be no doubt about the fact that newer machines, and younger bodies, are naturally predisposed to be more productive/desirous.

Virtuous realists and materialists of a particular kind, my “laymen” insist that depletion of desire should be prevented through mobilisation, vigilant attention to one’s experiences, and other self-work. Deleuzians might object that such vigilance, as well as the realist “desire-as-resource” logic, is precisely an oppressive conservatism that is not much different from the “bourgeois Lacanianism” (compare Nancy Ries’s, 2009, concern with the conservative and reactionary “potato ontology” in Russia). The “laymen” would (hypothetically) retort that they insist on caring for desire, on generating love for the world, precisely regardless of the social, cultural, and material inevitabilities and semi-inevitabilities of their condition (family including!), making these inevitabilities both a central concern and irrelevant. So the Deleuzians, by viewing desire in any other way but as an exhaustible resource, are idealist, and not materialist. They render “desiring machines” nothing but a metaphor. Moreover, in demanding an unconditionally sustained production of desire, Deleuzians join the always-imminent call of the (Soviet/Russian) state to mobilise—a call justified on the whole, but also oh so tiresome, and often excessive, in its own unconditional zeal. To ask one to always-desire is the same as to ask to always-produce, to always-strain, and to always-give oneself up for the benefit of the Collective, without balancing the books of the social contract on the more humane side (ref. Chapter 2). In not so many words, these “laymen” would find Deleuzian materialism and economy of desire at the very least utopian, still idealist (they would also say, “burdening” in terms of being preposterously complicated), and somewhat oppressive.

The last observation I wish to make is that the ethics and politics of “boredom” engender a certain glossing-over of social structures, an imaginary of a variety of social and political structures as similar. The rigid hierarchy of the Soviet-heritage factory is no different from the loose organization of the post-Soviet marketplace. A pro-Western, Americanised franchise and a private law firm can be no less dangerous to desire than the state-operated army, schools, and prisons. The insensitivity to the variation of social and political forms is, therefore, not (merely) the legacy of the Soviet “grey” and “totalitarian” past, but is coterminous with its enduring ontology and the concern about “boredom.” This is the
paradox of vernacular Marxism: imagining oneself, including one’s desire, as profoundly constituted by and oriented to the social, leads in practice to what could be called an “arrest” of social and political imagination. And yet, it is exactly this monolithic perspective that allows people of various class backgrounds, generations, genders, and even, roughly speaking, Soviet/post-Soviet “convictions,” to (still) agree on what matters.

The ethics and politics of “boredom” are also a basis for a national politics of identity. In the question that was often directed to me—“Isn’t it boring to live in Canada?”—I could see how (geo)political imaginaries join the familiar binaries of not/boredom. Canadian life is well organised and “nice”; Canadian respect for convention and morality is articulate, straightforward, that is, ideologically pronounced; Canadians do not seem to be virtuously bored. One is bound to ask—may their lives be like the seemingly unproblematic tea drinking of one’s in-laws at the dacha?
Chapter 4
Believable Threats: Power, Violence, and the Personal Theatre of Intimidation

David Zilberman (1978:314) described Marxism (Leninism) as a philosophy of action “of coercive, rather than adaptive, kind.” In this chapter, I discuss how vernacular Marxism informs domination, violence, and aggression. On one hand, violence and domination are “naturally” exonerated in an ontology where agency is imagined as overcoming the resistance of inertial, inarticulate material, and where conflict is seen as a condition of production. As such, violence “seeps” into everyday talk, sometimes in the form of singularly focused tales of domination, and sometimes as a nonspecific element in other types of stories. In general, “coercive” philosophies of vernacular Marxism are rarely refuted or negated (although this also happens). The same speakers reveal themselves as self-righteous perpetrators, and sometimes as willing victims, of domination, aggression, and coercive disciplining. These constitutions of agency and (the formation of) subjectivity interplay with familiar cultural tropes: heroic sovereign action, stoicism, self-sacrifice.

Is violence, then, a “part of Russian cultural DNA” (Lovell 1989:159), embedded in ordinary ethics on such an unreflective level as the metaphor of DNA suggests? I found that my ethnographic vignettes also reveal ethical subtleties in the approach to violence. The more “humanist” imaginaries of an a priori intersubjectivity of all interaction (Chapter 1), and the cost of “energies” and “voiceful articulation,” also inform the tales about violent conduct. By this, a performative distance is produced between violence and aggression, a distance that also locates moral value with only particular types of performances, namely, affective (voiceful), individual, and sudden/singular.

Incorporating some insights offered by Judith Butler and some from my own line of thought developed in Chapter 3, I suggest that idealising these (Weberian) “sovereign” charismatic actions implies a moral judgement, namely, idealising them against their unnamed and immoral other—instrumental, institutional-bureaucratic, and chronic (Foucauldian) disciplinary violence. In other words and in terms of “dislocative coincidences,” the local
philosophy of domination seems to differentiate what social theorists epistemologically define as “structural” or “systemic” violence, but it also extends such differentiation into the very morality of domination, that is, in the ways to distinguish “good” domination from “bad.” Also, in the stories of being a victim of domination, the moral and the pragmatic values of externalisation of control are judged against what Lauren Berlant (2007a) calls “the burden of [self] sovereignty”: interiorising norms and self-responsibilisation. “Russian talk” about domination therefore makes connections between value, on the one hand, and performativity, governmentality, and “structural violence,” on the other.68

1 “Stroit’”: Personal Theatres of Intimidation

Many of my friends knew how to make an aphoristic statement. But a particular quip from Pavel’s lips that, I think, takes the prize for the power of brevity and provocation. One day I leisurely mentioned to him that I had sat in on several sessions of one samopoznaniye group in Perm’. A samopoznaniye group is a self-help group, part of a burgeoning Russian self-help industry and market; samopoznaniye literally means “self-knowledge,” however, rather than “self-help.” Pavel replied with mirthful ironic enthusiasm:

Like, “Go and know your neighbour, because if you don’t, your neighbour will know you”? Ha! And one always has to “know”…somebody, something, somehow, and somewhere!

In these two lines, Pavel articulated many of the “intensities”69 of the present dissertation. By “know your neighbour,” he replaced the introspective notion of “self-knowledge” with an outreaching, intersubjective orientation (see Chapters 1 and 3). Then, he reoriented to self, to self-care and self-discipline—because one “has to” (prikhodit’ sya, indicating necessity) to push oneself, to mobilise, in order “to know.” The context of “knowing” was “dissolved” in the familiar “uncertaining,” the chronic everydayness of inarticulation: “somebody,

68 Sarkisova and Shevchenko (2009), for instance, notice how curiously “ordinary” “Russian” people’s interpretations of submission and domination reiterate some points of intellectual tension between Elias’s view on domination as a “civilising force,” and Foucault’s views on domination as “disciplinary violence” (described in more detail in Introduction).

69 I use this word in the same way as Kathleen Stewart (2007) does in Ordinary Affects.
something, somehow, and somewhere.” But “know your neighbour” [poznai, “get to know” in higher-style Russian] is also, of course, an alteration of the biblical “love your neighbour.” Through the menacing inversion (“if you don’t, then your neighbour will know you!”) “to know” becomes the biblical “knowing” in terms of sexual intercourse—and all its violent connotations in Russian culture and language (the aggression of swearwords, the mat described in the Chapter 1, is built heavily on sexual reference).

This quip shows how easily and insidiously the theme of violation “seeps” into everyday speech. And yet I discuss it here less as a demonstration and more as a reminder, because the themes of domination, aggression, or violence have been a part of almost everything about which I have written so far. A “good,” cared-for subjectivity is always an exchange of “energies,” hence, easily shocked (Chapter 2). A session of shouting may be needed for a productive shock, in a sort of communicative prophylaxis (or catharsis?)—recall Maksim’s remark in Chapter 1 that “We shouted [naoral, screamed/shouted for a duration of time] at each other and there was peace and quiet (between us) for another month.” The “natural” leaning of the human psyche is to be inertial, lacking desire, or indifferent (see Chapters 2 and 3, and Lemon 2009, discussed below). Therefore, positive emotion and motivation are not inspired but mobilised, for example, through the acts of zavodit’—a word that sometimes connotes teasing, enticing, or “pushing someone’s buttons,” but also, literally, “winding up,” forcibly overcoming inertia, like winding up a stopped clock. Working with this inertial mass is hard labour that requires not just the capacity but the willingness to expend one’s vitality to “push” other people. This capacity and willingness are both valued and publicly recognised, as in this toast made at Ekaterina’s birthday party:

I have not known you for long, Ekaterina, but you are so zavodnaya! [lit. “wound up and/or winding up,” like a spring-driven mechanical clock or toy; lively and up to doing things]. You are active yourself, and you wind us up [zavodish’] as well! Thank you for not letting us fall asleep, for pushing us off the couch!

70 While the dignified categories of self-respect, self-confidence, and assertiveness are promoted by “self-help” groups and movements, in the popular imagination they are still often judged to be naglost’, an aggressive self-aggrandising at the expense of others.
On another occasion, Lilia, the HR manager, launched into a diatribe against boredom (Chapter 3), and in so doing summarised succinctly, if somewhat cynically, other common ways one can make people do things:

Yes, I have looked around and saw positions I could take, and I can take them because I have the skills needed—the skill to *stroit’* [lit. “make people stand in a row,” as in a military exercise; to discipline through personal aggression, to order about], *rukovodit’* [to lead, conduct], and *manipulirovat’* [to manipulate] people, but why? What do I personally get from this type of work?

It is *stroit’*, an act or conduct in a style of stern (or *zhestki*) intimidation, that I have chosen as the focus of this chapter. The most generic of the constructions regarding dominance in interaction, “*stroit’*” constitutes its own field of linguistic creativity, along with colloquial synonyms like “*gonyat’*” (to herd, chase), “*druchit’*” (to beat with a stick, drive), “*zhuchit’*” (to drive, beat, or “to beetle” --- the latter makes no sense in Russian and is likely chosen for the harshness of sound), and “*nayezzhat’*” (to drive over, as in “to drive over with a car”). They are used frequently, and with gusto, to describe a variety of relations and situations, as seen in the following examples:

**Husband to wife, jokingly:** I *gonyayu* [“chase” you] in order to drive the cockroaches in your head in the right direction [I am helping by straightening up your psyche, which is obviously in disarray]. Because you clearly are not on friendly terms with your cockroaches, after a shift at work!

**Female PETA member about schoolchildren:** I cannot go out for coffee now, I have to buy the tickets for the museum. I am taking all the kids from my daughter’s class to the museum. Yes, I am such an *aktivistka* [aktivist, Bolshevik-speak]! It does not help that the teacher in charge of the class is very young and mild-mannered, so I have to *druchit’* the kids for her. She is, of course, grateful [that I take her responsibilities on myself].

**Female customer about a waitress:** I came to this coffee shop before and made the waitress pick the leaves out of my tea. I made her *run about*, I did! Well, [what should I do] if they made my tea out of loose leaves, I pour it and there are leaves in my tea? I *nayekhala na nikh* [lit. “drove over them”] saying either you do something about it, or else. So she was standing over me picking these leaves out! (laughs)

**Man, on friendship:** I arranged a job for him—and he was reluctant to take it! Really, I had to *drag* him to the interview *za shkirku* [lit. “by the scruff of his neck”]!

**Man, on lover’s tiff:** He does not dare to tell his wife that we resumed our friendship (AK: So is she still angry with you?) Yes, yes. Because I *gonyal* [lit. “chased”] them. I could not tolerate the thought that she was with my best friend.
Man, on colleagues: I feel like I have to go on a binge! There is no other way to bear the pizdetz [irredeemable disgrace] happening at work. (AK: What happened?) The manager hired a new chief engineer, a moron. Knows nothing and does not want to work. We almost got into a fight today! (AK: How so?) Well, today, I walked up to his table, and told him through my teeth, “When are you going to pull your share, your half-wit?” And pushed him in the chest. He was sitting on a chair with roller wheels, so he rolled to the wall behind him, scared, and told me, “vse, vse, ya ponyal” [here, here, I got you]. So far it’s working—he is going around all silky [meek, obedient].

Husband about wife: I am one of the few people she is not afraid of. She knows for sure I won’t hurt her, that is. That is why she treats me like this—she stroit’ me, laughs at me, pushes my buttons. She is deadly afraid of her mother. Her father does not interfere. Before, I bought her flowers every month, the day of our marriage, imagine? I have spoilt her. I should have stroit’ her instead, wives need to be stroit’ a bit.

Woman, about her sixteen-year-old daughter: Again, a story in the house (da vot opyat’ istoria)! Alina broke someone’s nose at school. (AK: Whose??) Well, first there was this junior snot who started driving over [naekhala na nee] Alina, [saying] “Don’t you dare touch that boy, he is mine.” They fought, and then the junior’s older sister came up to Alina saying, “What did you do, my sister sits at home and cries, come and sort it out.” Alina went to sort it out. That girl squeezed her hair and hit Alina’s forehead against her knee. She has a huge knot on her forehead now. But Alina slashed at her with her nails, broke free, grabbed her by her hair and also smashed against her head against the knee, only this time it was her nose! I asked her, “Why, why did you break her nose?” She says (chuckles), “That’s nothing, it will heal—besides, it is the third time someone has broken her nose!” (X, a man in the conversation, laughs.) So it was not the first time she took it for her junior sister!

As her mother recounted the story, the willowy Alina listened, sitting in the corner and cross-stitching, very adroitly, a cat face on a doily; whining about buying her a new t-shirt; polishing her nails. I looked again at Alina’s nails and reconsidered her obsession with their strength and beauty (“Mum, I won’t chop these beetroots for the salad, they will colour my fingertips, again!”) as no ordinary teenage body-image concern. Stroit’ was ordinary—even the fluffy pet whose image Alina was cross-stitching was introduced to me with “Here is our cat, Leo—he is here when he is not outside, where he stroit’ the local pigeons.” And yet, it was not entirely ordinary, because it deserved to be a story.
2 Global Theories, Local Meanings, and Ethical Problems of Everyday Domination

What is the logic of meaning in everyday domination, and, even more importantly, what are the moral boundaries that circumscribe violence described in these extra/ordinary, half-regretful, half-boastful, and very similarly structured narratives of everyday domination? Despite their ubiquity, the answer remains elusive. While many volumes have attempted to explicate the “violence” of Russian history, institutions, and “mentality,” few of them perform more than enumeration and description of violent acts. The more notable perspectives include functionalist arguments, suited in particular to elucidate the workings of violence in organised crime (as in Volkov 2002). Oleg Kharkhordin (1999) followed Foucauldian lines in order to detail Soviet historical modes of subjectivation.71 Valery Tishkov and several of his co-authors (Tishkov and Bocharov 2001), identifying the inevitable political sensitivity of approaching the topic of “Russian/Soviet” violence in the continuing aftermath of the Cold War, approach violence from more traditional anthropological perspectives, but mostly to explicate “ethnic differences” in the development of conflicts in the Caucasus and other former republics. Perhaps, one of the most relevant explorations is Bruce Grant’s (2005) recent work on “naturalising violence” in the Caucasus, showcasing how familiar Russian tropes—and acts—of “self-sacrifice” can emerge in very interesting forms, and in contexts that allow the application of anthropological theories of exchange. Russian “colonial arts” in the Caucasus region have for a long time include the “tale of the Russian captive,” a Russian soldier who—almost willingly, Grant implies—offers himself as the spoils of war, as a gift and a reason for indebtedness on the part of the Chechens, thus becoming a sort of an agent and the venue of Russia’s “emplacement” in the region where Russia does not belong, and where it is certainly not welcome. This subtle analysis of a local logic of meaning and action in a technology (or, as Grant refers to it, an

71 Kharkhordin’s (1999) book is a mostly historical, Foucault-inspired, and ethnographically rich exploration of subjectivation practices and practices of domination in the USSR. Vadim Volkov (2002) offers a rich study, combining institutional analysis and interviews, of the amalgamation of business and violence in the life-worlds of “violent entrepreneurs.” Volkov’s book is about “professional” dealers in organised violence, and focuses more on the functions of violence than on the meaning of it (especially moral meaning).
“art”) of colonial domination offers insight into how uninteresting and unduly generalising the “theories” of “totalising” “Russian/Soviet” violence may be.

There are other customary camps in the contemporary field of theorising violence. Some scholars, including anthropologists, prefer to look at violence as a “structural” phenomena (overview in Farmer 2004). Others espouse this approach while attending to the “experience-near” view on violence that is visible, physical, and attributable to an actor: the violence of ghettos, wars, refugee camps, and organ trafficking (well-known examples are works by Nancy Schepers-Hughes, Philippe Bourgois, Lisa Malkki, and Alan Feldman). A particular point for anthropologists has become to show the interconnections between this real/overt/interpersonal violence, on one hand, and “structural” violence (see Shkolnik 1985; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

In our postcolonial and post-Foucauldian times, the limelight of “theory” is on political and structural violence. These approaches, however, tend to implicitly recognise all domination as violence, thus generating a moralising disinterest in subtleties that may be drawn from specific cases or local perspectives (Faubion 2003); I might add that this moralising disinterest extends even to the difference, once compelling for anthropologists, between violence and aggression (see Riches 1991). In other words, local representations of the

72 These would exclude earlier evolutionary, psychological, and functionalist approaches.

73 Faubion (2003:76) writes, “[W]hat I myself see as an obligation to define or at least restrict some of the free play of ‘violence,’ which (with its close companion, ‘terror’) circulates with near wanton ubiquity these days, within anthropology and outside of it, as the label we impose upon just about anything and everything that we find unfortunate, harmful, objectionable, condemnable, overwhelming, horrifying, or intolerable. ‘Violence’ is not simply ‘bad’ as a consequence; it is the vehicle at once of an unreflective moralism and of a wild figuralism that carries us very little forward analytically, however exhilarating the transport may be.”

74 Just a few studies that are attentive to such difference: Malinowski 1964; Montagu 1976; Gibson 1989. There are related studies of anger and other violent emotions in Briggs 1970; Rosaldo 1989. In the “West,” the studies of emotion halted after the 1980s, replaced, however, with “affect” in the 1990s and 2000s. In Russia, the study of emotions is mostly historical (overview in Plamper 2009; also http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/2639). Sheila Fitzpatrick (2004:357), for instance, identifies “righteous anger at one’s enemies” as an “official” “Soviet emotion” in her outline of emotionality in Stalin’s time.
ethics of violence have received little attention.\textsuperscript{75} Lemon (2009), for instance, notes with surprise that there seems to be not a single work that looks at empathy in any proximity, or connection, to violence or domination. She explicates how aggression and empathy are not necessarily opposite but may be seen as complementary (one can argue that a good aggressive performance requires empathic skill, an idea discussed in more detail below). But contemporary academic ideologies preclude bringing empathy and violence into the same field of vision. Empathy is exclusively “a good thing” and violence is exclusively “a bad thing,” and they do not meet even for a moment of the ethnographic/sociological imagination.

On the other hand, there is always a problem of “dislocative coincidences” between “local” views on violence and the insights of “social theory.” A Russian colleague, when I asked why it seemed hard to find a contemporary perspective on violence and domination that would be relevant to my material, responded that it “won’t be easy to put ‘theoretical pants’ [my emphasis] on the question of violence in Russia because it is not prosto (simply, merely) violence but a system—we all grew up in armies and pioneer camps, and the like.” This answer is one illustration of how difficult the separation of (“local”? “expert”?) “knowledge” and “social theory” can be. My colleague seemed to distinguish institutional violence, or, perhaps, the “Foucauldian” violence of “total institutions,” and “prosto” violence, that is, ordinary (or visible, physical, and attributable to a certain actor) violence. But if this answer is seen through the prism of “the local,” then the difference between “prosto” violence and “institutional” violence may be the familiar distinction (first described in the Introduction) between existential and systemic/organised forms of life, between Communitas and the Collective, with their own relational logic.

His response also displays the usual suspicion of articulation: violence, or at least “Russian violence,” cannot be (and he implies that it ought not to be) articulated through some sort of “theoretical pants,” the loading (see Chapter 1) terms of social theory. What is called for,

\textsuperscript{75} One exception is Whitehead 2004. Authors parse a variety of case studies in order to show the ways violence draws from and reproduces cultural codes, and in order to argue that anthropologists must understand these codes to understand something about the cultural manifestations of violence. Attention to the performative side of violence is pronounced in Anderson and Menon 2009.
then, is not abstract explications of violence (which would make it even more powerful and terrifying) but its pragmatic containment, a redressing that makes it visible and controllable, and returns it to the sphere of morality and justice. In her *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler (1997b) is a rather lonely voice that looks at modern, secular, non-ghetto-related, everyday violence through the terms that make such a manoeuvre possible—and, simultaneously, proximate to local views on violence and communication. Engaging the theory of speech acts, she argues that bullying, “hateful” speech is not just an “expression of an idea” but an act of violence no different from a physical blow—a statement to which my respondents would agree entirely (see Chapter 1, and also below). In “modern” societies, these blows are “acts of nostalgia” for the loss of the “sovereign power of the state” that “is no longer sovereign in character” (Butler 1997b:74–82). Instead, “the figure of sovereignty” “emerges within the contemporary discourse on the performative,” and “governs how a speech act is said to act—as efficacious, unilateral, transitive, generative.” In a “transformation of the performative function,” “the proper power of the state has been expropriated, delegated to its citizens, and the state then re-emerges as a neutral instrument to which we seek recourse to protect us from other citizens, who have become revived emblems of a (lost) sovereign power” (ibid.).

I do find it useful to view the examples of “*stroit*” above as idealisations of sovereign power: sudden and singular acts of violence, threats that are very personally delivered in order not to inspire beliefs but to correct behaviour. I do not see, however, why these would be idealisations specifically of the sovereign power of the state and not other forms of sovereign power—of tsar, hero, or god—or of personal heroic acts that aim to “restore the normal,” to claim justice, or to bring about positive change. A more encompassing view on sovereign power takes us away from Foucault and the modern nation-state, and closer to Weber and his concept of charismatic authority—and, simultaneously, away from violence itself:

[Weber’s analysis of charismatic authority] opens with what could hardly be classified as anything else but the violent imagery of Achilles and his “heroic frenzy,” a “manic seizure, just as is that of the Arabian berserk who bites his shield like a mad dog—biting around until he darts off in raving bloodthirstiness” (1946: 245). Yet Weber dispels any presumption that charisma is inherently manifest as violence in soon turning away from such “beasts” to the quintessentially pacific figure of Saint Francis (247). Moreover, for all that it is absolute, untamed and a
singly revolutionary force of change (1946: 250) charisma remains a modality of
domination by consent, of authority, and so by Weberian definition not itself a
modality of violence. (Faubion 2003:74–75; emphasis mine)

Through this observation, we (finally) arrive at what I see as the main tension: the tension
between the “absolute, untamed and a singularly revolutionary force of change” and
“violence.” Articulation is change; change is revolution; revolution is violence. This tension
was too central to vernacular Marxism and the Soviet socialist project76 to be smoothed over
by merely rhetorical means (nor in Weber or in Faubion: “for all….it remains”). A more
effective way to circumvent it was, precisely, through theatricality, or through a very
particular, in Butler’s words, “transformation of the performativ function”—but one that
happened not, as Butler theorises, in a somewhat “unconscious” or hegemonic way, but in a
self-consciously organised fashion, by certain people and in the early days as a part of the
project itself.

Gratefully, we can glimpse some of the details of this function in the work of Alaina Lemon
(2004) who, for many years, studied the Russian school of theatrical performance and its
mutual constitution with Russian theory and history of psychology and communication.
Violence, in the form of conflict relations and violent speech acts, had been, and still is,
taught to students of the Moscow theatre school as a creative power. In this school of
thought, the dynamic of a performance does not start with “imitating life” or separating “an
idea” from “reality.” Echoing the centrality of the intersubjective that I described in Chapter
1, the starting point of any successful performance was to exercise (a sort of) empathy, that
is, to try to understand and visualise the “social conditions” and “material relations” of the
characters in the play. These visualisations drew on a familiar (pseudo)sociology, on the pool
of highly stereotypic social imaginaries (Lemon uses the word “typecasting”). They were,
nevertheless, seen as “realist” and “empirical” precisely because they followed the “truths,”
the authoritative discourses that postulated “scientific” gender differences, national
differences, class differences, and so on, and, more recently, socialist and postsocialist
differences (ibid.). The next step was to identify potential lines of conflict, without which, in

76 As Alan Badiou (2007) argues in The Century, this tension was central to the whole twentieth
century and to the modernity project in general. In (the alleged) “postmodernity,” the tension has not
been resolved, only supressed.
line with Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, there could be no development and certainly no performative function. Performing the conflict as the real content of the dramatic, actors mobilised their emotions to deliver “emotional blows” to spectators. Actors overcame people’s “natural indifference” by forcefully producing an enjoyable and instructive change in the audience. Spectators—or other consumers of art (see Chapter 2)—presented themselves to the artists to be (pleasantly) shocked or surprised, which placed particular demands on the skill and responsibility of the artists.

One can argue that it is, perhaps, only in the elite confines of a famous theatrical school where one can agree, knowingly and readily, to wield “radical empathy”—visualising others’ material and social conditions—in order to better deliver an “emotional blow.” As described in Chapter 1, visualising something too easily becomes negativ, bringing this negativ to one’s life. The following passage, written by a talented journalist, reflects how impossibly unaffordable empathy is for “ordinary” people:

*The absence of empathy in Russia is not due to the lack of imagination, on the contrary; the lack of empathy is there because Mordor78 is always nearby, and no one wants to look into this icy vortex, not even to think of it, God forbid, to draw something extra [evil] to oneself. Too much pain, too much suffering, the whole world is under the control of the evil one,79 and you cannot say “bless you” to every sneeze. Visualising an orphanage, a hospice, suffering the red tape [in such a situation], the life of a boy living in paralysis? No, no, my God, please pass it by. Imagination is given to us so we could dream about vacation. (Minupov 2012).*

Nonetheless, I argue that the philosophy of “theatrical realism” is constitutive to the ordinary dominations, and to vernacular Marxism. The speech/act is violent if it is to be transformative, and vice versa, if it is transformative, it is always violating. One can say that an actor, who takes upon herself to move the inertial masses of people through the strength of theatrical psychological realism, is the ultimate example of an aktivist who “winds up”

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77 A friend of mine, a psychotherapist with decades of experience, shared the following observation: “It seems that, for instance, to the Japanese empathy comes more naturally, if empathy is understood as crossing over and assuming the perspective of another person. Russians see such empathy as something dangerous, as a potential loss of one’s self...they prefer to bring self and the other to a common denominator [k obschemu znamenatelyu, in other words, sympathy rather than empathy].”

78 This is a reference to J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, in which Mordor is the region controlled by Sauron, an evil character.

79 John 5:19.
others. But I also want to point out that theatrical realism—producing/identifying/performing
veritable conflicts—also draws the boundaries of everyday legitimate intimidation (to the
extent that they can be interpreted, third-hand, from the representations of these intimidations
in talk). The next section describes these boundaries.

3 How to Stroit’ in a Moral Way

First, violence is deemed moral and contained if it does not do irreversible—and therefore
real—harm. In the story about Alina’s fights with her schoolmate, it was necessary to note
that the results of the fight were not irreparable: “it will heal—besides, it is the third time
someone has broken her nose.” This, of course, raises the question of how “irreversible” is
defined. In the “psychological cultures” of the “West” (and, increasingly, the “East,” see
Lerner’s (2011) argument that Russia is on the way to becoming a “psychological” or
“therapeutic” society”), the discourse of trauma—the (often) “invisible” or “unconscious”
imprint left by a violent incident on the psyche—makes null any claims as to the
reversibility/irreversibility of something. (One can never be sure of the “real” consequences,
or inconsequentiality, of violence, since they may be buried deep in our psyche.) Ekaterina,
Maksim’s young and worldly wife, was one person who was intensely doubtful about how
reversible were the acts of violence that were routinely understood as such.\footnote{I described in Chapter 1 how Ekaterina was particularly averse to her boss’s style of management, which, perhaps, transgressed from the theatre of controlled rage to uncontrolled rage, and even worse, to manipulation.} But usually
there is a clear separation between violence and aggression—the latter is a show of an
intention more than it is an action. Mostly, it is words, stances, “the metal in your voice,” the
performance of cold rage or stern righteousness. There is no confusion, in Tatiana’s tales,
between the “fist on the table” she practically demands of potential beaus in the radical
theatre of affective potency, and the destructive violence of her father who beat her pregnant
mother (ref. Chapter 3).

The other, even bigger, emphasis is placed on believability. Mediated, impersonal,
institutionalised violence allows violators to perform violence economically, not spending
their own “energy.” The imperative to perform intimidation personally, the very
“psychological realism” of sovereign charismatic violence, carries a price—a psychic cost and a burden on the vitality and inner life of those who take it on themselves to do justice, which limits the aggressor’s potential for violence. Thus, though the personal theatre of intimidation may be in itself an institution, it differs from other institutions, contra Butler (1997b) who points to the importance of iterability of hate speech, making it sound as if any speaker of hate speech only exploits some borrowed voice (Chapter 1). The (true) voice is always that of the speaker, and such affective and emotional violence is justifiable; instrumental, or inhuman (“frozen,” otmorozhenny), is not.

Considering the cost, having a free hand in transforming one’s own, and then others’, subjectivities through “efficacious, unilateral, transitive, generative” (Butler 1997b:74) “emotional blows” (Lemon 2004) is a position of privilege that “ordinary” people claim for themselves as an exception rather than the rule. This makes uncomfortable the fact that the facility for rage comes more easily to some than to others. Especially suspicious is the ability to “switch” quickly in and out of rage—the ability not unlike that of a trained actor!—because it indicates an intimidation that is predatory and instrumental, rather than self-taxing.

This is how Batyr described this troublesome behaviour:

> X is a normal guy. But his wife: stupid, despite her medical degree. I talked to her, she blabbered all sort of nonsense, but it is her children—. She does not simply stroit’ them—you know, she can talk to you—blah, blah [in a pretentiously saccharine voice]—and then in a second she turns into a monster and turns on her kids [ferociously]: “I told you—get this out of the sandbox!”

The fact that she could switch from polite and sugary “nonsense” to ferocious intimidation implied instrumentality on her part, and therefore was “not simply stroit.” It was unlikely that she had mastered her emotions to be mobilised on a whim. And if she did, that would imply a powerful tool in the hands of an irresponsible person.

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81 See how in the moral economies of violence in the ghettos of American cities, explored by Philippe Bourgois (1989) with perceptive detail, the facility for rage is a valued trait without any reservations or limitations: the more, the better.
4 Sovereign, Disciplinary . . . Theatrical?

How does the “theatrical realism” of violence elucidate the questions of “simple” vs “institutional” vs “sovereign” vs “disciplinary” violence? One can argue, after Butler/Foucault, that in the (“Western”) world, sovereign power is indeed marginalised, both symbolically and socially. It appears in ghettos, prisons, and places of execution, but also, curiously, in “tough love boot camps” for teenagers, the latest in outsourcing domestic and familial, and therefore everyday, sovereign violence to a specialised commercial service. It is bracketed by the constraints of the spectacular and the carnivalesque, returning, like everything repressed, as a fantasy, in the movies but also reality shows like “Intervention,” in which spectators observe how ordinarily permissive—or indifferent—family and friends (finally) take it upon themselves to threaten their addicted “loved ones” out of their addiction (an example that will be particularly relevant to the last portion of this chapter).

But in (post)Soviet spaces, the picture is far from clear. The Soviet state was very determined, if not very successful, in building its disciplinary power structures, but even more determined about presenting itself as “disciplinary,” that is, rational and modern (Buck-Morss 2000). But recent phenomenologically inspired scholarship has started to question the wholesale applicability of the Foucauldian apparatus to Soviet modernity (with forays into the question of how the very relationship with the “other” was differently constituted, see Magun 2014). Sergey Prozorov (2013) observes that, of the famous Foucauldian “modern” tripartite system of biopolitics, governmentality, and securitisation, the Soviet state had only successfully adopted biopolitics. Securitisation had (been?) developed quite differently: instead of security and the instrumentalization of life, the focus was on the exposure of the population to violent transformations of their life-forms (one of the foci of vernacular Marxism), or on the “building up” of life-forms from the “raw material” of formless life (“flexible and pliant” (Oushakine 2004), that is, destroyed and disrupted by revolution and violence)—an imaginary and practice described in more mundane terms throughout this dissertation.

These gaps and displacements between projects, reality, and representation, and the popular awareness of these very gaps complicates reading (or “putting theoretical pants on”) any
situation as an example of “just violence” and versus “the violence of the camp.” Social opportunities for aggression are structured, and one can easily point to the fact that the aggressive act of making a waitress pick the tea leaves out of one’s cup is a clear case of the institutionalised imbalance of power. Like the poor who fight other poor, and not the rich, in the ghettos of American cities (Bourgois 2003), Alina fights the other girl, and not the boy, in her school. But institutions—the “camps”—remain weak, and the loci of power remain uncertain, more often negotiated than already in place. Besides, in the Soviet understanding (often still lingering), clients are submissive seekers of service, while providers are the dominant granters of it. Tatiana, by insisting on being treated well for the money she pays, used the moral code of personal intimidation to present herself as a savvy actor on the part of the “new”—“rational and modern,” that is, the post-Soviet—order, “turning the tables” on former masters. And in Alina’s school, it seems, boys do not have much say in which girls they date. When speaking to me about an unruly neighbour, Sasha, as I see it, very self-consciously appropriates both heroic sovereign action and disciplinary power for himself: “I zhuchu him up regularly, two times a year, here, last summer I did. Only he is usually drunk when I do, so he does not remember [the lesson].”

The action is sovereign (zhuchu, from zhuchit’, mentioned above as one of several synonyms to stroit’; here it may mean physical aggression), but the framework of regularity (two times a year) is disciplinary, as is Sasha’s (overt) goal to make the man internalise the norm. Sasha, thus, juxtaposes two modes of power, sovereign and disciplinary, and claims both for himself. But the moral code of sovereign violence, whose harm is never lasting, wins: his charge’s interiority remains unchanged—he “does not remember.” In other words, Sasha fails to make his charge govern himself, and, paradoxically, he is virtuous in precisely this failure.

5 Grateful Victims: On Bad Habits and Outsourced Subjugations

The status of alcoholism in Russia is curiously double: on one hand, ordinary, a form of life that often approximates the imaginaries of the “swamp,” of uncertainty and inarticulation
from which articulations rise, and into which they dissolve when the will to will inevitably fades. This chronic, baseline character of addiction is in-built in the space of the city. Municipally sponsored posters condemning smoking, alcoholism, and drug use hang next to private advertisements for various treatments. But the harshest reminders are the catatonic bodies of the drunks, like the man whom I once saw lying in the middle of busy traffic, where his inebriated oblivion happened to strike him and where most passersby ignored him. (I was strongly advised against trying to help because “it is unlikely an ambulance will attend to such matters,” and if it does, “it will arrive hours later when the man—if he has any hope at all—is likely to have recovered himself.”) Another morning, I saw an unconscious teenager, lying upside down on a slope with his face quickly reddening. I got many strange looks when I dragged his body rightside up, turning the axis, against his drunken protests.

On the other hand, alcoholism is the baseline that is too often a point of no return, a point at which, as Tatiana said, “man is claimed by the devil, and there is nothing you can do about it.” The stories of such falling were often both philosophical and singularly tragic—an abused childhood, a friend’s suicide, an accident caused by the fatal errors of drunken judgement. Philosophically, such stories often implied how the main “corrector” for bad “habits” is life itself—“the school of hard knocks” (zhizn’ nauchit, life will teach). “Life,” in this idiom, is a power of external limitations to which one can adapt without losing desire—in fact, in so doing often gaining desire, as a woman in a marriage gains desire because she now has to mobilise towards the purpose and certainty of caring for her kids. This limiting power of life stands in contrast to the limitation of the “swampy” marketplace, army, and the school, described in the chapter on Affective Bankruptcies. Life corrects behaviour with harsh blows, the force of threat, and the facticity of no choice—routinely, matter-of-factly, as conveyed in how Tatiana addressed her cat: “Yes, you will eat this cottage cheese, for which you do not care, I know, but I have three days before my paycheque and no money for your Kitty Kat.”

82 A few people saw it differently, such as Roman, who insisted that “life does not teach, only traumatis [travmiruyet]. My parents kicked me out of the house early so “life would teach me”; I blame the failure of my first marriage on them.” But for the majority, the power of life in providing correction to behaviour was a matter of fact. This actually showed me one more reason to stop being anxious about whether there was “sufficient ethnographic distance” between me and my respondents.
But how does one deal with the imperceptibly aggravating spell of addiction, when life fails
to be a harsh mistress, producing little sense of productive conflict? Anastasia, the wealthy
housewife introduced in Chapter 3, mused: “I lived too comfortably, so life taught me
nothing.” Or when bad habits creep up, in the blurring chronicity of the everyday; when the
sharpness of one’s senses is blunted by the inflation of anxiety; when, as Lilia said, “living to
be twenty in Russia, one can get used to pretty much anything?” No one trusted themselves
to build up enough willpower to fight this condition, but quite a few constructed a limitation
as if it were an external factor, to mask their self-sovereignty, and explicitly claimed to do so.

How are these “outsourced subjugations” constructed, justified, and contested in everyday
talk? Maksim was an especially curious case. He always emphasised his love for autonomy
and independence, so I did not expect him to rely on outsourced subjugations. And he almost
did not. Once, he related a story of an (allegedly) past gambling addiction that he conquered,
as he told me, in a pointedly self-reliant manner:

> When the official mandate was issued to ban all forms of gambling, I prosto dlya sebya reshil [decided for myself] that ne nado [it is better stopped]. (AK: You mean, because gambling was banned?) But they [gambling parlours] still exist! They just changed the name; now they are called “lotteries.” I prosto kak by sam dlya sebya na tot moment reshil otkazat’sya [“I merely, like, myself for myself decided to quit, at the
time].

I had intentionally asked about the external limitation (the ban); Maksim rejected the
implication and claimed to be the sole source of the decision (sam dlya sebya, “myself for
myself”), with no extenuating circumstances or people interfering with his self-sovereignty.
And yet this self-sourced rationality was immediately circumvented by pointing to another
side of his own self, his drinking habit, presented as an externality, a circumstantial trade-off:

> [B]ut [I must admit that] gambling at that time was useful. It did a lot for me in terms
of solving my drinking problem. I used to have a serious drinking problem, and
gambling supplied adrenalin that people seek in alcohol—you know, when all sorts
of nestandartniye situatii [unusual situations; adventures] happen when one is
drunk.

My experiences eclipsed my background in the way that I was exceptionally lucky with people,
events, and opportunities. In reality or in representation, life has “taught” me little.
Pitting “separate” parts of one’s own subjectivity against one another was not uncommon. Here is how Svetlana appreciated the limitations her “laziness” put on her alcoholism:

Here, you know, I do see myself as an alcoholic. I may not be an alcoholic, but I call myself one. Because it is a matter of habit. But, you know, I am in part saved by my laziness. I am a very lazy person. To go out and buy a bottle, you know, I need to get up, wash my hair, often, because it always sticks out otherwise. I don’t want to scare people, you know. And for X, for example, it is harder [not to be an alcoholic]—he is always outside, with people, anyways, because of his work.

Lauren Berlant (2007a) described as “lateral” this mode of agency in the spaces of “not doing anything,” of “sleeping and eating” and other “actions of no consequence,” in the acts of idle pleasures that require “no burden of will.” I wonder to what extent pitting laziness, the “sleeping and eating,” against alcoholism, is an exercise of this agency—and simultaneously a masking of it, because it makes it self-conscious and therefore quite sovereign? Similarly, the irony of “outsourcing” one’s will to external circumstances is not lost on Maksim. He chuckled when he told me how he promised himself to quit smoking by binding the act of quitting with the (most likely negative) result of a lottery he took part in (so much for giving up on gambling):

Maksim: I read this book about how to quit smoking and understood that I like smoking.

X.: It is just that one should not zamorachivat’sya [bother, burden oneself] about it!

Maksim: No, I understand I need to quit smoking, it is a bad habit, all considered. …I think I will quit before October for sure, when the [lottery] promotional campaigns are over. You see, now, they started all those campaigns for my favourite brand of cigarettes—so I told to myself that I will smoke them until I collect a flashcard, a t-shirt, and a lighter. And then if I do not win a laptop computer [which they also promise among the prizes], I will quit smoking! Ha-ha! Imagine, though, if I win a computer—fuck, wouldn’t that be a disappointment!

Often, fear of a threatening benefactor was the most direct (perhaps even the only) way to change behaviour that could not be helped by self-responsibilisation. Outsourcing involved very conscious acceptance—and only half-mocked appreciation—of a friend, or a partner, who took on the role of being that insurmountable external limitation. Batyr explained how his wife played that role, though others’ did not:

Among the muzhiks [men, lads] of our age, thirty to forty years old, I simply cannot comprehend what is going on. They binge drink, all of them. Not like it was before, when one drank and got sober and drank again—people are drunk for weeks on end. I
used to have this problem myself. But I have bank loans to pay, you delay a payment once and they start calling you. They even send enforcers! Also, my wife is never shy to scold me about it. She can hit me—even with something heavy! (chuckles) N.’s wife does not give a shit [about his drinking], she could not care less. And the bank loans don’t hang over his head. He has a place of his own, and dough to spend on drinking, so why not drink? And the winters are worse in this regard—its dark—all these men, they sit at home—and holidays are coming soon, so they reason, like, “It’s time to get it going [drinking].”

Fear is not understood as a particularly harmful emotion because, again, it is framed not as “traumatic” but more in its medieval understanding of the “fear of God” (see, for instance, Margaret Paxson’s (2005:108) ethnography of the village of Solovyovo, where people say that life was better in Soviet times because “people had fear”—they “were careful in life”). Fear focuses will and attention. If family and friends are not willing to spend their vitality in righteous anger, going around with cast-iron skillets to ensure responsible behaviour, fear can be purchased. Eugene Raikhel (2010) describes so-called coding, a common practice of treating alcoholism in St. Petersburg. A popular coding technique includes inserting an implant with a medicine under the skin with a warning, coming from an authoritative doctor, that imbibing any alcohol while having the implant will be deadly.

Another technique, of which I was told by the wife of a man undergoing treatment for alcoholism, is also referred to as “coding,” but is performed in the very different setting of a “traditional” ritual. The couple went to a renowned and personally recommended village healer who ritually placed on the patient a prohibition against drinking. The ritual, the wife noted, was surprisingly short and straightforward. The healer, standing surrounded by Orthodox icons, performed several ritualistic speech-acts (zagovory) and hand-passes. Then she commanded the “patient” to chug a glass of vodka, 250 grams worth—the “truly last one,” she announced. (The quantity is significant; an ordinary “shot” of vodka, even among experienced drinkers, is no more than one hundred grams). Shortly after that, she pushed the disoriented man out of the house. The couple left, and on the way home the man went into a kind of state that I would retranslate (from his wife’s words) as “manic”: he burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter and ate, greedily, an enormous amount of street meat that she had to speedily purchase from roadside cafes. But the “coding” took effect: the story was told almost a year and a half after the fact, and since then, not a drop of alcohol had passed the lips of her husband.
There is also no shortage of “free” fear around if one needs to outsource one’s subjugation. While Batyr had been “coded” out of drinking by a professional, he did not care (or pretended not to care) much about his smoking: “Smoking is just a bad habit. Of course I find excuses—but I think I will die of something else before I die from lung cancer. With our life, with the stuff that is happening—I don’t worry [zamorachivat’ya, ref. Chapter 1; allow morok, darkness, upon myself] too much about it.” Rather than a substance, it was speeding that was his bane, the one “habit” in dire need of correction. I learnt about it in 2010, when he invited me for a pleasure ride through the city. He was speeding along on the nearly deserted streets when an accident scene suddenly appeared, clearly visible in stark, if monochromatic, details in the white summer night. A police officer stood scribbling by the scene, along with a small circle of onlookers. A middle-aged woman limped over and sat on the curb, trying to keep streaks of blood from smudging her trousers. She was clearly not deemed to be in need of hospitalization, in comparison to someone else whose blood was pooling on the uneven tar of the road. Batyr parked and we joined the onlookers. After some silence, he said:

You know, I always predstavliayu [imagine/visualise] that it is me who is hurt in the accident I see. (AK: Dear me, that’s morbid. What are you, suicidal?) No, on the contrary, it is a preventative measure of sorts. I often do drive too fast—so I imagine it was myself in this accident, to remember to be cautious. I also carry on me a video on my phone—wanna watch? Only if your nerves are strong enough to bear it! It is from the Internet, of people burning alive in their cars.

I recalled this incident especially after Tatiana talked to me about choosing a new car. She would have liked a Jeep, but Jeeps, I was told, seemed to have power over their drivers. Knowing of her propensity to speed, and having told me stories about it before, she needed an external limitation. So she reasoned: “I will not be able to drive a Jeep for half an hour [without an accident]. My buddies say that driving a Jeep, everyone takes turns to rezko [abruptly], rezko accelerate and rezko hit the brakes hard, too. So I better stay away from Jeeps.” I suspected the Jeep was also still quite a bit beyond her means, but that was not the rationale. Presenting herself as being unable to keep from speeding, she had her cake and ate it, too: she could claim for herself a character that was virtuously desirous, affectively ebullient, capable of being “mad.” And yet she was also a responsible individual.
The stories of external limitation could be quite serious. There was a time, Tatiana said, when she contemplated “ending it all,” but reasoned that no one would look after her children if she died. The “burden” of children became the line of conflict, of “friction” in her condition that helped mobilise her will to live. Other stories were quite light-hearted, joking, turning it all into almost an anecdote—remarkable, yet banal at the same time. In one such story, a husband, wanting to try the new and exotic service in Perm’—a Thai massage parlour—told his wife that the prospect of having an erection during massage looked to him both likely and worrisome, and asked her to come with him because her presence would ensure it would not happen. The wife, in the words of the teller, agreed, if only slightly annoyed for the “sovereign work” that she had to do “after hours,” so to speak. In this case, I guess, outsourced subjugations were also a constructed situation that allowed the affirmation of fidelity and virility, on the part of the husband, and care on wife’s part.

Most cases were in-between. Pavel, for instance, found exhilarating his encounter with a stern teacher, who made him mobilise under pressure and achieve results, if only getting him seriously ill in the process:

AK: How did you manage to pass the exams if you were drunk?

Pavel: Oh, how, well, indeed—I got on intravenous injections [in the hospital].

AK: After the exams?

Pavel: No, during the exams—because I could not drink any more, I could not do anything at all.

AK: How long were your studies?

Pavel: Thirty-five days straight. First two weeks, they taught us from eight am to eight pm. On the first day our teacher walked in—a young woman, well, not young, of our age—she says from the door, right away—“Well, guys veshaites’ [prepare to hang yourself]; we shall study dawn to dusk.” And they started to vtyukhivat’ [push violently] all that into us! My brain exploded. At some point, I became unaware if it was day or night, what day of the week it was, and so on—I woke up [at night] and could not understand what planet I was on!

AK: How did you feel?

Pavel: (laughs) Like okhueshka vulgaris of the species called “undetermined”! [A fictional bird’s name constructed using the swearword okhuyet’, “to be stupefied” (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6), and the noun-forming suffix “-shka,” often encountered in birds’ names.]
6 Masking One’s Sovereignty: The Limits of Power and the Limitations of Reflection

The first part of this chapter was filled with voices eager to present themselves as wielders of sovereign power. In the second part, they posit themselves as being on the receiving end of various “teachings,” as subjects of limiting circumstances. These stories of “personal theatres of intimidation” and “outsourced subjugations” are two sides of the same coin, stemming from similar affects (idealisation, or “nostalgia,” of/for charismatic authority), and a singular ontology (understanding that people are naturally prone to indifference, and will is rarely produced from “within”). While in the first part I had recourse to Butler and the critical theory of the performative to better reflect this affect and epistemology, in the second I am spoiled for choice, since externalisation of control and the various agentic but desubjectivised idioms of agency, what could be called the agentic states of patients, is anthropologist’s beloved topic. Relevant are the theories of possession as affirmations of agency in the face of “overdetermination” by social structures (as in Boddy 1989 on the Zar cult in Sudan). Mary Keller (2002) theorises the agency of possessed women in ways that revalue receptivity and permeability, moving beyond the association of opennes with passivity and weakness. For anthropological theorizations of patients (in other words, acted-upon subjects) as a counterpart to agents, see Asad 2003 and Faubion 2003. Then, there are various “ironic states”: Michael Lambek (2003) presents the case study of one man’s military career and its shaping by “rheumatic irony.” Through the double identity created by spirit possession, the man, Ali, denies his agency and yet accepts responsibility and identity. Anne Meneley’s (2003:25) ethnographic account of fright illness among Yemeni women explores narratives of near tragedy, and the way in which they can create “a moment of ironic reflection on the thin line between the comic and the tragic.” Although, as Muslims, Yemeni women acknowledge the need to accept the will of God when confronting loss and death, fright illness allows them an ironic mode for challenging the rightness of that will (2003:32).

My difficulty, however, is not with the imbalance of the approaches available for analysing the wielders of power and the patients, but how neither allows me to locate the
epistemological and moral awareness of the speaker of the structure-agency dynamic of her situation. In Butler’s (1997b) framework, the performative function stands external to the speaker’s own reflectivity—a position I have tried to remedy with Lemon’s (2004) account on the active and conscious, ideological appropriation of performativity in Russia. The anthropologists line of thought on the “ironic” mode as an explanatory device (Lambek 2003, Meneley 2003), wisely, allows one to eschew the question of reflectivity and awareness altogether, merely pointing to the subversion of agency and the agency of subversion: “fright illness” allows challenging—an oxymoron of sorts, and the point of “irony”—the rightness of God’s will. And yet, it is hard not to notice how close my respondents come to explicating the elements of their own anthropological designs: the placebo effect of (false? real?) fear; the effectiveness of the ritual, which does not require belief in order to be effective; and especially, the thinness of the line between the “acted” and “acted upon,” wherein the subject is implicated in the power to which he is subjected, and vice versa. They are aware of irony, the states of self-distancing, and the intentional occlusion of awareness that are part of power relations.

To illustrate this irony, and this occlusion, I conclude with reference to the classic Hegelian paradox (as discussed in Butler 1997a:35) of a contract between the lord and the bondsman. The lord tells the bondsman, “You be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body you are, is my body.” By “outsourcing” their subjugations, my respondents seem to quite consciously invert the paradox of that contract—telling their “lords”—the bankers, the wives, and the “life that teaches”—“You be my soul, the source of my will, for me,” while tacitly acknowledging that “the soul you are, is my soul.” They renegotiate not the positions but the meaning of the contract, so it allows their “souls” (whatever they are, and the goal, perhaps, is for them to remain “whatever,” like the bird named “okhueska vulgaris of the species undetermined”), to remain free.
Chapter 5
“Anything Can Happen”: Modernity and Vigilance

Dmitry Bykov (journalist): There is no pofigizm [“whatever-being,” refusal to care, see Chapter 1] in Russia. A pofigist would not live till his twentieth birthday in Russia! One has to be very cautious, to think over each situation very carefully, to avoid direct confrontation with the power (vlast’), with police, with people—

Sergey Enikolopov (psychologist): With all the people around one!

Bykov: With people around one, too.

Enikolopov: The ozloblenniye [angry, aggressive] people who are all around us.


Where is the boundary between an accident and a catastrophe? They say, “road accident,” but tekhnogennaya [“technology-failure-related”] catastrophe.” But the definitions are very clear, they are accepted by the World Health Organization, and are the same across the world. If there are thirty people seeking help within the hour, it is an accident. If there are thirty-one, it is a catastrophe. You got the numbers, right? (chuckles) So at our emergency station, we get thirty-five calls an hour. That is, our paramedics work under the conditions of unending catastrophe!”

– Anatolii, a fifty-something former paramedic. Fieldnotes 2010

In the Introduction, I related the story of the “uncertain flat”—a flat that goes through various metamorphoses, but does not “really” change. The wider world is similar: “nothing changes” in it, but “anything can happen.” In this chapter, I discuss the moral economy of control over the fact that “anything can happen.” Among possible modes of control, insurance and calculations of risk (Collier, Lakoff, and Rabinow 2004; Lakoff 2008) are discarded as irrational, or as unaffordable in moral or economic terms. Precaution and avoidance (Lakoff 2008)—building “a wall” of defence, preventative measures, or radical autonomy (see Shevchenko 2009)—are rational, but may be also unaffordable. The focus is therefore on the practice of scanning and the cultivation of vigilance, a “mode of reflexivity” (Willerslev 2007) and a particular relation to the future unpredictable event. A vigilant agent scans the environment in a passive yet proactive manner, countering threats in a just-in-time and largely uncalculated “reflexive”—“knee-jerk”—reaction.
To demonstrate a “dislocated coincidence,” I show that this ethnography/philosophy of vigilance, at first glance, is “global” in the way that it falls in line with the theory of “reflexive modernisation” (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). According to this theory, the world has shifted to a “reflexive”—a word playing on both “reflexivity” and “reflex-like”—“modernization.” “Reflexive” refers to the heightened ability, and inclination, of the world’s population to critique the status quo. This “self-reflexivity” (1994:115) implies that everything is thought of as potentially predictable and controllable, as socially and historically (over)determined. For example, headlines declare that “a new study finds that climate change is, with 99 percent probability, caused by humans”—a statement that underlines the use of “probability” as only a metaphor for overcertainty). And yet, “society” (or the “nation” or “humanity” or “history”) is too immense and complex to see as a culprit, a cause, or a venue of control. In short, “high modernity’s” reflexivity and large amount of knowledge lead to fear, fearful people demand ever more control and safety, and such demands overreach any real possibility of control in an increasingly complex and interdependent world.

In vernacular Marxism, the society and “the world”—which is, first and foremost, society—are not viewed as “complex”; on the contrary, I describe in Chapter 3 how social imaginaries in particular tend to be monolithic. At the same time, “reflexivity” about society (in the form described in the Introduction), was fostered throughout the seventy-something-year history of Soviet modernity. Like no other modernity, this period posited the rationality of ultimate human control, the primacy of nurture over nature. No “acts of God” could have been cited; “nature” was an agent, but one whose agency was presented as rapidly diminishing in the face of conquest by science and human will.

This presents the paradox of contemporary “Russian” vigilance as a mode of relationship to the future. On one hand, it is “global-sociological,” going along the lines of “reflexive high modernity” with its reflexivity and jerky, reflex-like, fearful reaction to the world. On the other, it is “particular-anthropological” because this reflexivity may be fostered just as well by the vernacular-Marxist habitus of “sociological” reflexivity. In addition, the rhetoric of vigilance is an expectation that is rooted in a memory of a different trajectory of modernity. Viewed from the modernity of vernacular Marxism, “reflexive modernisation” is a non-
statement. The “reflexive” part of the phrase is redundant: to be modern is to be reflexive about one’s social and historical condition. And the “modernisation” part is untrue: being modern is defined by controlling one’s condition.

1 Memories: The Security of Childhood

In “swampy,” provincial Perm’, where “nothing ever changes,” the imaginaries of stagnation are never far away from those of rooted, deep-seated stability. The long winters and hot summers comprise the so-called continental climate, deep inland, too heavy and entrenched to displace. Perm’ is far away from the dangerous south and its various Chechnyas, from menacing oceans, from the volcanic belts of the world. The Urals are old and settled. The slow-moving, mile-wide expanse of the Kama River behaves, flooding only slightly from year to year. The swamps lie still, and the forests stand tall, thriving in the abundance of water, harbouring prison camps, and, as Pirate assures me, secret stashes of military reserves.

Words like “typhoon” and “hurricane” and “tornado,” coming into Russian transliterated, bring to mind exotic and foreign lands. Sophia tells me:

That awful thing that happened in Japan, the tsunami, you know? Something like that makes you think that it is good that we are so far away from the oceans. Though we have the Kama. Who knows? You know they tried to calculate what happens if the KAMGES [the dam and the hydro station up the river] breaks down? How high the water will come up into the city, then? My father, he actually measured which city block the water will rise to. Yes, he did! (laughs) It turned out that it will cover the condo where we used to live. And my best friend, she used to live higher up, not far, just a block or two. We used to joke that we will run to her house for safety!

The story is funny, and worthy, and nostalgic. Funny because she implies how silly, in their improbability, were those things that we had the luxury to be scared of. Worthy because it is worldly, connecting then and now, Russia and Japan, through a vision of a watery apocalypse. And nostalgic about the pacts of trust and assistance that one made with friends in the times of innocence, in the times of before. Speculating about the collapse of KAMGES highlights, by juxtaposition, what childhood is usually remembered for—the utmost ontological security. Olga reminisced:
We had a great childhood. We had a Soviet childhood. We lived in a terrible, terrible district [ghetto] — but we were not afraid! We strolled; we did not care/know if it was nine in the evening, or midnight. And we did, we asked people in the street, total strangers — what was the time? Nobody feared to be killed, raped — we ran free around the whole district, and further — sometimes as far as the river. We went to the city beach at night, the kids! I think we have something built inside us, from this childhood of ours [chto zakladyvayetsya v detstve]… We were so, so lucky [to have had such a childhood].

Stepan said:

You can bash me if you like, but my memories of sovkoviy [usually a derogatory or ironic word for “Soviet”] childhood are so good. I remember how my parents never had a care in the world if I left the house — to go anywhere, at any time.

In a conversation with Batyr and couple of other male friends, as we looked at a piece of the contemporary art discussed in Chapter 2, he voiced both cynicism and nostalgia:

AK: Oh look, what is written there: “Happiness is not beyond the mountains.” Do you believe it, young men?

Batyr: Ha. Whom do you call young men? This was installed for the youngsters, for their prom nights. “Happiness is not beyond the mountains”! (sarcastically) Right!

AK: What is “not beyond the mountains,” then?

Batyr: Fuckup!

AK: What, you don’t believe in “a better tomorrow”?

Batyr: Why, I do…One has to keep pozitiv [ref. Chapter 1]… We were brought up, we were taught to be optimistic, to believe in the future. And so we do…

Growing up brought disappointments. Sophia (b. 1975, store manager) studied French at a local university; she recalled, “How I loved the language, how I loved it! The songs, the books. But there were no jobs whatsoever. I went to work the floor at a liquor store. They took me because I could read the labels on the bottles.” Her husband of many years got involved in a food processing business during the 1990s, was cheated, and lost it:

A murky business it was — It was the [cruel] time, you know. So when bratki [lit. “brothers,” the mafia] demanded money, we did not hesitate even for a moment, gave it all up at once, sold our apartment overnight — We were left literally with some suitcases to our name. Pity it did not work out; we would have been well off now.

Her son is eight. They still live in a rented apartment, and she plans to have another child. She still works for the same liquor company, now a luxury establishment. I ask her if she has
become well versed in vintage wines; she laughs: “You have to have an education in these things, travel a lot, read a lot— I, myself, still prefer prostoi [simple, authentic and unpretentious, see Chapter 2] vodochka [diminutive for vodka].” She is very certain about her regret over the loss of the USSR: “I am very social, Anya. I would have been an obschestvennitsa [another word for an aktivist, see Chapter 4]!”

“Nothing really changes here,” but “something always happens.” The ontological security is no longer present. I am reminded that I have to watch out, to reacquire the state of readiness, as soon as I get off the plane. A woman in front of me enters the passport control booth and is held up there, coming back to the yellow line visibly upset. Whispers arise that her passport is the “new kind”—with various scanning devices inbuilt in its pages—and it does not read. Whispers continue that it is not surprising at all. It is easy to issue a high-tech passport in some Moscow office, but the provincial airport scanners do not “like” them. “My passport is simple, old-style”—proudly says a man in the line—“so I pass quickly and surely.” The officer says menacingly to him: “Get back in the line, now, there can be only one person in front of this window.” The man retreats quickly, apologising—“vse, vse, vse, ponyal”—“yes, yes, yes, I got it.” The queue waits. A kid sits down on one of the steel chairs lining the walls. When he gets up, the steel springs up from under his weight. It sounds like a gunshot. The boy’s face cringes with fear and embarrassment. His mother explains to the crowd, smiling: “Here, I brought my son from Germany, for the first time in eight years. We have not left the airport, but he is already in a trance” [v transe]. I think that to be “in a trance” is a particularly good definition for the state of cultivated vigilance—the subject of this chapter—the state in which one scans the environment automatically, being ready to retreat, quickly, or to do a quick trade-off between alternative evils that are weighed on a scale of retrievable and repairable losses (like a lover’s betrayal or losing a wallet) and the nightmares of being reduced to beggary, imprisonment, and bodily harm.
2 Disasters: “City under Siege”

The talk of disasters picked up especially after 2008, along with the rumours about “another” financial crisis coming around.\(^8^3\) Then the infamous chain of accidents started, said Natalia (b.1974, editor at a local newspaper). Frozen in its provinciality, Perm’ had been, by virtue of the same immunity to change, a \textit{bogospasayemiy} (God-protected) city. Now, she said, it had lost its immunity to the catastrophic post-Soviet reality because the city’s governor \textit{sdal gorod} (literally, “ceded the city,” as in a military campaign) by accepting a higher position, leaving the office open to invaders from the capital—hideous, hedonistic, greedy Moscow. “Muscovites came and started investing and digging out [\textit{kopayut}, extracting] the money. Now everyone says: ‘We are damned.'” With the outsiders came the sin (of big money? of systemic, Western-style capitalism?); with the sin, the mystical protection over Perm’ was withdrawn.

Natalia was never religious or even particularly superstitious. She is “cultured,” a professional, with a family background in the white-collar middle-class intelligentsia in its conservative “Stalinist” sense (and not in the “progressive” sense of the dissident spirit and passionate political intellectualism, as discussed in Chapter 2). Natalia seems amused by her own words about the city’s divine protection, both believing and disbelieving it. The issues of belief and disbelief are bracketed; but the eruption of \textit{anything can happen} is always a titillating and mature consideration to share.

After the government reshuffle, the city’s mystical landscape turned against its occupants. In everyday talk and in social media, Perm’iaks started a count(down?) of the city’s disasters. First, a Boeing plane crashed on approach to the Perm’ airport in 2008, killing all eighty-eight people on board. Perhaps the pilot was fatigued, perhaps unfamiliar with the Western equipment on board, perhaps inebriated. (That last “perhaps,” however, is always redundant, assures Svetlana.\(^8^4\)) No one wondered much what the official explanation was; Sasha

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\(^8^3\) The crisis of 1998 wiped out people’s savings, and became sort of a financial crisis baseline for the teens of perestroika.

\(^8^4\) In a dialogue with Svetlana, I mentioned the ethical question of interviewing a person who might be drunk: “And when I prepared to come here, I wrote an ‘ethics review.’ What if the person I talked
explained, “It’s just somewhere, something always goes boom from time to time.” And the city’s newly acquired curse was said to extend throughout the country. I was assured that the pleasure boat Bulgaria, which sank in the Volga River in the summer of 2011 killing 122, had been serviced in Perm’ city docks just before keeling over. Other disasters were less lethal but still worrisome, tell-tale signs of how increasingly “something” keeps brewing, and rupturing that swampy layer of reality that “never changes.” As befits Perm’s geological semiotics, the ground collapsed under the biggest local shopping mall. No one got hurt. But the meeting of the ancient chthonic forces (“Did you know that there were 734 catacombs dug under Perm’ by the Demidovs, the merchants?” asked Maksim) and the glamour of the new consumerism was, as I derived from Natalia’s depiction, funny in its surrealism. The collapse of the most glamorous of the mall’s windows, the one that held outrageously expensive liquors from all over the world, was spectacular. But such funny catastrophes, like the earth splitting just to shatter a few whiskey bottles, added to the verity of the immense, never within the horizon of your imagination, scope of anything can happen.

The “big” story of the plane—which was needed to operate and navigate the demands of imported and therefore incomprehensible, or locally made but decrepit, machinery—was refracted on a smaller scale. A mundane ATM spat out a receipt in English—“Anna, where, for fuck’s sake, can I find my balance on this thing?”—Pavel complained, showing me the receipt. That receipt showing, or rather not showing, to Pavel the actual state of his resources, could have been a metaphor for the particular, everyday chronicity of uncertainty. Pavel had to make sense of the ATM slip while being stressed and fatigued—drunk in an effort to beat the stress; and fatigued from work, from making sense, and from drinking. The simplest of things could fail in the haze of fraud, unintelligibility, miscommunication. At work, he once

to was not fully aware of what was happening? What if this person was drunk, for instance?” Svetlana laughed, “Good and well, Anna, but that review was useless. There is no such thing as ‘if’! [that is, people are never certain of what they say, and men are tipsy all the time].” And yet, such sure talk about the “certainty” of everyone being drunk may function similarly to talking about the weather. Condemning alcoholism for ruining everything can be an icebreaker—followed by bitter acknowledgement of the therapeutic irreplaceability of alcohol—followed by companionable drinking.

Douglas Rogers (2012) explores it in depth in relation to the ways local oil businesses frame their social responsibility; see also Chapter 2.
had to climb a ladder that turned out to be a meter short for the task. The client measured it wrong, but time was money and the client was money. To compensate for the height, the ladder was put almost upright; Pavel toppled down and broke an arm.

Old or new, foreign-made or locally produced, machines are inherently unreliable, reiterates Irina, the paediatrician. She has to be on her tiptoes, watching, all the time:

> Every year there is something new, new ailments, and new regulations—I work twenty-four-hour shifts. We never sleep, watching the children in the ICU. Even for a toilet break, the nurse and I, we go in turns. I don’t trust the equipment. Some bulb will disconnect—So we spend the night, all night, watching, watching. And just this summer, this new law passed that we have to save all newborns weighing under five hundred grams. You know, “to improve the demographic situation,” because “Russia is dying out” and all! Morons! Before, five hundred grams and under was considered “the product of a spontaneous abortion.” If the mother is a junkie, the child will not grow up normal anyway. And now, we are held accountable.

In 2009, the “watching, watching” was something I was told incessantly, stirring my interest in narratives of the unexpected blows of fate. These stories “on the ground” echoed the flow of catastrophic news on the TV. My impressionable internal statistician scored the proportion of negative news on TV at 80 percent. Intellectuals mused about a political conspiracy, the possibility that TV catastrophism is a political technology, a campaign timed to stir enough fear to seek a saviour at the time of elections.

But the conspiracy would have to include the co-conspirators, the audience, who seemed to both welcome and loathe the stories. I have, incidentally, asked Sasha, the journalist, if there was a demand for catastrophism, or if it indeed was just a political technology. Sasha was visibly excited by my question, responding: “I don’t know, Anya, I don’t know, but be sure that the demand for these horror stories is humongous! It is perhaps the only type of story there is a demand for.”

Batyr, another day, said something to disagree with Sasha’s assessment:

> On all the TV channels—banditry, fires, murders, accidents, all day long. Imagine that people listen to it every day. They must be in a state of atrophy already! And imagine if you take it close to your heart! [AK: Why can’t they lighten it up?] They can, but they don’t! Take that “Cops” series on TV—it was about murders all right, but they had some funny moments, too!
Yet come another day, in another conversation, and Sasha notes casually that he does watch the news on TV, quite often: “You know, to be prepared, to know what is going on.”

The Lame Horse nightclub was deemed a place to cater to the thirty-something middle-income crowd. In December 2009, firecrackers were set off in celebration of the nightclub owner’s birthday. They ignited the flammable decorations on the ceiling. The windows were barred, a common precaution against breaking and entering. Only about half of the people reached the exits in time; fire and smoke killed 156. Haunting visions, in the media and in personal accounts, focused especially on the rows of bodies of young women, in their high-heeled, mini-skirted best, lying in disarray in the December snow. I called frantically on that December night, waking people up, catching them by surprise and with a bit of suspicion to see an unidentifiable international number on their mobile phones, which they never turn off. I did not have a close friend perish that night. But the echo of the disaster reappeared like a ghost in the stories told in and about that year—about a family friend, a colleague’s wife, the only daughter of one’s well-liked schoolteacher who always used to stop for a chat. One friend said, about the schoolteacher, “I just passed her on the street saying nothing, I just could not. I knew it would be worse if I stopped and we started talking and the only thing to say was to bring up that night and her daughter, who died from burns two months later in the St. Petersburg hospital. So I met her eyes and walked by, and she understood and said nothing, either.” Life, as usual, turns unsuitable, inimical to words. Some confessed the intuition, the lucky decision not to go to the club that night. Pavel said, “You should always keep your inner intuition on alert. I always feel it when something serious is brewing. When somewhere, something terrible is being planned. It makes me shake in my chair!” I pressed: “And the Lame Horse?” He responded, “You would not believe it! We sat in the office that Friday night. And a friend called me asking to go the Horse. I said, ‘I want to,’ but I couldn’t. Just too tired. It was around 10 pm.” Drinking, an ordinary source of contingency, adventure and unusual situations, can also be a conduit of safety. “ Sitting
well and resting” keeps one home or at the dacha or in the after-hours office—away from troubles. Unless one accidentally sits down on the hot stove in a sauna, like Roman once did.

Stories highlight how the “infrastructures” of people’s psyche—and of “societal hope”—crumble under the all-around pressure, become uneven and treacherous, like the ground in the yard of Sergey’s condo, which crumbles under the onslaught of second-hand Hondas. But often they are about infrastructure in the old-fashioned sense of the word, the housing and transport built in the 1950s and 1960s and exploited ever since without much maintenance. There may have been an explosion at a local gunpowder/warhead utilisation plant. The “boom” was heard by many; some window panes reportedly were blown out. Media coverage was focused on an unknown witness who was seen leaving the plant shortly after the explosion, shoving some hysterical woman in a car, and swearing unintelligibly.

The storytellers, my informants and media alike, relished this hastened escape and the unintelligible swearing. It struck a chord with the audiences, the rationality of the reflex-like action, which is as quick and as unthinking as a muscular twitch—“yes, yes, I got it.” None of that Hollywood movie nonsense, “where people talk like idiots, Anna,” the unbelievable people who stay at the site of a disaster, calling 911, asking questions, speculating on what happened. The guy fled, swearing; the storytellers’ attention to these two actions was shorthand for “It does not matter if something happened or not. Something always happens, I know it, you know it, and all that matters is being ready and getting away, fast.”

3 Transaction: A Necessary Evil

Getting away preventatively, building a wall—of distance, unintelligibility, fenced-in domesticity, and other types of cocooning in inarticulation—is considered often.

“Precaution” (Lakoff 2008)—an intent to avoid the event at all costs, not taking any risk—is a moral possibility and a rational act. Roman speculated “Wouldn’t it be nice?” about the

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86 Galina Lindquist (2005:8, after Hage 2003) makes a distinction between “between subjectivity of hope, the propensity to anticipate the future even under the gravest adversities; and the ‘societal hope’, the capacities that societies have for the generation and distribution of social opportunities.”
idea of settling down in the middle of nowhere, in a gated community with a chosen circle of friends. These fantasies of radical autonomy, of building a house in a forest, blended with fantasies about moving to Canada. He did not see it immediately likely, in particular because he “did not finish his university studies,” and that also was an accident. It was due to: “some wicked woman—that always happens to me, Anya. It was the dean’s daughter— But I will tell you another time how I got expelled; just to say that I have not yet given up on higher education, no! I am content to work at the factory, but I will try to save some money and get a degree in economics. When my youngest son is a bit older, you know.” Svetlana fantasised about a farm “up north.” When faced with abuse from someone, Irina “simply turns and walks away” to save her “moral health” (see Chapter 1), despite usually needing something from the offender.

“Building a wall” can, sometimes, lead to unpredictable results. Talking with Pavel, I pressed him, asking “So you always have to negotiate?” He replied, “Yes. But sometimes, even if you are building a wall (stroish’ stenu) around yourself, ignoring people, doing nothing, telling them, ‘I will do only this and I don’t care what you say, it will not move me in the least. What you see is what you get.’ And sometimes—from this—comes huge profit! Which is kind of strange.” But for the most part, “building walls”—radical solutions of refusal to be in a transaction, of removing oneself physically from the reality of scanning for dangers—is often an unaffordable, fantastical, or only accidentally available option. During my first days in the field, I had to witness the pain of those who had to negotiate with a stranger—myself—despite their almost visceral fear. I was looking for an apartment to rent. A real estate agent asked me to call her to confirm the viewing exactly one hour in advance, because too many people stood her up. My only requirement—that the place was to be rented for less than six months—made it all but unfeasible, said the agent. “No one would entrust their apartment to a stranger for such a short term.” But it was “not a problem.” Since there was no way for an owner to enforce a contract, she told me, “You should just say that you are going to rent for a year, and then you can leave at any time because there is nothing they can do.” She did not question my ability to lie and sign a false contract. She also came recommended, I reckoned, so I decided to see it through; the matter might resolve itself somehow.
The flat belonged to a couple of pensioners who themselves lived at their dacha. We were to gather for the viewing in the courtyard of the pensioners’ condominium. I saw no one upon arrival and made a call to the agent. She said that they were there, standing about a couple of hundred yards away because they demanded to verify from a distance that the person asking after the apartment was actually a woman. The agent told me, “If they heard it was a man, they would not even pick up their phone next time I called. Like many elderly, they hang up if they hear a male voice.” Their anxiety, especially that of the woman, was palpable. She desperately tried to use two tactics, curiously oppositional and equally futile, in order to coax out the truth about my intentions. A barrage of questions attempted to create intimacy, to produce closeness and trust: “So you are married? Where is your husband? Isn’t it expensive to live on your own like that? Why don’t you have kids? You know, we always had good relations with our tenants, always based on trust, we even came to babysit for her kids.” These were interspersed with stern warnings, the helpless facades of someone who was not to be taken advantage of: “You absolutely cannot remove this panelling here, we just installed it. And no holes in the walls, you have to ask first! We do not have a phone here, we know that we could be stuck with a bill for long distance calls. We have installed a steel safety door on the entrance. No TV either, you have to arrange it yourself!” The agent kept silent and smiled derisively. I fled as soon as it was minimally polite. My successful rental was with another pensioner who sat silently and resolutely while the agent signed a perfunctorily charted contract, and charged me for the full stay in advance. I saw a drawing hung on the ancient wallpaper of the flat, the only ornament apart from the old carpet and a very domestic smell of cat piss. The drawing was of a cartoon: a stork holding a frog in its beak; the frog, in its turn, was choking the stork’s neck, issuing a bubble of words above: “Never give up, never give in!” I asked the owner if it was hers; she pursed her lips in a firm line and said “Yes, we won’t be strangled,” and that it was her “motto in life.” When signatures and payment were done, she did not ask many questions, expressing just mild curiosity at my strange occupation and constant travel. “It must be good to feel so free,” she said ponderingly. When she left, leaving me the key, I wondered about her parting words. It was not “rich” or “wealthy,” it was “free.” Carefree.
4 Sealed: Doors, Borders, and Signed Envelopes

I got my own place, with a shaky table for tea parties and a little balcony where a visitor who smoked could go out, as they said, “to poison myself a little.” A neighbour got curious, catching up with me in the hallway, urging me politely to be more vigilant when I was inside; they noted that my “door was ajar.” Doors are important; everyone installed a steel door in the 1990s. Though it was joked that doors were more expensive than the stuff in the apartments, the tacit knowledge was that the value of material possessions was not the main point. These days, no one can expect rational behaviour when too many people are otmorożki, “frozen off” (someone with no humanness left in them, see Chapter 4). This conversation exemplifies such fears:

   Neighbour, in his forties: “If I hear someone knocking at the door, I come to the door with a baseball bat. Or a piece of steel pipe.

   AK: Seriously? Do many people do that?

   Neighbour: Well, people are different… There are some folk who would not even ask, they just open, but I always ask.

   AK: And what else can you do to protect yourself?

   Neighbour: What can one do? You just cannot protect yourself. For instance, I have a permit to carry a gas pistol. But if you shoot and hurt a man, you will be found guilty and serve a full sentence!

   AK: What about self-defence?

   Neighbour: Ha, self-defence! If there are four or five people who attack you, then you may be able to prove something, but if it is only one or two—

Doors block, but they also point to the places where someone who does not want to be found can be found. Doors often do not have numbers or signs on them—as Maksim told me, “To those whom I want to see, I will tell how to find the door.” Piotr, the yoga teacher, once told me how his own (supposedly, very “Russian”) expectation that he can drop in for tea without announcing his visit, was thwarted:

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87 In 2014, friendly neighbours in Moscow decided that I should be taught more properly about locking the door. While I was inside, they silently unscrewed and removed the lock from my door and put it nearby on the stairs, to show me that I could easily lose it if I did not mobilise my vigilance.
[A friend] successfully *otkosil* [found a way to avoid] the army service—. Everything was good. I came to visit him—rang the bell once, twice; I heard Metallica roaring behind the door, but no one answered. I got mad at him and went home. But then I thought I should check up on him—why didn’t he open? I call him—he picks up. I ask, “What happened?” He tells me sternly, “You should have called me before knocking on my door!”—“Bah! Why?”—“Because of the *voenkomat*! [mandatory military draft committee]”—“I, oh! *Vse, vse, ponyat!* [Yes, yes, I got you]”

Svetlana laughs and tells a story that echoes Piotr’s:

We were also sitting here one time—I heard the bell at the door. Truth be told, no one comes to my place without calling first, without a warning. I am thinking: Okay. I am not alone; I have three able men here at my place; so if *things happen*, we will sort it out. So I open—a woman asks me if Mikhail X lives here. I, like, [say] “And who are you, incidentally?” [She says] “I am here with a subpoena from the military committee.” I say, “No, he does not live here at all; maybe I will see him in half a year or so.” She asks, “And who are you?”—“Sister.”—“Will you take the subpoena?”—“Who, me? Sign for it? Never. I will never take papers, this sort of things, into my hands!”—“But I am from the committee!”—“So what? Tell them that you asked me to accept the note; you were refused. Just tell them that, and *svobodna!*” (lit. “at ease,” military). When Misha came home, I told him: “They have been after you!” Ha-ha!

I marvel at the meaning of the signed paper: useless between individuals but powerful in the hands of the state; then again, even the state cannot always get what it wants if one is watchful. According to Evgenii, because I travel I should be watchful about the state, too:

[M]any universities are afraid to develop international connections. Imagine, in our university, a guy was charged with *espionage* after a trip to Belgium! You can also get someone’s attention. They don’t care, “anthropology” or whatever. They do not rationalise. What they think is that you are great material for their reports. Because if the report is too short, they will be “knocked on” from above. They won’t get a bonus or something.

For Roman, his hope of “going to Canada” may also be threatened. At the factory, where he supervises some fancy machinery, he was vigilant “not to sign any paper that would prevent me from travelling outside the country. I will never sign a paper without reading it a hundred times, Anya, never!”

5 Out in the Open: Fire and Ice

Roman managed to get some time off to meet with me, to catch up, after several times when our arrangement did not work: one time, his youngest got ill and needed a lift to the hospital;
then he was called to the factory after hours on some urgent task; then he stood me up a couple of times without explanation, but I was already wiser not to ask. Something always happens, or, after a day of happening, someone is already too worn out to feel any guilt about a leisurely commitment to a leisurely anthropologist. “Do not try to book a meeting in advance,” says my old friend Renata, upon hearing my woes, “it is useless. I know myself, I sometimes lie on the sofa after a day of chaos, of fixing things frantically, and I simply cannot move, like in a stupor. So just call people from time to time, shortly before, maybe you will catch them when they are in the mood.”

Closer to the winter holidays, we finally caught up. We finished our coffee, longed for the summer as is customary, and went down the street to check out some footwear he needed. I gently bounced in place, trying to get blood flowing in my toes, careful not to fall on the icy street. Roman asked warmly, hinting at his masculine stoicism: “Ah, your feet are cold? Mine are never cold. I got them frozen once. I got beaten on the street, and lay unconscious for a while, and it was minus 28 that night. Well, I was tipsy, naturally. But the worst thing was that I had those thin, fancy British-made boots. Tall, but bloody thin.” He will never buy any British fancy boots again, only prostoy [simple] boots.

The local “thermal regimes” (Howes 2003) are all about radical changes of temperatures (it was minus 34 in winter and plus 32 in summer 2009, a variance of 75 degrees Celsius). Culturally informed affectations are a particular way to structure experiences—and the everyday stories of danger, including those related to temperature. “Don’t breathe with your mouth open,” I was told by Pirate, who was concerned that I had lost my habitus. “Even if the cold air hurts your nose more, breathe through your nose. If you open your mouth, you will get pneumonia.”

Roman took a mini-bus back home, first checking carefully to make sure that it has a back door to “jump out if something happens.” I walk home; a yard-long monster of an icicle slips from a roof, point down, like a dagger, and bursts in an explosion of silver dust right before me, on the marbled steps of yet another bank. “It feels like a high-level videogame to navigate these streets,” Alla tells me. I wonder. Alla teaches philosophy at the local university and reads Sartre in the original. I doubt she plays videogames but indeed, the
metaphor sounded fitting—in videogames, the first-person point-of-view shooter survives through calm self-distancing, vigilance, and fast reaction times. Alla, half-jokingly, half-seriously, attempted to bring some structure to this “videogame” by constructing, quite self-consciously, a world of balanced exchange where some unknown reality has to be appeased with “offerings.” When our exciting outing to a local poetry competition, part of the touted cultural revolution in Perm’ (ref. Chapter 2), ended up with her expensive camera being stolen, Alla was unpleasantly surprised at the size of the “offering.” She remarked, “The other day, when someone on the bus picked a knitted hat from my pocket—I was so glad to think that the ‘sacrifices’ seemed to be getting smaller! And now, this!”

A radio station broadcast featured replies from ekstrasensy (people with psychic abilities) to an inquiry to “read” a photo of a missing person. One said, “Your husband is dead, he was killed by the people with whom he otdykhal” (rested, ref. Chapter 2). The psychics also interpreted dreams: “Your dream means that you are unhappy in your marriage and you will never be happy in marriage, so if you are thinking of marriage, better don’t.”

In the sweltering mid-summer, everyone looks forward to a slack in the grip of vigilance, replaced as it may be by the sensory utopia of resting. Throngs of people head to lake and riverbanks. A morning newsreel reported that “since the beginning of the season” the provincial count of drowning victims stood at seventy-nine. (When I expressed astonishment, Maksim chided: “Who would go on a raft trip without a box of vodka, Anya, really? You are so funny!”). Climate change, droughts, and forest fires extended the scope of thermal regimes beyond cold vodka, the freeze of winter, and burning sauna stoves. Maksim said, “I met a friend yesterday. His face was bruised to pulp—asked him if he caught an ‘asphalt disease.’ He said, ‘Nope, I tried to dive in the river, but oops, the water was not there!’” (laughs) (AK: “Asphalt disease”?) Well, it was just his whole muzzle was shredded, like that of a drunkard who fell face down on asphalt.” Pavel, travelling to work sites in nearby small cities and villages, said he was careful to always stay upwind, away from the fires that are set by pozitiv, mindless vacationers: “It burns,” he says, “oh, it burns, just fifty meters from the road, an unbroken stretch of burning forest, for a kilometre. And no one is there, no one puts it out. It is dangerous to stop. One gust of wind, and the fire flows over the road.”
No one does anything, but then again, who knows if anything can be really done, or if you can really “know from where the [metaphorical] brick will fly, and hit you.” Several years ago, Pavel lost his best friend, a partner, who went alone to fix a faulty industrial electric panel. He must have been in a hurry, says Pavel, because he was tired and it was night—they often go to fix something after hours, at their own risk, being paid for piecework. He must have not let his eyes adjust to the darkness before starting the work, muses Pavel; his partner was electrocuted. Pavel seeks the meaning in that accident. The only meaning he finds is fate, which is a poor consolation, so he adds a lesson of vigilance: it is about the familiar suspicion of what you should, or should not, say out loud. His friend was going to quit in search of a better job, says Pavel; before going to the site, he had said that “he would go to fix one more thing at this job, for the last time. It happened just liked he said—he went for the last time.”

6 Captive Audience: Commute

Disasters strike vacationers especially when they relax their vigilance in anticipation of rest. Elena, a single mom and a tourist manager, saved just enough to fly her daughter to that ultimate dream, a hotel on a sweltering seacoast. The vacation that cost her two months earnings “went to waste” because she made the mistake of booking a train:

Devil jinxed me to do it—with my experience, and such a blunder! The train from Perm’ to Novorossiysk goes for two and a half days. The temperature inside the wagons was 44 degrees! It was bearable on the way there, because you anticipate the resting ahead, the seaside. But when we went back, it was 46C. Children blacked out on that train! We tried to endure it, but of course we failed, and drank cold drinks to cool down. [Abrupt change from hot to cold can be deadly.] Came back on Wednesday; my daughter woke up next morning and said—“Mum, my eyes hurt, and my nose hurts”—sinus inflammation.

The vacation was wasted because the immune system, that magical “wall of defence” that is built through the summer heat to be used up in winter (Elena insisted, “Usually, if we spend time by the sea, we go through winter without a single cold”), was ruined by the immediate illness.

Trains are an “adventure,” but even during the boring, mindless city commute things can “happen,” too. In October 2009 a city bus went “rabid,” as briefly mentioned in Chapter 2;
with its accelerator pedal “mysteriously” stuck, the bus continued to propel itself along the main street. On such buses, there is typically a warning sign: “Please be vigilant about the terrorism threat, and look out for suspicious luggage.” This warning causes mixed feelings in provincial Perm’. It is a little like the tsunami or swine flu, an exotic, bigger-world danger that seems a luxury to think about amidst everyday catastrophes. But such dangers are not entirely discarded, either. My sister said, “Imagine, I got a fright the other day—saw a man with a backpack and something that looked like a hose in his hands. The hose was making sort of sniffing noises. My first thought was—it is either a radiation leak, or he is looking for explosives! And it turned out he was just picking garbage!” Another sign on the bus read, “Please be reminded that on the 23rd of July, the emergency service phone number changes from 923 to 834.” I find myself wondering if I will be able to remember this when something catches up with me, or if I should just try to get away, fast.

7  People: On the Surface and Deep Down

No one could tell me the hour when the city buses stopped running for the day, so I was told to “plan a retreat,” if I was going out after 10 pm—“or even earlier, does not hurt to think about it earlier.” At 6 pm the street and courtyard benches were still full with a frock-clad, lackadaisical public, and it seemed like an idle concern. But in the grey twilight the crowds thin abruptly. The silent late-night commuters at the bus stop are visibly relieved when the incoming bus headlights cut the darkness. Liquor stores are at each stop, and one has always to watch out for volatile late-night drinkers in their desperate, psychotic search of dognat’—“chasing”—not having enough alcohol at home to get into a state of alcoholic elation but enough to get anxious and aggressive. And yet, looking out for the “visibly dangerous” is no guarantee.\footnote{Roman casually noted that the guys in the gym he used to frequent:  \begin{quote}
It is equally impossible to tell if someone deserves one’s pity. My sister said, “You know that babushka that begs on the corner? I found her once on the street, lying there half conscious. I tried to help her, dragged her to the condo entrance, and people there in the yard started swearing at me—‘What do you think you are doing? She shits in our entryway when she is drunk! She has a grown-up daughter who works a waged job; the daughter looks after her. But this old woman still goes outside to beg and collect empty bottles. She spends money on liquor, gets drunk and shits in our entryway!’”
\end{quote}}
Looked so decent—you would never guess! But I overheard them talking—in short, they do violent assaults. They go along Young Communist League Avenue—if they see a tipsy guy, they hit him at once—he topples over, or will be knocked unconscious, at the first blow. They are scum. Though they are sportsmen—they don’t drink, they don’t smoke—but their attitudes to people, to life—they are just scum.

Stepan, a “foot soldier” in the local police department, describes to me the usual techniques of attack. “Their favourite approach is to knock you down by hitting your knees first, then several blows to the head, and then take anything valuable. But they take anything, really, they can even take a jacket if they are really ‘frozen off’” (otmorozki, people with nothing “moving” or “alive” in them left). He tells me about them over steaming cappuccinos at a local coffee shop, my treat to Stepan who cannot afford going out on his meagre policeman’s salary (“I am an honest cop Anya, I don’t take bribes!” he laughs).

Stephan is married, happily, or at least smoothly; from our chats I know that he is not certain how his wife would react if I were to visit them at their house. According to Anastasia, family is naturally a field of mutual surveillance. One time, Anastasia and I were expecting a mutual acquaintance to come to a get-together, but he called to say he would arrive an hour late because he had to drive his wife to a dacha. Closing her mobile phone, Anastasia shared a guess that the true reason he was late must have been that he had to report home first because he knew that his wife would call him immediately from the dacha to check if he went home or someplace else. “Everyone is pasut [lit. “to herd,” observe closely for the purpose of control] each other, wives pasut their men, and they pasut their wives in return,” she explained casually. Pavel would later confirm this: “I try to arrange that my circles do not overlap. The less they know, the better they will sleep—because men, to tell you the truth, wag their tongues more than women.”

In my apartment one day, I treated a local sociology professor to some tea; at the end of our very “cultured” conversation about the prospects of anthropology in Russia, I asked for his mobile phone number. Explaining why he stopped having one, he said, “there was this guy I just passed in my condo unit entryway. He looked normal, he was just taking something from the mailbox. I passed him up on the stairs; suddenly, he ran up after me, and hit me on the head, hard—just for that damned cheap mobile phone!” He spent half a year in hospital for a mobile phone, his earlobes torn off for a pair of little golden studs. Thinking about safety in
the streets, I asked Stepan, “Why do you think they are so brutal, Stepan? Why don’t they, I don’t know, maybe threaten with a knife and ask for money? I am sure people would not object, everyone is scared enough.” Stepan shrugs, then replies:

Don’t know. People don’t think, don’t rationalise, and they are aggressive. The city is affluent, and so it is awash with heroin. Why? The Americans are to blame! The Taliban had things under control. But the Americans did not want them to be in control because they wanted to destroy Russia. Since the Americans removed them, the supply of heroin to Russia increased several times in half a year. Heroin is insanely cheap now.

Enterprising Maksim, adamant in his pozitiv, always a contrarian, picks up the theme of mugging suddenly when we go for a walk at midnight, after all his chores for the day are done. He says:

and don’t believe all this talk about street crime, it is not bad at all! Like now—see? We walk along, and nothing happens. Here, look, a couple of giggling girls, looking for adventures, naturally—and even if it happens, you simply have to know how to behave. When I was mugged, I raised my hands in the air immediately, I told them at once, “vse, vse, ya ponyal (yes, yes, yes, I got it), lads—here is my wallet here is my passport, take whatever you want.” … And sometimes, they just want to let off steam. I remember in my youth, there was a squabble; two guys came up to us. They carried pieces of wooden boards. I told them, “What are you thinking? There are five of us and two of you. If you want to fight, put your boards down and fight it out.” Me and my adversary, we finished pretty soon and just stood and watched the other guys. They went for quite a while.

It is never quite certain whether situations will develop according to some kind of “rules”—the rules of hood machos, the street patzanstvo, vague or archaic as they were, or if they will venture into the frozen-off territory, the territory of no-limit of bespredel.89

89 See Gromov 2009 for an ethnography and analysis of the disappearance of “masculine street codes of honour” in postsocialist Russian cities.

80 “Bespredel,” literally “no-limit,” is a prison-slang-derived, but commonly known, word connoting a deed, event, or state of affairs that is entirely lawless (violating even thieves’ laws); but even beyond that, bespredel is likely irrationally inhumane. The general affective load of the word, in short, points to the baseness of existence, to the spaces of bodily violence, suffering, death, and abjection, and specifically, all of those as products of human interaction (see also Bowden 2008 for an interesting semiotic articulation of order, chaos, and bespredel).
8  Bosses and Clients

When the full spectrum of anything can happen is always at the back of one’s mind, the dangers of contracts and transactions are seen as almost trivial, as the terrain where false facades and cheating and simple negligence should be taken for granted. Both Pavel and Maksim negotiate salaries with the bosses of their small private companies every month. But others, working in big private and state enterprises, may be less protected. Nadezhda’s father, who could not have been fired under the law protecting people with disabilities, was slipped a document that he took to be a vacation permit. It turned out to be a resignation note in his name, and once the signature was there, he could do nothing. The Perm’ labour market is getting “civilised,” with big employers moving in. Sergei told me, “On TV, they always show reports from the big local supermarkets franchise, that they always sell rotten meat. By the way, do not buy meat in expensive stores: because it is expensive, it stays there longer, and there is more chance to get poisoned.” I make a mental note that a price of a condom, according to Stepan, is an indication of quality, but the price of boots and meat is not. Elena shared with me her approach to finding good quality goods: “I always buy the medium-level brands because, here, it is usually the most expensive and the cheapest ones that are counterfeit.” So, continues Sergey:

they simply change the tags on the meat and sell it as if it was fresh. And they also have wild labour turnover. They hire a set of young girls and tell them that their future salary will be 15,000 roubles but, before that, they have to go through a probation period. And at the end of the term, they accuse them of shortage of goods, in the amount of, say, 50,000 roubles, telling them to either quit or they will tell the police. Or they start to peck at them with petty insults, telling them they do not fit.

A friend’s status on a popular social media platform: “If you feel like you are the centre of attention, it means someone wants either to fuck you, or fuck you up.”

Opening text on an episode of the program Purchase Audit (Kontrol’naya zakupka):

“Let’s eat sausage…but is it fresh? Let’s go on vacation…but will we have good time? Let’s buy a camera…but will it even work?”

The results of the “investigation”: “The results are shocking! Out of 15 brands of condensed milk only 4 are up to standard. The rest are a danger to your health.”
This is why Irina the paediatrician is both depressed and thankful for the stability of her salary, meagre but guaranteed, insured not by benevolence of the bosses but by the inertia, the swampiness, of the state healthcare institutions:

Look, I lead those birth classes with pregnant women, how to breathe and to push and the like. The cost is just a hundred roubles. The previous time, only three women came. And in our city, every third woman is pregnant! And last time, no one came at all. I got a call from the director not to come because no one showed up—which was handy because I myself forgot—. This is all because of those stories on TV, people stopped trusting doctors. Imagine: we arrive to pick up a woman in labour and bring her to the hospital, and she asks us, “Are you guys sober”? “What do you think,” I say, “we all came drunk to an emergency call?” Imagine! I want to quit, I do. But on the other hand, they say there is financial crisis everywhere—for us, it was 15,000 roubles yesterday, it is today, and it will be tomorrow.

9 Sick and Tired

Svetlana angers at pregnant women who stupidly trust the Internet instead of her advice, but Batyr tells me that hospitals are “the most scary places, really. You will come there relatively healthy, you will leave completely ill.” Kseniya, tall and athletic and beautiful, a well-earning professional who enjoys her work in city services, her family, and her new apartment in the city centre that came into her possession through her work for a fraction of the market price, tells tales of vigilance and anxiety over the heath of her two young children:

My eldest, the boy, did not turn out too well because there was some infection when I was pregnant. They sort of treated it but did not really…and things went wrong. And we tried to be prepared for everything, did everything by the book! I went to every birth class they offered! But they check for these infections only when you are already pregnant. So my boy was born with a kidney deficiency. He had to undergo an operation at a year and eight months, such a small baby, and all this blood in bags, and transfusions… I got a nervous breakdown from this. We have to examine him every year now, take pills all the time. But my point is, there are no healthy kids these days at all. You always have to watch out. I cannot go anywhere, I always have to come back to take them to hospital, for examination. It all gets mixed up in my head: Who took the pills? Who did not? With my daughter, we were taking every precaution, every precaution indeed—injections, pills, even treatment with leeches! She turned out all right… And it is impossible to foretell; yesterday we got some sort of food poisoning. My husband tells me not to watch TV—and I watch all these [warning] programs on TV! My husband’s sister miscarried at six months, because her ob-gyn did not check her as she should have. They killed the baby, they killed her baby boy. You cannot put it any other way. She says, “I would have paid for proper care, I would, if only I had known,” but even if you pay, you have no guarantee whatsoever.
Sometimes, people rebel against the practice, and the discourse, of everyday vigilance. Sensitive Tatiana detected immediately that in telling tales of vigilance, X. was putting on airs:

X. (a male, at a party): I went to the (Labour Day) parade dressed in a suit because all our big shots were already there. They were guarded, with four perimeters, everyone going through metal detectors—

Tatiana: What metal detectors? It is all bullshit! We went to that parade and my brat threw a paper pellet on some big shot’s bald head. Nothing happened to us. No-thing! We stood there, yawned for a while and went back. It is like, they said that Chirkunov (regional governor at the time) will visit our school. Imagine the fuss! Police, dogs, urgent teachers’ committee meeting, some say he will come, some say he won’t. Well, he never came. I mean, I don’t give a damn, but the teachers, they prepared. They were so nervous!

10 “Shouldn’t We Just Chill?”

But the harshest toll was on vitality. Where does vigilance cross into “paranoia” and negativ (Chapter 1)—and into boredom? Batyr remarked, “People start to have some sort of atrophy from seeing all these murders and catastrophes on TV.” Atrophy is like a limb withering away—the limb of caring attention, the chord of openness and intent that connects a virtuous self to the world. For Ekaterina and Maksim, the vigilant dispositions all around were a pet peeve. They made many comments defying the necessity of being on guard, and told an exemplary story about a guy who had absolutely no reason to be paranoid. Working as a masseur, he was said to bring home, if he wished, a supremely enviable income of a hundred thousand roubles a month, while the nature of his job, in a rare, enviable perk, had little to do with criminal, political, or law enforcement circles. Nevertheless, Ekaterina was amazed at the constant (and, in her opinion, irrational) fears this person displayed:

So, he went on and on about how zhutko [severely, scariley] scared he was to go anywhere with his kids, especially to Turkey or Egypt. It was his key scare, vot, all day long [he complained] that he is afraid for the kids. He kept shpnat’ [same as stroit’ in Chapter 4] his boy all day long. When my kid ran away to play ball—they had a place where they played ball—he started screaming, “Where is my Fyodor? Where is my Fyodor? We should bring him back!” All the while Fyodor was in our line of sight; we could see him perfectly! I just don’t get where this fear came from.
Maksim reiterated with annoyance the gullibility and susceptibility of people to media-related fear-mongering:

Have you seen this TV program, “Beware: Food”? So, it said that smoked chicken is made from rotten meat. Vse! [that’s all, the end of it!] (AK: So you are saying you are immune to that?) I watch these programs to laugh! You cannot take them seriously! They see through all the facts and leave only 20–25 percent of the truth!

The determination of Ekaterina and Maksim not to slide into paranoia saw them through several “anything can happen” events in the last few years. Maksim had a close encounter with death by appendicitis, which, according to him, was a lucky escape because a knowledgeable doctor came to lecture at the hospital and happened to pass by his sickbed. The local medicine men suspected food poisoning (in their excuse, a very common affair), and were prepared to treat him with laxatives. Ekaterina spent several days in hospital in excruciating pain with prolonged labour because of the ignorance of the nurses. They always had a story of “anything can happen” to tell. Their flat was burglarised once; a serious car accident led to a long litigation; and their dog got hit by a car. Maksim changed several jobs because of money conflicts with the bosses. Ekaterina quit only once, but on the brink of a nervous breakdown because of her superior’s streit’ practice. Nonetheless, their commitment to pozitiv was relentless.

11 Vigilance: Reactions and/or Reflections

Anthropology has long been engaged with local philosophies of causality and with people’s relationships to future unpredictable events. How does “vigilance” fit into these analytics? I have discussed above the applicability, and yet problematisation, of the “precaution” model (examples of which are well described by Olga Shevchenko (2009) and her notions of “autonomy”) of such relationships. Other traditional anthropological and sociological approaches distinguish relationships according to whether the problematic situation is perceived as a risk or a danger (Douglas 2003; Douglas and Wildavski 1983; but also Luhmann 1993; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Seligman 2001). Risk presumes a situation (or a counteragent) whose developments (or actions) can be (at least partially) predicted. A rational agent manages risks through calculative evaluations, implying some willingness, on
the part of the agent, to accept the consequences of the future event. Danger entails something incalculable and impersonal, such as an ecological disaster or war, and excludes conditions of trust and bargain.

Risk allows for a (supposedly, more “sophisticated” and “modern”) variety of precaution: “insurance” (Lakoff 2007:247). Both risk and insurance were perceived by my “laymen” as unaffordable, especially for simple/prostoy folks. My friends provincialised “taking insurance” as a class difference: “I am not rich enough to afford insurance” (Batyr); “It is not a rational approach here because the problems are so different every time” (Maksim). Insurance was also counterproductive in terms of ethical self-care. Lilia spoke about the insights that she had during a conversation with an insurance agent:

I have a friend working in an insurance company—she says to me, “We don’t understand how people do not understand that we are saving their money.” And I realise that what she is saying, for me, is about-nothing (niochem). Here, in Russia— these risks, so many of them! At every step! People change—if a person has lived to be twenty here, he has learned to get out of such pickles… He learnt to live with this heightened state of risk (v povyshennom sostoyanii riska). And he starts to feel comfortable, his sensitivity to that—it lessens. But in reality—for yourself, and what your hear from your friends—so much is happening. Really, it is impossible to cover everything. On one hand, it is what is to be, you cannot escape (chemu byt' tovo ne minovat'), and we will break through it somehow (kak-nibud' prorvemsya, as through a military fortification). This faith is present among people, that everything will somehow right itself. Or there may be a different attitude—everything will be disastrous and “one cannot breathe enough before death” [idiom], so there is nothing to be done. It is a sort of romanticism. I realised that I have it as well when I talked to this agent: I cannot believe, I don’t want to believe, that anything serious can happen. Because, also, if you imagine it as possible, you introduce the reality of it into your world. The world you live in, your personal world—you make it possible in this world.

Most recent ethnographies point out that in the chronicity of everyday crises (Vigh 2008; Shevchenko 2009), risk and insurance, precautions and dangers, are less and less relevant to people’s life-worlds. Today is governed by contingency. Contingency is the mode of rationality that finds irrational, if not immoral, the possibility of any knowledge of the future, including the already destabilised, multiple-possibility knowledge necessary to calculate risk.

91 Rosalind Morris (2010, based on fieldwork in South Africa) suggests a differentiation between “contingent” and “accidental” events. The cause of contingency is “a social and historically determined fact,” while the cause of an accident is “radically undeterminable,” even after the fact.
But neither is it “fatalism,” in terms in which it is so often understood—a sort of abandonment of control, in the view that “what will happen, will happen.” Instead, one assumes what Bledsoe and Fatoumatta (2002), in Ghana, call “subjunctivity”—subjectivity in a conjunctive mood—that is oriented to identifying threats and opportunities. Johnson-Hanks (2005:363) describes similar sensibilities as “judicious opportunism,” the “waiting to see what possibilities will develop and then quickly grasping the ones that seem promising.” She points out how this sensibility is unevenly distributed in the world:

[A]ction under the principle of judicious opportunism occurs everywhere and among people of all kinds of backgrounds—in other words, that the model of rational, strategic, intentional action is inadequate even for explaining action here. At the same time, judicious opportunism is more common in southern Cameroon than in the West for three related reasons. First, the West has more numerous and more effective institutions that serve to reduce uncertainty: the money supply is stable, public transit mostly works, mortality and morbidity are low and concentrated at the end of life, the courts enforce legal contracts, and so on. Judicious opportunism is thus simply less necessary. Second, people in the West are habituated to this relatively certain state of affairs: through recurrent experience we have been inculcated with the expectation that our actions will be efficacious and with the disposition to act with intention. Although in specific contexts people in the West certainly do engage in judicious opportunism, waiting to see what possibilities will develop and then quickly grasping the ones that seem promising, we have learned to be inclined to act otherwise. Third, explicit intentions and intentional action are represented and culturally elaborated differently in southern Cameroon than in the West. … [I]n some contexts [the Cameroonian ethnicity of] Beti would consider firm intentions at least morally ambivalent, if not outright hubris. (2005:382–83)

Complacent, hopeful certainty, indeed, is not distributed evenly in the world. But Johnson-Hanks’s juxtaposition of the “First” and the “Third” World leaves, alas and again, no analytical space for the paradoxes of the “Second” World, where the expectations, in fact, the “habituation” of people are developed to face the self-consciously systemic, highly controlled practices (if not effects) of Soviet modernity. Against these expectations, contemporary realities are often compared to the Third World; as Elena said, “They should have named our country a Honduras, not Honduras itself.”

The developers of the “reflexive modernization” paradigm, on the other hand, would find Johnson-Hanks’s assessment of the “modern West” rather optimistic, and all the local-ontological distinctions insignificant, in the face of two major developments. People no longer “trust in faceless systems” as Johnson-Hanks describes. Instead, they are fearful. In
their anxious reflexion on the status quo of the world, in “self-reflexivity,” everything is thought of as potentially predictable and controllable.

In the imaginaries of my respondents, avoidances, building blind walls or getting away, fast, are desirable but unaffordable. Ex-Soviet dwellers of the “Second World,” perhaps, are best positioned to demonstrate both the confrontation and the mutual articulation between these two paradigmatic views: the Africanist’s and the modernity theorist’s, the anthropologist’s and the sociologist’s, the localist’s and the globalist’s. In the Soviet Union, reflexivity about society (in the form described in the Introduction) was consciously developed throughout the 70-something year history. This reflexivity was only partially “critical,” but it fostered the axiomatic rationality of ultimate human control; of nurture over nature. No “acts of God” could have been cited; “nature” was an agent, but an agent whose agency was presented as rapidly diminishing in the face of conquest by science and human will. The “cosmic,” “systemic,” “structural,” totalising views of causality—see, for instance, the post-perestroika “total crisis” talk in Shevchenko, 2009—therefore, had been (pre)conditioned by the very reflexive rationality and rationality of control of the Soviet “anchoring.” Moderns are reflexive by definition; and they have control over their lives by definition. The paradigm of a “reflexive incalculable high modernity,” is, from Soviet-modernity view, is redundant in the “reflexive” part: to be (Soviet) modern person is to be reflexive of one’s social and historical condition. And it is untrue in the second—being (Soviet) modern is defined by realising that reality is constructed, and therefore changeable and controllable. Insurance and calculation therefore should not be normal for anyone who lives in a systemic world of industrial modernity, the only modernity deserving the name. It explains the ease with which my respondents discarded insurance, unlike the “First World,” without even having a history of relying on it; they rationalised that it is an inefficient method of controlling reality, especially the wild, chaotic, uncertain present-day reality. Their rejection of insurance is reflexive, in Beck, Giddens, and Lash’s (1994) definition of the word: it is a

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92 When an Internet opinion poll asked about the causes behind the Lame Horse nightclub fire, the response “the system is to blame” won with considerable strength, more than 50 percent, despite a very clear cause of the fire being the poor judgement of the organisers of the show.
social commentary expressing not merely doubt in the efficiency of insurance as a method, but, as I see it, resentment against insurance’s claim to being a “rationality” (backed up by science, that is, mathematics; and presented by kommerses—young people in suits, as progressively rational) when the only true (modern) rationality is/should be planning and control. On the other hand, incalculability is the falling (back) into existential—antimodern, inarticulate, primordial, but also sublime—modes of being, with all the moral ambivalence that implies. The true, or moral, modes of being are therefore either planning/control, or resignation to accept the incalculability of life, an incalculability that excites through its sublime implications. Insurance is not merely ineffective; it is immoral.

But virtuous adaption to the wild present-day reality may be also found in forgoing (“loading”) reflexivity in favour of reflexes. Vigilance—which Lilia calls “a heightened state of risk”—is an apprehension of contingency that is sped-up and distributed throughout the day, not a singular action but a state, a momentarily attuned disposition. In light of this, “judicious opportunism” or “subjunctive subjectivity”—the disposition of “acknowledging the chanciness of life,” being on the lookout for opportunities (Johnson-Hanks 2005)—would be criticised by my respondents as too lackadaisical, unduly optimistic, and not reflecting the fast present-day conditions of bella omnia contra omnun. Vigilance is recognising contingency in a place where the range of what to watch for is spread extra-wide across the old and new social and material infrastructures—habits and roads, sensibilities and technologies. Here, insuring is irrational; “building a wall” is impossible, and “opportunism” is insufficient. Instead, one scans along all the vectors of possible safety breaches, remembering nothing, but keeping the operative, day-to-day memory saturated with, and attentive to, “everything.” Pavel explains:

I am not like some people, I like the state of stability. But the circumstances, they are outside of my control. And the good thing is that they compel you to act, and to be ready for action [that is, they make it unlikely that you become “bored”]. You expect one thing—they let you down, you expect another—they deceive you, so you start to think forward about the circumstances to such an extent, it is astonishing! You take everything into account, and you inform others whom you have to deal with, about everything, every possible turn of events you can imagine. And always, huge changes are made, every moment, all around!

A vigilant actor literally watches outside of oneself, in virtuously outward subjective orientation, supressing the negativ thoughts about the future, while at the same time “tuning
oneself” (nastroit’ sebya) to be on the lookout for the sudden and violent “whacks” coming one’s way. In the state of virtuous balance between proaction and reaction—a combative state of vigilance, diminished reflexivity, and heightened attention—one detects the outbreak just a very short time ahead of the event, or even co-synchronously with the event, but in sufficient time for an immediate reflex-like reaction.

Acting on this philosophy of vigilance can be read as dystopic, but this is how this conversation about vigilance ends: I ask Pavel, “Tell me if I am wrong, but it does sound like you like it.” He responds, perhaps surprised at his own sensibility, “You know—Yes! This is the [real] work, this is draiv [drive].”

In spite of all the burdens of vigilance, I wonder how scanning for always-already-present happenings makes the vigilant agent—pleasantly!—always-already present, fostering and preserving her voice, dispersing the acedia/boredom, affirming the presence of creative friction (ref. Chapter 4) in her life. Scanning for danger and talking about how anything can happen and something always happens is always, in some sense, looking for an opening in the finality of vse, the “that is all.”
Chapter 6
Witnessing: The Ethics and Politics of an Event

AK: I was told that it is impossible to translate “to have fun” into Russian.
Sasha: Why not? It is translated “to have ololo!” [LOLs]. But they [“Westerners”] have to organise their ololos, and we have our ololos falling on us out of the blue!

“I wish you to stumble, to fall and to cry… But… to stumble upon money, to fall into arms, and to cry from happiness!”

“Happy birthday! I wish you everything that you want for yourself, and a little bit of something of which you do not know yet and therefore do not want (so it’s not too boring).”

– Birthday wishes on odnoklassniki.ru, a website

Why is the world so cruel? Look how much it shapes people
It’s been only seven days since I came to Europe, and I cannot recognise myself…
I no longer understand if a happening has really happened:
Yesterday, I lost my wallet, but imagine! Today, I found it.

– “The Song about Europe” performed by a team from the Krasnodar region at the 2011 KVN competition

In the previous chapters, my focus has been on the difficulties and anxieties of everyday self-care. How to defend one’s own headspace from insidious and ubiquitous ideological—or merely semiotic—pollution? How are true desires distinguished? When does everyday negativ draw one from being virtuously “bored” to being “boring”—angry or emotionally burnt out, with the corollary loss of moral and social capital? I aimed to combine

93 The competition’s acronym comes from klub veselykh I nakhodchivykh, “club of the funny and inventive.” It is a Russian TV comedic competition where teams (usually college students) compete by giving funny answers to questions and performing prepared sketches. The programme was first aired by the First Soviet Channel on November 8, 1961. Over five million live spectators annually watch the show. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/KVN
interpretation of personal experience with insights into their sense as aspects of vernacular Marxism.

This chapter makes a functionalist contribution. A big part of the everyday moral work described so far converges on the nature of the relation between voice and structures of subjectivation: language, but also “convictions,” “expectations,” “tastes,” “habits,” “worldviews,” or “identities.” It may be called “a problem of presence” (Engelke 2007), a fundamental Christian problem, questioning, however, not the presence of God but the presence of the self. In this chapter, I explore how some popular structures of narration, which I call “witnessing,” may present a way to experience the presence of self, a subjecthood, while masking the ways in which subjecthood relies on subjectivation/articulations. This is achieved through the interplay of expectation and disappointment, the ordinary and extraordinary. Witnessing something “extraordinary”—a “happening”—is a moment when one’s expectations and therefore one’s social identity come into view, but become destabilised by the very event and the witnessing of it. This allows one to be present, to feel the singularity of one’s existence, while masking/questioning subjectivation—and to share this experience of “articulation-less” selfhood with listeners.

Witnessing in itself is objectified. It is a part of a regime of value that re/informs social differentiation in terms of sensibility of, and sensitivity to, events: who defines what is a “happening,” and how. I juxtapose the construction of social difference in terms of “shockability”—sense and sensibility of/to “happenings”—with the construction of social difference in terms of lifestyle, education, or consumption.

In terms of a “dislocated coincidence,” this may represent a twist on the concept of identity. Social scientists have identified identity as a process of identification (overview in Brubaker and Cooper 2000)—that is, drawing an imaginary link between “self” and some sort of social body or community, imagined or otherwise. Identity, in postmodern anthropology, is processual, fluid, situational, layered. If, however, we consider how witnessing involves the game of shock and expectations, norms and abnormalities, that is, simultaneously accepting and negating the possibility of an identity, identity can be seen as “deconstructed” by
“laymen,” albeit in a way that is different from acknowledging its situational, relational, processual, layered, etc., aspects.

1 Authenticated Selves: The Unsurprised Surprise

Nancy Ries’s 1997 ethnography pioneered the centrality of “laments,” “tales of suffering and absurdity” in Russian conversation; a related genre of “crisis talk” was explored by Olga Shevchenko in 1999. Of late, the study of “plaintive” registers and practices has become a subfield of (post)socialist studies. My own fieldnotes filled rather quickly with tales that could be interpreted as laments, complaints, or the stories of ordeals.

Yet, both the advantages and the limitations of “lamentation” approaches to cultural analysis were made especially apparent to me by the exhilarating, if ironic, reading of Ries’s Russian Talk (1997) alongside Renato Rosaldo’s (1986) description of storytelling among the head-hunting Ilongots of the Philippines. (This comparison may scandalise my informants—recall Stepan’s and Elena’s usage of the word “Honduras,” an epitomic “savage,” to mean “moron”—but I claim this comparison to be the same type of absurdist humour they so often appreciate.) Ries notes the “monotony of representations” in Russia, and Rosaldo observes that Ilongot “cultural codes” are shared to a markedly high degree. Just as the biographies and experiences of Ilongots overlap significantly, the standardization of social life in the Soviet Union also meant that people (at least those of the same age cohort) had, to a large degree, similar experiences. Telling stories is a prized activity among the Ilongots and central to Ilongot cultural production; Ries shows that “talk” is among the main, or perhaps the main, Russian cultural form. In both collections, the stories reflect a culturally valued resourcefulness and improvisation—virtues, as Rosaldo notes, common to societies with a strong military agenda. The most prized stories of the Ilongot are about hunting; like the stories of hunting for food in the stores emptied during perestroika, Ilongot stories centre less

94 The 2013 conference at Princeton looked at them as a (post)socialist phenomenon.
on the success of a hunt than on what can be seen as “laments”—“the matters of accident, movement and surprise,” and “the mishaps that occur along the way” (Rosaldo 1986:114).

The point of the prized Ilongot stories, Rosaldo argues, was certainly not to complain, and not (just) to participate in and reproduce the community through shared morals and meanings. Neither do Ilongots strive to share how the hunts could be optimised, especially considering the overall success of their hunting expeditions. In addressing the metapragmatics of the stories, he shows how they are structured to transform the very workaday, ordinary chore of hunting into a remarkable experience of mystery and suspense. Through stories, Ilongots make their lives not only meaningful but significant.

Rosaldo belongs to a tradition within anthropology that is attentive to the ways in which social processes are grounded in experience (the 1986 Turner and Bruner collection contains an overview of “anthropology of experience”; without, however, very strict definition, it may include the works of such phenomenologically attuned writers as Thomas Csordas, Michael Jackson, and Michael Taussig). This tradition of social thought inspires us to think about how morally charged claims (for instance, “stoicism” or “fatalism” in Ries) can be not only ends in themselves, but also the culturally shaped means drawn upon in order to make a story extraordinary, historiable, and eventful. In this line of thought, what anthropologists sometimes code as “cultural values” and “moral claims” represent techniques of personal experiential economies, moral experiences that “are to be regarded as personal resources that may be used in interpersonal exchanges as a way of authenticating ourselves” (Abrahams 1986:55, emphasis mine). What does it mean to “authenticate ourselves”? How is it different from the more conventional “express” or “realise” ourselves, or the theoretically rich “perform” ourselves?

In the present chapter, I show how, and to what ends, some registers of talk—witnessing (both being present at, and re-enacting through telling) a “happening”—may produce such “authentication.” To start, it may help to draw on Edward Bruner’s (1986) schematics of difference between “life as lived,” “life as experienced,” and “life as expressed.” Bruner (1986) notes that “people often notice the gap between the reality and the words”—reality, in his terms, is “life as lived” --- the ordinary life, its customs and routines and concerns; and
words are “life as expressed.” In previous chapters, I described how “people notice the gap”—the “bothersomeness” and the corresponding ethical significance—of the non-coincidence between reality and words, life as lived vs life as expressed. The words, articulations, are too often dangerous, and monopolised by the state, experts, the intelligentsia, and bureaucrats (in other words, through “ideology” and “loading,” see Chapters 1 and 2).

But what about the gap between life as lived vs life as experienced? Do people notice the gap between the relative structural monotony of their everyday reality, and the situational, contingent character of their bodily, emotional and cognitive apprehension of this reality? It would be arrogant to suggest they don’t. The paradoxical sentiments—“nothing really changes” but “anything can happen” and “something always happens”—are a type of ethical reflection on the separation of reality and experience, because it asks a question: what do we consider a happening? What should we consider a happening, and why? The last epigraph above, the lyrics from “The Song about Europe,” illustrates the importance of this question. Deciding what is a happening defines one’s national identity. These four short lines can be read like this: My (“Russian”) reality, life as it is always lived, tells me that losing a wallet is almost certainly a complete loss. It is significant, because it is a loss and because it is irretrievable. I therefore was prepared to lament this loss—and, perhaps, to witness the mishap by telling stories about it. But it happened in Europe, where wallets are returnable, and I found it today. Finding it is an experience—a shocking experience that contradicts my reality. But does, now, losing it in the first place, count as significant, if it was found? Was it an event, or not, and what does my own shock at finding the wallet tells me about my identity?

I cannot point to contemporary work that explores how the very discernment between reality and experience constitutes a part of everyday interaction and practices of self-care. The awareness of such a gap, for instance, may be identified in the “mystical” rejection of the world’s constancy, given-ness, or knowability; or in questioning the “realness” of “reality”; and, perhaps, in seeking to answer these questions through the reorganization of experience. But the concept of “mysticism” in anthropology is not always suitable since it usually implies an institutionalised, or even doctrinal, system of knowledge. Returning to the meta-concern
of this dissertation, one may suggest that the scarcity of frameworks that allow us to work with such “gaps between lived world and experience” may be due to the certain (embarrassing? unproductive?) overlap between such philosophies and anthropology’s own relativist agendas. I therefore depart from the abstract hermeneutics of lived reality vs experience, and instead propose a plunge into the concreteness of people’s everyday elocutions about “happenings.” How does a “happening” happen? Here is Pavel’s story about a happening he witnessed during an otherwise blissfully uneventful vacation:

I went to this Soleletzk town. There, a chicken, which costs a hundred roubles here [in Perm’], even more now, costs only forty-six roubles! Ten eggs—four roubles! Packs of lamb chops! I gorged myself on mutton. Flows of beer! I took a glass, went to the middle of the [salt] lake, stuck a straw in the water—and drank like this—some salt, some beer! Very, very good. But also, you know what? In Solikamsk, there is this prison, White Swan? Strict regimens, repeat offenders, murderers? They have one of those near Soleletzk, too! It is called Black Dolphin! It is their official name. I went for a stroll and saw a fence, with a checkpoint. Okay, I thought, stoit i stoit [so what if it stands here]. I looked up—there are buildings and watchtowers behind it. And you know, we left a car nearby, and there was a guy walking around our car. I ask [vigilantly]: “What are you looking at?” He said: “The 59 plate number, where is it from?” I say, “Perm’. Why do you ask?” He says, “Nothing, just curious.” And I just see that his robe is—kakaya-to nechelovecheskaya [lit. “somewhat inhuman,” though in Russian it is a less dramatic statement than in English since “human” is often just a euphemism for “normal”]. What is it here? This is Black Dolphin prison! I ask, “So what is it, what you would compare it with? Is it like the White Swan [prison]?” He says, “Yes, life terms and extra-strict.” They are held inside behind four walls and never let out. All is done by [voice] command. Four perimeters of checkpoints! So this guy was from the first perimeter, from among the non-convoyed inmates, with short sentences and lighter crimes, so they sweep the perimeter and open the gates. You know, uberi-prinesi [lit. “clean-this-fetch-that”]. So, I ask, “How is it going?” He says, “If an officer is in sight, we have to run in. Because they will beat us with sticks for any contact with the villagers.” So, I ask, “What, has that happened before?” He simply hails another guy at the gate, “Kolyan!” Kolyan turns around—and half of his face is beaten to pulp.

A “happening” happens, of course, as a relationship between “ordinary” and “extraordinary.” Pavel transforms an ordinary situation into an extraordinary one, and then and back again; he turns experience into the experience—and back again. Russian imaginaries of prison, in themselves, are useful material if one wishes to show the instability of the border between extra/ordinary. On one hand, prison is a world apart, “a society within the society” with its own rich history, organization, and folklore. It is not a popular conversation topic since the
brutal realities of this world are negativ (see Chapter 1). And yet, prison “leaks” into the everyday. Few people do not know at least some of the cultural codes of prison. It leaks through mass culture, where the popularity, and to some extent the role, of prison chansons can be compared with that of country music in the United States (see Oleinik 2003 study of prison symbolic worlds). The very enormity of the penitentiary system makes it permeable. A popular proverb says, “Don’t make pledges to never become a prisoner or a pauper; prison cell and pauper’s sack can happen to anyone.” Approximately three hundred thousand people enter and leave prison every year.

The prison, therefore, is rarely talked about per se, but it “leaks” into everyday speech indirectly: Olga’s ex-husband was a former inmate; Batyr’s luck would have it that after conscription he became part of the troops that secured prison camps; Ekaterina mentioned a former prison guard commenting on the security at her workplace; Oksana, who works for a charity, mused on some people’s biographies in terms of their fulfilling or failing her expectations of their eventual incarceration. Maksim told of an accidental brawl that had been a close call for him, almost landing him in prison, because, on account of the “madness” of the officer who detained him, the brawl escalated into “an organised assault aimed at acquiring guns.” Statistically, more than 95 percent of court verdicts in Russia are “guilty,” so Maksim was saved, as he saw it, by another accident: a higher ranking, “reasonable” cop

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95 “The Gulag and Soviet society were not only related through propaganda, repression, bureaucracy, and other features of Soviet life, but their respective populations, in certain areas, could interact with one another. The Gulag system itself was more flexible than a rigid definition of a concentration camp allows, and many of its islands were not islands at all, but part of the mainland, connected through numerous points of condoned and illicit interaction, often facilitated by de-convoyed prisoners. The ‘two worlds,’ to borrow from but contradict Solzhenitsyn, did, in fact, ‘intermingle,’ and may not have been ‘two worlds’ at all, but one” (Bell 2013:141).

96 Russia has one of largest number of prisoners in the world (second after the United States, at 469 for every 100,000 people in 2015 according to the International Centre for Prison Studies, [http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/russian-federation](http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/russian-federation)). Around 18 percent are “pre-trial” detainees.

happened to drop by the “investigation” and interfered before charges were pressed. For Batyr, an entrepreneur, “success” in particular meant higher status—and the likelihood of imprisonment. I asked who he would consider successful (uspeshniye) people in Perm’, and he said hesitantly: “Depends on how you measure it—you know, tur’ma delo dobrovol’noye.” Literally, it means “prison is a matter of one’s volition”; an ironic pointer that social ambition and the likelihood of being imprisoned, are correlated.

But Pavel starts building up the play with extra/ordinary before he gets to his encounter with the prison. His “rest” in a resort village is described in the most sublime expressions, and yet, this account is based on typicality, on what is expected from a good “rest.” (I described in Chapter 2 how the “organic life” of “simple pleasures” is both an extraordinary ideal, and yet the entirely expected, the promised—and also presented as realised-in-reality—populist socialist norm.) This extra/ordinary reality of resting becomes ordinary when the prison “happens” upon Pavel out of nowhere (“I went for a stroll and came upon a fence, with a checkpoint”). Pavel exercises virtuous vigilance (see Chapter 5) in the face of danger: he asks warily the reason for the questions asked by a stranger in an “inhuman” robe. When they converse, it is not lost on Pavel how the highly sensory-utopic, organic names of the prisons—“Black Dolphin,” “White Swan”—are extra/ordinary because they entice a comparison between “scary prison life” and the very ideal of utopic “organic life.” Further on, and the dangerous virtuality of the prison world becomes an actuality, a veritable presence, witnessed by its inhabitant: “strict rules,” “four perimeters,” “repeat offenders.” But the same “inhuman” witness reveals prison life as an ordinary, indeed domestic, space where people have to “clean and fetch,” working menial jobs like that of gate-keeping. They share in a familiar experience of boredom, and remedy that boredom through ordinary acts of

98 This “accidental benefactor” story reminds of the story told by Maksim about his misdiagnosed appendicitis, when his life was saved by an expert doctor who, on his rare visit to this hospital, happened to pass by his hospital bed.
99 Evgenii Dobrenko (2007) explores this conflation of the present and the future, of the (representational) promise and its (non)realisation, which was the powerful drive behind Soviet socialist utopia. It may be, however, a drive behind many political projects: Lauren Berlant (2006, 2007b) explores a similar dynamic in her work on neoliberalism, although the displacement is not to the future but to the past standards of the “good life” that are no longer attainable but represented as existing/promised.
idle curiosity and small talk (“what region is plate 59?”). The finale of Pavel’s story points back to the extraordinary. Small talk is punishable by severe beatings, a reality that presented itself, again, with sudden and palpable presence when another inmate turned his face to Pavel and revealed his bloody disfigurement.

This interplay, I argue, is not (just) a complaint or a (social) commentary on the “horrors” of life. It is a witness to the existence of “another world” as a marvel/happening of sorts, and also an ethical understanding that the very strangeness of this world is contingent on our view of it. The given and the surprising nature of the world are both readily apparent.

A popular anthropological analytic of “horizon” (I hope) offers a way to visualise this dynamic. Introduced by Reinhart Koselleck but developed in particular by Vincent Crapanzano (2004), a horizon is “that line behind which a new space of experience will open, but which cannot yet be seen” (Koselleck 2004:260–61). The horizon is a sense of possibility, of difference, “the imaginable being on the other side of the line of demarcation” that is perceived as being present, or existing, but “not offering itself to knowledge” and not therefore a part of “reality” (Crapanzano 2004:8). When something (like an encounter with prison) “happens,” it does not happen in the world, rather a new world opens up through its happening.

But there is also a crucial difference between Crapanzano’s conception of “horizon” and Pavel’s usage of it. In Crapanzano’s view, potential new worlds spawn endlessly and linearly: “When a horizon and whatever lies beyond it are given articulate form, they freeze our view of the reality that immediately confronts us—fatally I’d say, were it not for the fact that once the beyond is articulated, a new horizon emerges and with it a new beyond” (2004:2, emphasis mine). This romantically optimistic view on potentiality is also popular. It appears, for instance, as an “antiboredom technique,” in the birthday wishes at the opening of the chapter: “Happy birthday! I wish you everything that you want for yourself, and a little bit of something that you do not know yet, and therefore do not want (so it’s not too boring).” The wish encourages one to commit more fully to “opening horizons,” and therefore to happenings that are so often dreaded (“you do not want” here is intentionally ambiguous,
since it may be understood as both “do not dream about/wish for oneself,” and “are afraid of”).

In Pavel’s story, the “new” horizon—the prison—is also a reality that is sensed rather than known. But he suggests that prison may be ordinary, after all, although we do not experience it as such because it is not a part of our “terrain,” our lived life, our resort villages (which are, in turn, extraordinary if compared to the everyday of going to work). So in the dynamics of the “happening,” Pavel placed himself in the space from which both the prison and the village became horizon-like. They “freeze without the fatality”—though not on account of some “new beyond” emerging after both the “village world” and “prison world” are made ordinary, but because the in-between position of the witness perpetually confirms them as (possible) horizons. And the witness, by standing between two ordinary/horizons, produces a stable gap between “life” and “experience,” in which he feels authenticated or “real.” Realization of this gap (realization both in terms of experience and reflection, coming-into-being and being aware of) between lived reality and the/experience creates a subject who somehow evades being captured through the “linguistic” and other representationalist models of subjectivation. He masks the reliance on dangerous articulations that are always political, hijacked (the fact of language being always highjacked by “somebody, somehow,” is a rather trite observation, from the suspicion-of-language point of view described in Chapter 1). Witnessing approximates an ideal ethical place where representation is at least partially circumvented, because two equidistant horizons produce/destroy each other’s meaning through juxtaposition.

Words that are used to describe one’s state at the time of the happening often work like expletives, to emphasise the immediacy of experience. Okhuet’ (recall the fictional “bird,” “okhueshka vulgaris of species undetermined,” from Chapter 4), okhrenet’ and obaldet’, to be stupefied, stunned—all these words perform no fixed evaluative functions; they can

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100 In “traditional” culture, the “familiar” world of one’s village was filled with “dangers.” Even familiar terrains and lived-in buildings were simultaneously the dwelling places of various “beings,” and hence, the places where anything could happen—while, necessarily, being nothing extraordinary. This “familiarity of danger” and “the dangerous familiarity,” “the dangers lurking in familiar world,” was taken as a theme of an Oxford symposium of historians and anthropologists on the workings of post-nineteenth century Russian “folk” culture (overview in Kelly 2005).
express awe and disgust alike. However briefly after, evaluations can only be made after the moment of “being stunned.” “Imagine, coming from a hike in the forest [back to the city] and being told that there is a coup d’état [perevorot] going on, that parliament has been disassembled—You simply okhuet’! Really, okhrenet’! What happened, where am I?” explained/exclaimed Roman, witnessing a happening that was, incidentally, not just story-able but history-able. Here, the extra/ordinary “forest” is juxtaposed with the “city” which was expected to be ordinary—the return to work and family and the routine—and yet turned out to be unfamiliar, shocking. The in-betweenness of the “I” is stressed indexically—“where” am I?—allowing the “I” to remain an “unspoken,” unclassified, and therefore authentic given.

2 Revolution, but Not Entirely: Badiouian Events and Ordinary Ethics

There is a line of thought, inspired by Alan Badiou, that Caroline Humphrey (2008) pursues in arguing that witnessing “true events” (Badiou’s [2007] definition; not a relative term but a very particular category of event) allows for the construction of unequivocally agentic subjecthood. It is a subjecthood in its “initial” meaning of the self-realising (not necessarily “rational”) actor, a subject whom Humphrey (2008:358) asks us not to confuse with the poststructural and the postmodern anthropological subject—the one who has descended into what she calls “processual-relational haze.” (Badiou himself referred to the fashionable Deleuzian thinking about agents, actors, and subjects as “the potato-fascism of rhizome.”)

This line of thought on subjecthood is close to what I describe, but also quite different, precisely because the Badiouian event is so strictly defined. We have to play with the limitations of the Badiouian definition of event, or “true event,” since it is not a loose but a very particular term that has to fit a number of parameters. Badiou would scoff at the encounter with the prison; he is more inclined to think about revolutions.

“Event” is “pure rupture”: that which cannot be classified under any “list of facts (strikes, demonstrations, etc.)”; “that multiple which, presenting itself, exhibits inconsistencies underlying all situations, and in a flash throws into a panic their constituted classifications”;
“interrupts the normal regime of description of knowledge…and imposes another kind of procedure on whomever admits that right here, in this place, something hitherto unnamed really and truly occurred” (Meillassoux 2011:2). The Badiouian event is when “[t]he truth emerges from being-as-being, between the gaps in discourse, rather than out of the hysterical subject’s speech act or eventual statement. It is therefore beyond discourse” (Bell 2011:113; emphasis mine). “Russian talk,” with all its suspicion of language, remains talk (and, perhaps, “hysterical” talk at that). Similarly, Humphrey juxtaposes (real) “subjects” to “ordinary people who are enthralled to existing knowledge” and therefore “not subjects” in a “Badiouian sense” (Humphrey 2008:363). But why deny subjecthood to Pavel, who evokes—constructs—events as if they were of Badiouian kind, paradigm shifters? And, in doing this, is Pavel “enthralled by existing knowledge,” or is his a type of relativistic thinking that actually subverts the “enthrallment,” claiming that knowledge is a matter of malleable experience?

As I see it, placing the self between the horizons masks one’s reliance on language, representation, and therefore the whole familiar mechanism of subjectivation. It is a mystical manoeuvre, a detour through the space of antistructure, Turner’s liminality, which is “squeezed” between two existing and well-known “firm” horizon-structures, which are made “infirm” and relative, “beyond” and “horizon”-like, by virtue of the subject’s playing with them, and playing them up against each other. On the other hand, this very mysticism depends on the commonality of experiences, the sharedness of “cultural codes,” on the firmness of the conceptual frameworks, because the “beyond” is not something entirely unimaginable, but rather the predictable opposite of “what I think you and I think it would be.” At Irina’s birthday, amidst cheerful banter, one of her female relatives said:

You thought it was hard to live without hot water? [a pet peeve; see the significance of “thermal regimes” in Chapters 2 and 5] Try living without cold water! Last winter, they switched off cold water for a week! We lived between the buckets of boiling water that we tried to cool down by any means we could! We thought that our toilet would crack! They [the state, the authorities] must be preparing us for a terrorist attack, or something! [laughs]

Having no cold water in the house may not constitute a Badiouian event; and yet, my respondents make it qualify—if not for “real” Badiouian subjecthood, then at least for the some authentic selfhood.
Can witnessing be, perhaps, interpreted as a device for destabilising the “insufferable oppression” of an overstructured social order? It can and it cannot. In the anthropology that describes such dynamics, the speaker/actor assumes, if temporarily, another world or another identity (as in possession cults, for instance, see Boddy 1989) which would be “counterinterpellating” or “challenging” to what is “actual,” “given,” or ideologically or symbolically “dominant.” In witnessing, the destination is not an alternative to a given reality, but the space in between, the space where the speaker and the listener become authentic by witnessing the world’s extra/ordinariness. Such destabilisation could be compared to the undertakings of “ritual-clowns” (Handelman 1998), tricksters, or, perhaps, revolutionaries, who act wilfully to make language and order into a (productive) topsy-turvy mess. But the similarity is limited because all these “agents of chaos” are wilful and intentional in their doings. The very authenticity of witnessing relies on the “happening” happening on its own, to oneself, not by one’s will.101

Here is another “happening” story (which, to some extent, shows how the “witnessing” speech genre is well liked and utilised by both men and women.)102 Nadezhda (b. 1974, a single mother and a secretary at a state factory, first introduced in Chapter 1), lived a life of strict routine—not least, as she explained, because the chronic shortage of money makes one an excellent and meticulous planner. “I know exactly how many roubles go where,” she said, half in pride, half in complaint. Objectively, Nadezhda’s life was a telling example of the precaritisation of lives in Russia, especially the lives of single women. She often described how no amount of planning saved her from dangerous disruptions: the factory bosses decided to monetise bonuses, to her financial detriment; her daughter lost a bus pass; her boyfriend, a long-term but mostly long-distance relationship, had said something again that put the future

101 However, the non/agency of tricksters is also a questionable subject: they often undermine their own efforts, mistake their body parts for something unrelated to them, etc. (Dalton 2002).
102 Compare with Ries (1997) who structures her book heavily along the gender divide, showing how the “values” of stoicism, martyrdom (suffering), and patience are championed more often by women, while men talk of “absurdity” and “mischief.” To that, I can add that “suffering” and “absurdity”—which bear the other names of pain and paradox—may indeed be distributed unevenly between female and male worlds, but they also work in tandem: they both point to the limits of language.
of the relationship in doubt (ref. Chapter 1). One day, however, she told a story that requires little context to represent the dynamic I am describing in this chapter:

Yeah, we live *veselo* [merrily]. We burnt!!! Gas maintainers did some repairs along the pipe, so they switch off the gas. My father is losing his mind, you know, he sometimes leaves the doors open—come in, take what you want… He tried to start the oven, could not, got mad, and threw the burning match aside. It fell behind the counter, smouldering… and short-circuited the fridge. It caught fire and ignited the oven. When the firemen came and opened the door, all they saw was smoke. My grandpa fell into the doorway, into their arms. The smoke filled the unit, the neighbours knocked on the door, but he had already inhaled too much smoke and fell by the door. So when they called the fire brigade, they told that there is a person behind the door. Lina [daughter] was at school. And after school, she went *v gosti* [to visit a friend]! Imagine, like a divine intervention (*provideniye*). Because if she had opened the door with her key, she would have been burnt, at best!

And meanwhile [here, the play with horizons starts], I was walking back from work, the weather was great. I heard a siren—*ta-ra, ta-ra*—I thought, “some place is on fire.” Then I saw they dragged a ladder—well, I thought, this cannot be for us, why would they drag a ladder for a second-floor apartment… I kept walking. Met a former classmate, we walked together a while—*tatata*… she asked where Lina was. I say, “Lina visits friends while I make money.” Ha-ha… everything is good, is in order… We parted, I got a phone call, I saw an unfamiliar number. I do not like getting phone calls from unfamiliar numbers. Those who are *nado* [are needed/have a legitimate need], their numbers I know. But I picked up. A stranger says, “You just calm down. Everything is fine, fire is out, grandpa is alive, Lina is with us.” I said, “Excuse me?” She said, “Everything is fine, Lina is at our place.” You see, no one was there when Lina came back, everyone already left, so she went to the neighbours’. And before they all were there, fire and emergency people and paramedics, because the gas lines are on our floor! If we had had gas that day, it would have exploded! And my kitchen, all burnt. I stood there speechless. We cleared a narrow strip on the floors to walk on. My friend came to check on me. She said to me later, “I went in and saw you brushing the oven diligently. I thought, ‘Why, why would you clean a broken oven?’” But she understood, she did not say anything about it. You are cleaning the oven? Good. It is *normal*. It is better that you clean the oven, just keep cleaning!

Like Pavel, Nadezhda diligently recreated the contrast between the utter ordinariness of that day, and the extraordinary event that could have killed her family. The weather was fine; the chat with her friend was an ordinary, monotonous “*tatata.*” She was properly vigilant, wondering if the fire trucks might be going to her place or if an unfamiliar phone number on her caller ID meant danger. And yet, she managed to convey how likely, how really not that unexpected for her, those events were in general: gas maintenance “happens,” her elderly grandpa is irritable and forgetful, her fridge is old, the community gas pipes run through their floor, her daughter has to come home alone while she “makes money.” Witnessing works
through “university surprise,” when, in the moment of surprise, “we are overcome by the fulfilment of expectations we hardly could admit to having” (on university surprise, see Zirker 2004/2005). In witnessing the consequences of the fire, and in telling this story, Nadezhda was surprised as much at the event as at the discovery that she did have some expectations, some sort of common-sense acceptance of the world, while the exact content of these expectations was also unclear: Was she expecting a disaster to happen? Not to happen? She mocked, and praised, herself (post-factum) for trying to normalise reality by normalising her experience—through the familiar normalising techniques, the bodily labour, the chore of cleaning the oven (ref. Chapter 2). But all in all, this story of an ordeal (or a “lament,” in Ries’s vocabulary) was a story of success, because the disaster had proven that her acceptance of the world (and her vigilance) was not entirely unmerited. The representatives of the state, they “all came”; the neighbours were helpful; the friend spent time consoling her (and later the boyfriend came and did repairs). She “lived merrily”: her life was authentic, it was significant, she was lucky. *Provideniye*, divine providence (or intervention), might have been on her side after all.

These paradoxes of expectation and disappointment, or extra/ordinary, are semiotically fecund. The very contestation of what to consider extra/ordinary becomes a happening to be witnessed. Stepan’s remarks about sex make this clear:

> I am really omnivorous when it comes to sex. Every lady has her charm. I am annoyed when someone tells me that everyone loves blondes. I *zhestko* [harshly, fiercely] argue back. I was asked at work once, “Is it true that blondes are the ideal of beauty?” No way! No one confirmed this information. And, by the by, we now have black girls in town. For three grand an hour! (AK: You mean, good value for money?) Well, I don’t know. A friend of mine went—they are all from Cameroon, by the way—and he says it is nothing special. All interest is in them being, you know, exotic. Nothing glamorous, or anything.

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103 Adriana Petryna (2013), I believe, captured, though in passing, this dynamic in the remark about a narrative she collected in post-Chernobyl Ukraine. She mentions “the position between shock and believing,” the “two worlds,” on the part of her respondent: “Anna seems to be caught between two worlds as well: the world of the believer, where a history of [her mother’s] nineteen abortions was considered acceptable, even normal; and the shock that she shared with me across the table, of knowing that her mother had physically endured so many repeated and often brutal abortions” (2013:71). The extra/ordinary nature of reality is confirmed by perceiving/presenting “nineteen abortions” as both ordinary and horizon-like, as “normal” and “shocking.”
Telling all this, Stepan projects a persona that is feminist (in a way, see Chapter 3), worldly, and maybe even patriotic. All this, undoubtedly, was directed at me, the listener, a woman, a traveller, and an expat—the latter making me suspect as an “advocate of the West.” My point, however, is to show how in the process of the production of this persona, the witnessing and the extra/ordinary dynamic is also reproduced. Stepan notes the “cultural codes,” values and tastes, are not as shared as people (and probably you, Anna, too!) think. Not everyone loves blondes. And, he continues—let me tell you where the real horizon-opening is: it lies in bedding black women, as was witnessed to him by a friend with proven expertise (“they are all from Cameroon, by the way”). And then again, black women are nothing extraordinary either. The hype of their difference does not translate into an enchantment, “glamour,” or “anything.”

The virtuous self cannot be entirely known and remains underarticulated (see “the depth of the soul” in Pesmen 2002; Rogers 2012; also Chapter 1 and 4), but its opacity, though sometimes entertained as a philosophical concern, is far more often implied through witnessing the “happenings” in/of one’s quotidian life. Lidia, a factory worker in her forties, declared, “I don’t know what is wrong with him… He came to my place yesterday—imagine!—after eight years of absence! He lay on my sofa and asked, [dramatic pause] “What do you want from life”? Really? What do I want from life? Imagine!” In an excerpt from Tatiana, whom we first encountered in Chapter 1, the process is reversed. She was amazed to feel how something very symbolically specific and ideologically defined, and hence rather voluble—a lofty “patriot” identity—arises suddenly as voiceful when the ordinary reality of driving to work on an interurban road, both expectedly and surprisingly turns into the experience:

*Tak, voobsche* [speaking in no particular terms, a common “uncertaining” device] I am a patriot—especially, there, when I listen to that band, what is their name—“Hey, my Russia!” When they say that word, “Russia” — *Pizdetz kak polilo!* [lit. “it has burst out like shit”; that is, I was overflowing with emotion]—I am Russian! Those birch trees—I drive often, in summer, on the interstate—among the fields, when it is all green, it is *kaif* [such pleasure].

This statement is not what is usually understood as a “politics of identity” (in other words, a “patriot”), because this identity is already understood as situational, experience-dependent, rather than defined in “any particular terms.” It is, rather, the poetics—or the mystique—of
identity. In social theory, identities are often viewed as tools to authenticate selves; but here, the self, authenticated through the extra/ordinary gap emerging within the everyday driving routine, is a good (and, perhaps, the only ethically legitimate) ground on which to construct identities.

Similarly, it is surprising, and pleasurable, and worthy, to witness how an encounter that seemed ordinary and fleeting has been revealed through life experiences to be extraordinary, leading to a life-long friendship. Tatiana recalled when she first met her friend:

The guy I was sitting with at school, he was on sick leave for a couple of days, and this was when she entered the class for the first time. So she sat down beside me and took his place. He was so pissed off when he came back and saw his place taken! But he did nothing, and she has sat there ever since. And we are so different, and who would have thought that she and I would be such close friends all these years, fifteen years later!

“Unsurprised surprise” utilises a difficult philosophy of the im/possibility of miracles. Thirty-six-year-old Eugenia did not need anyone to tell her that finding a suitable bachelor “at this age” is impossible. She, however, glimpsed the possibility of a miracle, of another reality opening up, one day at her work:

We had this guy, a department head, good-looking, single, solid. I was wondering, how come? How can it be that there was not a single woman [at work] that was to his liking? Turned out, no one wanted him because he was an insufferable bore! Really, we started dating, and he brought me flowers every time we met, but when he started talking—he was telling me how he went to buy a sweater, and it was not the sweater he wanted, and blah! So boring that my teeth ached.

Eugenia, undoubtedly, performs her persona as a woman who believes that marriage should offer intellectual and emotional stimulation, and tacitly recognises that I share/appreciate this value by sharing a tale of a male affective bankruptcy (see Chapter 3). On one hand, her story is affective reconfirmation of that ordinary lived reality we both “know” so well: suitable bachelors over thirty do not exist. But by telling the story of her disappointment, she reconfirms that, despite everything, she was hopeful: she remained open to the possibility of another world, the world of romantic love and marriage, even after thirty—of a happening. This is why stories of failed expectations, or “suffering,” may be read as cynicism or lamentations, but one can also see them as a radical form of idealism—of keeping horizons open and articulated.
There are, however, “ultimate events,” usually related to death or irreversible harm, that are feared precisely because they are the points of no return from which no continuation or development, no “horizon opening,” can follow. Sergey, telling the story of the “uncertain flat” (in the Introduction), never attempted to relativise the ugly, lonely death of the old woman, the drunkard whose death was the start of the flat’s social/existential perturbations. Death is always extraordinary. Death—especially sudden, violent, or painful death (what Bloch and Parry [1982] name “bad” death), while always an event, creates no feeling of presence, of selfhood, because it is a nothingness that has no meaningful “opposites.” After witnessing a death, especially a bad death, “ordinary” reality is not grounded against an extraordinary one, but annihilated, and there is no “new” reality horizon opening, either. Death is not a message, a world-grounding, a shared code, or a representation. I have recorded some stories of witnessing death, but I feel reluctant to make them the subject of analysis—not least because of how strongly my respondents emphasised just that: death has no message. Like violence (Chapter 4), it should not be “clothed” into “theoretical pants.”

3 Living “Merrily,” “Calmly,” or “Organising One’s Fun”: The Ethics and Politics of Happening

Striving to present a most mundane occurrence as a “happening,” as something un/expected, is generally appreciated as both entertainment and as a performance of ethics, of ordinary, everyday concern about what matters. And yet, performing witnessing may be suspect. Is the reality that one claims to have witnessed indeed extraordinary, if even for a (required, singular) moment? Is it good enough to help us authenticate ourselves? Some witnessing could be met with dismissal or outright disdain. Maksim assured me, “Nothing much happens, Anna, so people exaggerate what happens to them, to make life more interesting”; and at another time Svetlana echoed this sentiment: “Oh, why do you believe this (mutual acquaintance), he only pretends that something always happens to him, because in reality he is always in control, and inside himself [vnutri sebya], he zhestko [harshly, firmly] organises and directs everything.”
But irrespective of people’s “organization”—that is, manipulative and calculative, and therefore hidden—intent, the conundrum of witnessing is that it hinges on the precarious balance of both sameness and difference between the lived realities of the speaker and the listener. The substance of the happening is so often something very particular and very much the same: infidelities, car accidents, illnesses, lost wallets, sudden financial ruin. Witnessing fails when the listener has exactly the same story to tell, thus making it impossible to present the ordinary as extraordinary, even for a moment. I have recorded a story about a story whose telling went wrong. This witnessing failed because the listener, Lyubov’ (real estate agent; recall her story about pofigizm in Chapter 1), detected that both her lived world, and the experiences/happenings, coincided with those of the teller—thus making everything typical and rendering the game of horizons moot. Lyuba recounted:

Then it became clear to me why I was invited [to this party]: a person, as a rule, wants to tell another person, from different circles, about what happened to her. I told her, “Tanya! What you are telling me is the story of my life, too.” But she tells me, “No, Lyuba [diminutive from Lyubov’], it is not, because—imagine!” This and that. And she tells me and I can guess, just by her facial expressions alone, what will come next. I try hard not to [guess], I think, maybe I am mistaken! But no! It goes Odin v Odin [one for one, identical]. And she tells me all that with such inspiration! About her husband, and how he cheated. Come on, everyone lived through that, Tanya, everyone! I tell her, “Tanya, what you lived through was not at all surprising. What is surprising is how similar our experiences are. You are reading my life to me [as if from a music sheet, or a book].” And if someone had told me all that at the time [when it all happened], I might have even been glad to hear it. Like, thank God I am not alone in this, all people have this psychosis in life, it is normal. Nothing extraordinary, all shall pass, it is just morok [giggles] [see zamorachivatsya, lit. “to put morok, burden, on oneself,” as in Chapter 1; here its meaning is illusion or a trifling insignificance].

And yet, this story about the failed story is in itself a valid story, a story of unsurprised surprise. Lyubov’ is both surprised, and not surprised, by the fact that her own experiential biography and the life of a woman she hardly knows are identical. The “horizon” then arises from this very unsurprised surprise: how could this Tanya be blind to the fact that everything has already happened, in fact, was endlessly repeated? Imagine, Anna, no, just think about it: there are people who think that there can be something surprising, or new, about this life!

Veena Das (2007:9) points out how the fascination with the instability of the border between extra/ordinary comes from a lack of trust, the “trust that context is in place”: 
the fragility of the social becomes embedded in a temporality of anticipation since one ceases to trust that context is in place. The affect produced on the registers of the virtual and the potential, of fear that is real but not necessarily actualized in events, comes to constitute the ecology of fear in everyday life. Potentiality here does not have a sense of something that is waiting at the door of reality to make an appearance as it were, but rather as that which is already present.

The sensibilities I herewith describe are quite similar to this in their temporal-affective orientation, the same difficult convergence and divergence between actual and virtual, the “potentiality that is already present” or, on the contrary, is impossible. What Das describes, is, perhaps, traumatic in origin: though Das does not use the word “trauma,” she shows how these sensibilities are both salient and silent features of everyday self-maintenance in the face of fear and the collapse of the protective bubble of social order, the self-maintenance that she likens to “carrying a poisonous chalice within” (2007:9). But my fieldnotes are full of banter—sometimes stoical, sometimes hysterical, sometimes almost bored—that discusses straightforwardly, or signifies through the structure of narration, the in/stability of contexts. The affect, the trauma, the silence—perhaps, the fear of which Das writes—has been transformed into a Bourdieusian practical sense that makes multiple ethical and intersubjective uses out of instabilities of context, uses that go way beyond being merely therapeutic. When I asked Maksim what exactly he meant when he used the word “veselo,” lit. “merrily,” in reference to those ostensibly unfortunate and always unexpected affairs that he told me about, he seemed to understand what I was asking but had difficulty explaining it.

He simply proceeded to recount the most recent one:

Well, you see, here, I had a business deal that went veselo. Everything, everything has been accounted for, everything was talked through and settled [see Chapter 5, on vigilance and proactive reactionism]. And in the end, the supplier let us down. They cannot deliver in time. (AK: And this is veselo?) Yes! Or, here, take my son, it is unknown if he will graduate from school or not. I said, “Let’s put him in an institution [a child centre of sort] for a while, I cannot straighten him up!” [chuckles] And the kid is standing nearby, by the way [witnessing me saying that] [chuckles]. (AK: So, imagine that the deal went as agreed, and the kid graduated. What then?) Mne bylo by ne veselo [then I would not be merry]. I would be happy/satisfied [ya byl by schastliv]… — but I would be bored [mne bylo by skuchno]. But things are as they are, and mne veselo. (AK: But you are not happy?) No, I am happy— [frustrated]
You should not look for logic in all this!\textsuperscript{104} It is all just about one’s attitude to life \textit{[otnosheniye k zhizni]}, a disposition; again, a focus on the incommensurability between “logic” and “disposition”; ideology and life-practice; articulation and inarticulation. “\textit{Veselo}”: it is when something happens that you did not expect— but you see it as fun! [\textit{vosprinimayesh’ veselo}!]

The “attitude,” as well as the talk itself, are devices of ironic/humorous/discursive distancing, but Maksim would be offended to see them as merely escapist or therapeutic. He sees that having these experiences and “seeing them as fun” makes his life more significant than “merely” “living happily.” The experience is what happens to one, but it is also, paradoxically, one’s choice, and, to some extent, one’s ethical work.

Here I may return to the question, which I was asked by several people, “whether it is true that it was kind of boring in Canada” (Chapter 3). As Sasha noted in the epigraph to this chapter, “they”—and I could speculate that Canada stands for all the Anglo-Saxon world, and hence, “the Canadas of the world”—are suspected of being boring because they have “to organise their ololos.” Like Maksim, Sasha claims that in Russia, it is not the case. \textit{Ololos “happen” to us, and there is a salient ongoing debate, touching on morality, rationality, and maybe even “ontology,” about whether there are more significant ways of being than to have ololos “organised.”} This question is open, and important: once, Roman replied to my question about “happenings” with the suggestion that it is merely “immature adrenalin seeking.” He, himself, declared that “let them, Canada, or Australia, be boring, I am okay with that. I want to live like they do, because I am a settled/calmed-down human being \textit{(chelovek uspokoivshyisya)}. I don’t need all that.” Come another evening, he told me how he “deals with his life’s problems” by “going into astral.” “Astral” is the “state of mind” when he and his best friend, a policeman, board a battered jeep to drink and drive in the night-time countryside. “Behind the village of Bobki,”\textsuperscript{105} there is no more \textit{Soviet power} [that is, the

\textsuperscript{104} Happiness is a difficult emotion, as Sarah Ahmed (2010, 2014) reminds us; it is also pertinent to mention here that the etymology of “happiness” in English “relates precisely to the question of contingency: it is from the Middle English word \textit{hap}, suggesting chance. The word happy originally meant ‘good “hap” or fortune’, to be lucky or fortunate” (Ahmed 2014:574). Is Maksim’s exegesis of happiness an attempt to define happiness in nonhappy terms, precisely in order to escape the (very contemporary capitalist, as in Ahmed 2010? Or “Soviet”?\textsuperscript{105} imperative to be happy?

\textsuperscript{105} The village is real, but I sense that he used its name somewhat figuratively. “The village of Bobki” is the geographical periphery, and the space where Communitas begins.
Collective: the need for discipline, governmentality, and mobilisation! But in the city, he
abides by the traffic rules!” he added with satisfaction. When I told him what the traffic
police, or organizations like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, would do to him if he tried
“going into astral” in Canada, he became pensive for a while, saying nothing. Perhaps, he
contemplated these ethical, personal, and geopolitical conundrums. Should we all become
“calmed-down humans” and “merely live happily,” like they do?

4 Consuming vs. Happening: Event and the Politics
of Class

In postperestroika anthropology, there have been a number of studies examining the
changing practices of consumption (Humphrey 1995; Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Patico
and Caldwell 2002; Shevchenko 2002a and 2002b; Oushakine 2000) and corresponding
changes in the perception of social differentiation (Oushakine 2000; Patico 2005, 2008).
There has been, however, little attention paid to how the ethics and politics of
witnessing/happening—of constructing events—is constitutive of the ethical landscape of
class making. And yet, I sense that these may be not merely parallel but also necessarily
complementary approaches. The ubiquitous agreement to see a difference between events as
products (“in reality, he organises all that inside himself”; “organised ololos”) of human
making, and therefore events-for-consumption, on one hand; and “real” events (worth
witnessing), on the other, may constitute a mechanism of social differentiation. In other
words, the ethics and politics of happening—choosing what and how something is “a
happening”—becomes a tool to articulate social difference. Defining events, and therefore
the thresholds of the “extra/ordinary” in one’s life, is an intricate game of social positionality.
Displaying low thresholds may be a claim to culturedness—a sort of “princess and the pea”
principle, but in relation to eventuality rather than embodiment, with the usual concomitant
peril to project oneself as being too far above the “uncertain,” existential, and transgressive
life-forms of Communitas. Here is an example of contempt at a “lame” (from the point of
view of speaker, Roman) attempt to witness:

We were neformaly [lit. “not formal,” part of alternative culture; in Chapter 2 they
are referred to as “progressives”—as opposed to “normals”] — not like, you know—
Like that teacher, Mrs. X! That dura [idiot]! I still remember how she told us once how she was appalled at what they showed on TV, “all these sex scenes.” Her daughter, she told us, “knew better, when she saw that, she just stood up and left the room!” Then she started telling us about this movie — and we recognised the movie, and it was something so tame, like Intergirl or something! I was shocked to hear that!

The majority of my respondents, including Roman, readily complained that TV was filled with filth and violence, or served the powerful in hiding the truth, or all of the above (see Chapter 1 on the polluting influence of mass media). This, however, ought to be presented as a normal threat, business as usual, as the lived reality. In the story above, one’s ability to be shocked by TV serves to construct differences between groups of people. Claiming to see the mild eroticism of Intergirl as a happening marked the teacher as a conservative, nonprogressive intelligentsia. Her conservatism, the narrowness of her (moral) “horizons,” was shown in her disapproval of the “tame” Intergirl—in comparison with Roman and some unnamed “us.” But it was her choice to express her disapproval through witnessing that truly, shockingly, showed her conservatism. She could not see that her listeners could not possibly accept her witnessing because she had no idea of what constituted their “ordinary” worlds, their “lived reality.” Moreover, she claimed a shock, an emotional blow, for herself, but demonstrated no such thing on the part of her daughter, who “merely stood up and left the room.” She did not tell a tale of moral struggle, of fostering one’s desire, of emotional anguish, bad habits, uneasy choices, fighting boredom, etc., but an easy matter of moral and behavioural dogma (“knowing better”). Her daughter’s moral self was not a virtuously open and hence precarious subjectivity, but a closed “knowing what is what.” Roman remembered for years the social and moral difference that was displayed in the act.

His shock, however, also suggested that making a fuss about eroticism on TV at a time when most (moral) people are scanning against various threats (Chapter 5), is “having too much to eat.” To tap into this reflexivity, I once framed a question in terms of one such indication of an existential “baseline.” I asked Lilia how she would define what, to her, is bespredel. Bespredel, literally “no-limit,” lawlessness, is a prison-slang-derived, but commonly known,

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106 This was one of the first perestroika-era cinematic portrayals, indeed a rather romantic and even glamorising one, and not at all zhestky [harsh, ref. Chapter 1], about the formerly forbidden topic of prostitution.
word connoting a collapse of sociality and morality (defined also in Chapter 5). It suggests a baseline while at the same time being a space of the extraordinary. Lilia mused:

What I see as bespredel? I don’t know. I hate it when I enter my elevator to find a pile of shit in it. Or when I go on a business trip and my plane is cancelled, and no one bothers even to announce it in time for me to buy another ticket— or that I get a taxi ride and it’s raining cats and dogs, and the taxi has to stop in front of the condo gate because no cabs are allowed, and I have to walk 100 meters and get soaked anyway! (paused)—What am I talking about, though! I must have zazhralas’! [lit. “have too much to eat,” too spoilt with good fortunes].

As I already mentioned, Lilia was one of the most affluent and professionally successful among my interlocutors. Coming from a humble background, she almost lost (perhaps, wanted to lose?), but then never really lost, sight of what bespredel was really about. It shows how the rising norms of materiality, of enhanced consumption and lifestyles, are clearly seen as also changing one’s eventuality horizons, that is, affecting one’s ability to discern/construct an event-worth-witnessing—with all the moral dangers that may arise from such a shift.

The following example shows how the incommensurability of the “eventuality of consumption,” the “organised ololos,” on one hand, and the “witnessing/happening” on the other, may be transgenerationally reproduced. I was hanging out at Tatiana’s place; in the midst of our chat, Tatiana noticed the predicament of her son Lyosha (aged 11). He was given an essay assignment at school that presented a major difficulty. After an hour or two of watching him gnaw on his pen, his mother tried to come to the rescue:

Tatiana: So, the title is “Memorable Days in my Life: An Essay.” Write something—[hesitantly] for instance, how we celebrated your birthday. Or [with mounting desperation] how you were born. Write: I remember that happy day—when I was born—eleven years ago. And how my mum was happy and content—What else—tell the story about our vacation? Or may be about how you went fishing with your dad? Do you remember anything about it? What else—[long pause]. Don’t know—what else—Easter? Open our photographs from Easter and look. How we went to see the aquarium, I don’t know, was it of any interest to you?

Lyosha: Mum, I know! It was the day when we bought the computer!

The essay touched upon a touchy subject. Tatiana did her best to assume a proper Soviet-cultured, Collective (or might it be, as well, post-Soviet “middle-class”?) lifestyle, to organise and to consume the “ololos.” She aspired to fight “boredom” by voiceful
participation in “cultured activities”: “entertainment,” “leisure,” and “hobbies.” (In Russian, they would be razylecheniya, dosug, and khobbi/uvlecheniye; all are “cultured” words and connote purposefully pursued recreation). She worked hard to punctuate her family life with pool visits, holiday feasts, and coveted trips to the Turkish coast. And yet, she was hesitant to call these experiences “memorable days of one’s life.” Like bespredel, life was a framework that denied the banality of the “organised olos”—even if they were significant rites of passage like birthdays, or religious holidays like Easter. It was a real quandary: she could name a dozen organised events that also, in her understanding, were the only suitable ones for (public) presentation at school. But in life, they did not count as events, and her uncertainty about her own suggestions was quite palpable. On the other hand, I have already quoted Tatiana at length throughout this dissertation, and, hopefully, have shown that she was a masterful presenter of “horizons.” She favoured the stories of mad love and anguished marriages, the sudden encounters and near-death experiences on her road trips, and the mishaps and victories that happen in the intense world of human competition. She could make eventful an event as ordinary as finding out that her favourite jar of cream was broken by her “brats.” So the school essay presented a dilemma: what would be worthy, memorable, the experience—and yet comply with the (postperestroika, but also in many ways Soviet-intelligentsia-proper) middle-class decency codes obligatory for a school essay? Her son, however, found an event that represented (for him) the difference between “life as lived” and “as experienced,” between ordinary and extraordinary. It was the stunning moment when a new world—the Internet, virtual reality, social media—opened up to him with the purchase of the computer. Somewhat paradoxically, in this event the “organised olos” of consumption and the ethics that praises the moment when “the ordinary that freezes without a fatality because a new world opens up” (Crapanzano 2007:8) found their harmonious mutual resolution.

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107 I mentioned before that she counts herself as Orthodox, and proudly “more genuine than the majority.”
5 Modernity as “a Happening”

In Chapter 2, we met “Pirate,” a fifty-plus-year old man who leads boat cruises down the Kama River. Talking about the local sights on the cruise we took for Ekaterina’s birthday, he said:

Now, I can tell you the story of that chimney, you see there? It is the half-built and abandoned Gaiva District boiler room. It was started long ago, in the times of the Soviet Union, and was meant to heat the whole of Kamskaya Valley. So now, along the full length of that road there lie the pipes. I think the locals still have not cut them all up for scrap metal, there are still some left in the ground. Even then, at that time, when they started to build the boiler, they already had doubts about the feasibility of the project. The pipes had to be so long that all the heat would have been gone by the time it reached the valley.

To think of this, nashi [ours] are not that different from the drugiye [others; foreigners, the people from “normal” countries, the Canadas of the world]. They had the same sort of perestroikas that we did—like, plans to turn the rivers around to make them flow from north to south. Some projects were finished and some were abandoned half-way. I have read about the Panama Canal, for instance. They stole so much from the people when they were building it! And they say we built our Belomor Canal on people’s bones. They built the Panama Canal on bones all right, ten times more bones than at Belomor! Hah, you think this is morbid? Well, rejoice, because our leaders did not follow through with that river-flow-changing system of canals after all! Because if they did, we would all have died from radiation! Because they planned to build them with nuclear explosions!

Here, Pirate repeats Susan Buck-Morss’s (2000) thesis on the similarities between the Soviet and Western modernity projects. He might have read it somewhere; he might have intuited this from experience. But he certainly relished them as a familiar cultural form, the “unsurprised surprise,” the horizon-flipping: you thought we and they were so radically different? Nope! The supposedly shared “cultural codes”—the belief in the enigmatic Russian soul, the “insurmountable differences” between East and West, the tale of perpetual Western progress and Russia’s perpetual and mysterious backwardness—are the “ordinary” world-view (like “everyone loves blondes”), which is to be disproved. “We” are, after all, the same! But what is our suggested sameness? It is that “their” world is as unpredictable, violent, and absurd as ours!108 “They” also built their Panama Canals, utopias of space

108 In the prodemocracy Russian press, the argument “they are not better than us” has been identified as the result of political illiteracy and political brainwashing, and often labelled a “reverse cargo cult” (Shul’man 2014).
exploration, and welfare states, and the *bespredel* they committed in fulfilling, or half-fulfilling, “their” projects is the same as “ours.” Pirate is thankful for the accomplished feats and the strength of Soviet modernity, but he is also—sarcastically—thankful for the fact that all this might did not really materialise in full, in the form of the deadly nuclear ambition to turn the rivers around. And “they” also forgot about these ambitions, or rendered them ordinary, just like “we” did. Luck and misfortune, waste and riches, might and weakness are easily a matter of perspective or social access or assessment, and so are the beginnings and the ends of things, especially such contrived things as *projects*. The point, therefore, is not how similar or aberrant Soviet modernity was, but how important it is to understand the relative nature of normality. The “contexts,” terrifyingly but also merrily, are never in place.
Chapter 7
Driving as a Human Condition

Many people these days want to go to Tibet. To be “one with nature,” to meditate. Well, if your car broke down on the road between Novokuznetsk and Syktyvkar—you will be “one with nature,” easily, at least for three days! Sit there and meditate, until a local drunk “Dalai-Lama” “enlightens” you with the highbeams of his tractor. Mud baths on the Dead Sea? Try pouring rain in Yekaterinburg! “I want to go to Monte-Carlo, to watch a Formula 1 competition!” Really? Get into a cab in Sochi, and you will participate in one.

– Kamedi-klab, stand-up comedy TV show

Driving requires publics based on trust.


Current scholarship on automobility, the development and condition of the private means of transportation, puts in doubt the previously axiomatic connection between automobility and “modern” and “liberal-democratic” forms.109 Daniel Miller (2001:10) points out that “all sorts of sweeping generalisations as to the implications of the car to the more general ‘modernity’” were conditioned by a “lack of empathetic observation,” and need a “correction to the moral and political discourses, and the wider sense of risk.” Indeed, an increase in car ownership does not “automatically signal an increase of privatisation, individualization, emotionalisation” (Seiler 2012:378), nor do cars necessarily produce an experience of “pleasure, excitement, mastery and similar positive feelings” (Freund and Martin 1993:97).

Investigation of emergent car cultures, however, put in doubt whether it is useful to imagine some sort of generalizable “automobility” at all. In Russia, the relative number of cars remains low at the rate of 317 vehicles per 1,000 in 2014, compared to 809 per 1,000 in the

109 Revisions of Cold War paradigms are slower to come. The recent study Cars for Comrades (Siegelbaum 2008) claims that it was the (implicitly capitalist, consumerist, and technological-modern) desire of former Soviet citizens for cars that brought the Soviet power to its demise.
United States,\textsuperscript{110} but the rate of increase has been dramatic. The incoming glut of cars, however, was never met with an adequate increase in infrastructure. Roads, traffic regulations, driver education, car registration, emergency response systems, etc., continue to bear the stamp of Soviet practices and designs. They strain to accommodate the new car culture in a way that would conform Russian “automobility” with automobility canons—as “an interlocking set of economic, social, philosophical, legal, political, and aesthetic structures and psychological dispositions that facilitates automobile use on a grand scale” (Seiler 2012:358, emphasis mine).

But “car culture” is increasingly permeating both “life” and “words.” In 2009, media sites like lenta.ru mirrored this prominence by collecting all things automobile in a special rubric “Avto” [auto], high up in the site architecture alongside “Medicine,” “Finances,” and “Society,” but contrasting them by its stark red colour.\textsuperscript{111} I coded my fieldnotes accordingly, marking quotes and observations that were about, or made while being in, private automobiles. On one hand, these notes showed a normalisation of private car ownership, and its growing role as one of the markers of the elusive “middle-classness.”\textsuperscript{112} It became, as Maksim would say, “normal’no,” good/normal. People said things like: a car is “the means of transportation”; “life is hustling, and you cannot hustle without a car”; and a “car is an investment—it helps me to make a living.” These claims to pragmatism, however, did little to confine automobility to the routine imaginations of the everyday commute. Driving was veselo, fun (Maksim’s thoughts on veselo, living merrily, are described in Chapter 6), close to anything can happen (“the wider,” yet locally developed, “sense of risk,” to use once more Miller’s understanding quoted above), and related to witnessing. Driving was “storiable”—something about which stories could be told—and charged with sentiment and the minute details of physical and psychological struggles: spatial positions on the road; distances and routes, movements and sensations of travel; the sense of getting lost; encounters with other


\textsuperscript{111} Other important entries were “Culture,” “Technologies,” “Germany,” “Weapons,” and “Advertising.”

\textsuperscript{112} Debt is sometimes thought as another marker of middle-classness, and indeed, the proliferation of cars grew along, and in conjunction with, the proliferation of debt mechanisms in Putin’s decade.
drivers, pedestrians, and police; and the moments of pure perception and slowing of time in the face of an imminent collision.

This non/normalisation of driving made it fitting material for the genre of witnessing and unsurprised surprise (Chapter 6), projecting various aspects of automobiles as “the expected” and “the unexpected,” to the narrator’s self and on the listeners. A (pseudo)sociology (a term explained in the Introduction) of driving developed. Pedestrians versus drivers, people on buses and people in cars, drivers of expensive and inexpensive cars, driving in summer and in winter, in the capital and in the provinces: these dynamics and relations were all cross-referenced in the game of witnessing. Other “expectations”— gender norms, the meaning of public space, and the perpetual moral ambiguity of the boundary between conspicuous consumption and “simplicity” (ref. Chapter 2)—were recounted and then rebuked. Here are three examples of talk that exemplify the “sociology of driving”:

Batyr, while driving: I walk a lot, these days. And you know, the more krutoy [decked out and expensive] the car is, the likelier it gives way to a pedestrian. And some shitty devyatka, or kopeyka, or pyaterka [locally made models, somewhat contemptuously referred to by their numbers] will always push forward [pryot]. And also, women [drivers]! Always, always—I cannot stop to be amazed at that—they never let you pass in front of them, even when I walk with my kid. So surprising!

Maksim, while driving, “communicating” with another car on the road: What is he doing, what is it? He doesn’t move, and does not let me go on! (AK: Look at the plate number, 777). Yeah, a blatnoy [conspicuously expensive and often indicating a mafia relation] number. I know a lot of businessmen, many are very successful. And you know, they don’t need blatnoy numbers on their cars to feel happy! Because they are already moral’no udevlerevnyi [lit. “morally satisfied,” voicefully inarticulate and happy]. They think their lives are good enough. They work themselves, and let other people make money, too— (with satisfaction) I once talked with a traffic police officer, a friend of mine, and he said they always charge more to the guys who have such numbers.

Taxi driver: I have a buddy in Moscow. He said, “You think you have traffic jams in Perm’? What you have in Perm’, is not ‘jams.’ What we have in Moscow, is jams.” He went once to do an errand, and this thing took him forty minutes to do. But to get back, he spent eight hours on the road. Eight hours to do a forty-minute job! Myself, when it is rush hour in Perm’, I don’t work at all. Because it is not worth it to sit in traffic for hours for a hundred roubles.

In the same spirit of witnessing, I will proceed to show that automobility is not a triumphant sweep over new consumerist masses, but a field of both globally and locally meaningful contestations.
The chapter will deal with four key issues. The first section, “Terrain,” reflects on how relationships are constructed between the driver and the environment. Terrain is a category that breaks the dichotomy of the space and place in ways that, as I see it, are most relevant to my informants’ automobile experience (see Gordillo 2014). It reflects a morality of bodily embeddedness in the world (see sensory utopia in Chapter 2), and that appears in its more stoic and heroic aspect in the automotive experience.

The second section, “Emotions and Intimacies,” explores how automobility informs, and is informed by, modes of relatedness. A sensual desire for a car/object is rarely publicly acknowledged. It is undermined, in part by the antifetishist tradition (see Chapter 2) and in part by an equally moralised pragmatic focus on a car’s toughness and durability. This draws attention away from the relationships between consumer/driver and car/object, and to the embeddedness of both the driver and the car in the terrain.

Driving provides cherished opportunities for a “third space” and “third time”—the space and time outside of both work and family. Family, however, reclaims space and time persistently with taken-for-granted errands and chauffeuring. Finally, with friends, the affections of the road encompass a familiar spirit of communitas (drinking and driving, passengering, cruising). The reality of the road as a terrain of mortal danger, and a particularly unloaded (unreflective, nonthinking, inarticulate; see Chapter 1) agency of automobility, impart these meanings with particular poignancy.

The third part of the chapter discusses driving as an arena of unrelenting vigilance (see Chapter 5) and cunning mutual surveillance between drivers, pedestrians, and the state. With the proliferation of dashboard cameras, Russian automotive habits are now also scrutinised by international audiences. Bringing together vigilance and affective bankruptcies (see Chapter 3), I address the puzzlement of English-speaking international commentators at the reaction (or, the lack of reaction) of “Russian” drivers when, in 2013, the sky over the city of Chelyabinsk exploded with a meteorite.

Better roads and an increase in driving-related litigation show the ways in which the sensibilities of terrain may be seen as disappearing. The case of the Blue Bucket Society, discussed in the last section, shows, however, that the very “modernity” of civil rights
movements continues to rely on these sensibilities in order to create a truly public commons. In the last section, I briefly discuss this relationship between automobility, power, and justice as it evolves in the public aftermath of several high-profile traffic accidents.

1 Terrain

In 2013, Batyr was still renting an apartment, but had finally made enough money to purchase a status car. His new Jeep, I was told, was showcased proudly to all. I recalled, however, that a Jeep was not at the top of his mind when I asked him, in 2010, what his ideal (ideal’niy, perfect) car would be. To my surprise, his ideal was not a particular model or even a brand, but a kind of sci-fi amphibian vehicle that could go on water as well as on the road. (It echoed, of course, his love for rafting, but pleasure boats and rafts are a very common sensory-utopic imaginary.) My question, perhaps by choosing the word ideal’niy, prompted him to look beyond the mere-mortal realm of the usual assortment at Perm’s car dealerships. Yet, he did not choose a flying car, which would resolve any number of his usual driving woes, from bad roads to traffic police, nor was it some sort of fantastic Batmobile with a range of subtle capabilities. An amphibian car, as I see it, expresses the passion for terrain that Gaston Gordillo (forthcoming) attributes to “proximity wingsuit flyers” (or base jumpers): the enthusiasts of skydiving who free-fall alongside and in close proximity to mountainous slopes and rock formations.

Gordillo notes that the consensual theoretical separation between space and place is missing something that is very important for our understanding of spatiality. Space is understood as a condition, a background to human participation. It is a container (or, perhaps, an “affordance”) that shapes and brackets the meaning to which humans assign it. Places, on the contrary, are the portions of space that are grounded by meaning, belonging, and other “place-making” processes. In Russian, the word for space is “prostranstvo,” a combination of the prefix “through” and an ancient root indicating all sort of stretching and surfacing. Prostranstvo is punctuated by places, “mesto,” which also means “a seat” (of/for somebody). Drivers, though, often traverse stretches/spaces of highway that are neither uninhabited two-dimensional (Gordillo ibid.) spaces nor grounded, inhabited stationary human placements.
They are engaged with terrain—*mest-nost*’—which is “place” (*mesto*) but with a suffix that renders it a quality of uncertainty. Terrain is “place-ity.”

Terrain/place-ity is a challenge that does not exist in and for itself, but is meaningful only through the potentiality of being known, engaged with, investigated, or bodily traversed. This meaning is reflected in the popular saying “There are no roads, only directions.” As Yakov, a family friend, once explained:

> My daughter got stuck many times. Because the psychology there is that, like, if you are in a Jeep then you can go anywhere! In reality, there are no roads, only directions. Though, I got stuck myself, thank god there were some construction workers nearby, *muzhichki*, dragged me out.

“No road, only directions” does not mean that roads do not exist; it means that roads are not the *spaces* of a techno-utopia, but merely show the directions to be manifested and en-placed by *prostoy* (“simple”) ways of engagement. Travelling on a road is a moral-heroic pledge to bring the human body into a space, and the space into the human body. Pavel imagined that I, a “Canadian,” might think of driving as a mostly disembodied progression along a smooth road, in a *komfortabel’nyi avto* (cushy car, expressed in emphatically foreign-derivate words), facilitated by hydraulic steering and cruise control. He witnessed to the contrary:

> [W]hen you drive, your muscles work all the time! Seriously! Recently there was a situation. I drove. Snowdrifts piled up—But they cleaned the roads a bit. Well, a lane at least. So I go and see a huge pile of snow right in front of me. And from behind this snow pile—a huge car muzzle, going right into me! For fuck’s sake! I was driving in an oncoming lane, it turned out! So, I—one! Step on the gas, blow the horn, hop-hop-hop! Two, turn the wheel at the same time—signal with lights, and gear up, to make the car jump, you know, over all these humps and bumps and the tracks in the snow—Circus! (laughs)

Like any unskilled, mindless bodily work, driving is presence without the *burdening* of semiotic pollution: an autonomous, individuated—but not “individualised”—self-expansion.

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113 Like the English “–ity,” it is used to transform ajectives/qualifiers into nouns (as in clear—*clarity*); a transformation which, in my mind, always retains the vagueness inherent in qualifiers.

114 This is the common usage of the word *muzhik* in such stories. While meaning male peasant in Old Russian, its contemporary usage seems to indicate both “human” and (real) “man,” for example, a “good Samaritan” who offers help for nothing or, rather, token compensation, in this universal liquidity of Russian communitas, in the form of a bottle of vodka. Even if the Samaritan drove an expensive car, once he stopped to help, he would still be referred to as *muzhik* (though the compensation would likely be dropped in this case).
through the terrain. The muscles are not simply strained, but in time become sentient, transforming the bodily work of driving into a moral practice: the good body overcoming the “concrete” terrain, is juxtaposed with the “abstract” political body, starting with the body of the state. A mutual acquaintance once told me that someone like “soldier” Stepan (the policeman) “cannot become a politician” because he would “lose the ground under his feet.” In his career, Stepan should remain voicefully inarticulate. Similarly, a good driver should “feel the road with her feet,” as Ekaterina explained:

[T]hat is what they taught us at driving school—do not go around a hole in the road, let it go between the wheels…watch out all the time, learn to feel the road with your feet! Yes, think about the road with your feet, that is the thing. Now I do not think with my head when I drive. And that man who drives behind us, he also knows that I will drive over this hole…and now, if I drive on a smooth road, if ever, then really—I fall asleep! We even rejoice when we return back to our kind of roads—lo, finally a chance to wake up.\(^{115, 116}\)

Thus, the transformation of bad roads into good roads is all well and good except that people who are used to the terrain, get sleepy (that is, *bored*, see Chapter 3).

But they are in little danger. The process of modernization, articulation, is too slow to endanger the terrain. “Proper” roads—the modern, flat, two-dimensional technological stretches—seem to exist only in order to turn into gravel roads and then into dusty lanes in a village where huge cut tree branches block the road in front of every house, a device by which villagers make passing cars slow down into safe and dustless zigzag crawls. When “proper” roads turn into “our kind of roads,” drivers have to account for the change from alienation to embeddedness, and from two dimensions to three dimensions. Depth matters, and often it matters suddenly, as seen in these examples:

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\(^{115}\) An example of the “good fusion” of the political body and the terrain is perhaps the story, which was part of the school program in literature, about the war hero pilot Meresyev who was shot out of the sky, wounded, but crawled out of enemy territory—literally scraping many kilometres of ground with his entire body.

\(^{116}\) Sensorial merging with the road is merging with nature, and is, of course, the echo of the Rousseauistic sensory utopia described in Chapter 2. What is interesting, here, is how the car itself—the pedals—seems to be bypassed in this union (“feel the road with your feet”). To be moral is to be sensual, but the driver “merges,” through her senses, not with the car but with the “road,” the terrain that stands for “the world.”
News report: A car slid under the ice during an attempt to cross the Kama River. The driver tried a shortcut. To cross the river, the ice should be at least sixty centimetres thick. Last night it was only eight centimetres. The driver got out of the car in time.

Mikhail (b. 1976, contractor): Imagine when the coating of tarmac disappears from under you, at the speed of seventy kilometres per hour? X was driving at night, and there the tarmac was cleared. They started repairs and didn’t put any signs up, they forget. His whole family was in the car. Lucky guy. The traffic police was driving by, they measured the level difference—twenty centimetres. All four wheels exploded under him.

Roman: We went to Berezniki [town] and almost got into a nasty accident. It was on a federal highway. There was an end to Perm’s cleaning service’s zone of responsibility—and the zone of responsibility of the Dobryanka city municipality started, ha-ha. And Dobryanka started on a sharp downward slope! The difference in road level! Huge hole in the snow. You see, the federal service decided it was not theirs from that point—all four tires blew. And we were driving at 120 per hour. And we went into a spin. And were dragged onto the oncoming traffic lane. And we had three KAMAZ trucks coming towards us. We swirled back into our lane, backside forward. I was driving, and I had a can of beer in my hand—frightened, I squeezed it—beer waterworks in the car! There was lot of blood, of course. But we were lucky. We peed on a wheel right after. (AK: Why?) Well, I don’t know, tradition. Then we drove on, much slower, of course.

Irina, talking with me on the phone, in wintertime: Here, the traffic police stop all the trucks. The trucks are up high with their tall wheels, pressing the snow down into tracks. After them, no lightweight car will be able to pass—or it will pass and get stuck. I better ride a bus.

Irina, driving and muttering to herself, in summertime: Bumps and hillocks, but these ones I know —We will simply get shaken if we get into one —That was nothing—because here, we turn to another road, and that’s a doozy! And the rain has now started—(to her son) Remember we drove here in the rain? When suddenly we could see nothing at all? We simply had to stop and wait.

Breadth, depth, and traction are all relative on the road. With the same relativity a terrain may erupt into a full-on place. A person stuck on the road has to be prepared to make the road a temporary abode and a place of belonging. When I told Piotr about the news on Canadian TV that helicopters were called on to lift drivers stuck in a traffic jam on an interurban highway, he replied:

Our muchiki, they are prepared for everything. If they are on the road, they have a gas cooker with them, some produce, a cooking pot. How can it be another way? Your car breaks down, you are obligated [obyazan] to survive! No way around it. This is from the Soviet times. My father was often on trips on behalf of the factory he
He took food and blankets and a little cooking fire with him at all times. Once the car breaks down, one cannot count on anything but oneself. No service, no transport. You sit in one place and fix your car. You cook, eat, and you tinker again. You fix it, you get on the road, and you will live. Vse khorosho [everything is good/you feel good]. And in the West, they hope to just make a phone call and get lifted out!

In imagination, the road does not compress space and time; instead, it compresses the range of articulation. It shows how immanent and yet surprising the modern state and its apparatus of rules merge with the casual, the informal, and the unpredictable. High-tech surveillance, bureaucracy, and its uniformed representatatives merge with terrain, weather, emotion, extortion, road rage. Roman recalled, “I was in the city of X. I thought we have bad roads in Perm’. They have worse! I saw a cop checking documents on the road, and he did not stop the cars to do that. He simply walked alongside the road—they drove so slowly along all these potholes that he did not have to stop them!” Another friend invoked the same image: “In the mornings, I drive especially carefully—the road is slippery, and the cops are hungry.”

Automobility is supposed to decrease the risks associated with stranger sociality. Protective car-bubbles provide anonymity, even invisibility. Their choreographed ballet is regulated by the laws of physics and by traffic rules. Traffic rules in particular command respect and are described in nonsardonic terms, a rarity in comparison with the generally cynical understanding of the legal sphere. It does not mean that the rules are not broken, on a regular basis, or that the rules are not manipulated and abused by those who establish them. But their general legitimacy and necessity as rules, is acknowledged earnestly, and in absolute rather than relative, situational, or socially conditioned terms. They are articulations, state laws, but in no case can they be abandoned to cynical reason, to volubility. Anatolii said, “The way I look at it, when the road has dividing lines and other signs, it is pravil’no

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117 The English shorthand for this is usually, “on business.” The Russian word is “komandirovka,” literally commandeering someone to go and fulfil a task, as in military mobilisation.

118 When we passed a cop talking to a driver one time, Sergey said, “Oh, someone got caught, again. Under that brick sign. They always catch people here. Look, he led the driver to look at the sign. This is how they make money, putting a sign here and catching people. Why put up this sign here? (AK: To regulate the traffic?) What regulation, Anya, you are so naïve! What harm is that people pass through this lane? They say that in the West, they first record which lanes are most used by drivers, and then put up signs accordingly, to make drivers’ lives easier—and here they do the opposite, so they can make more money in fines.”
If people abided by them, everything would be normal’.

Knowing the rules is a case for pride and justice: “I will not let him pass, I know the rules”; “On their side, it was nothing but bluff, I knew the rules”; “I know the rules, and let them write me a fine, they won’t prove it.”

Spatial and verbal negotiations on the road often fall out of the rut of the prescriptions of “culturedness” (Chapter 2), or traffic-related designs. The car’s protective bubble can burst easily and frequently when one has to get out and “negotiate with those Lexuses” and their stranger-drivers. The interesting thing about these negotiations, the stories show, is precisely how the wide range of articulation can expand—or contract—within a short time. (I asked Pavel, “Do you have a baseball bat in your car?” Pavel replied, embarrassed-but-not-embarrassed, in the affirmative.) Maksim recalled, half-mockingly, his experiences of the day:

I poluchil travmu [was traumatised] today! They naekhali na menya [drove over me—intimidated me, ref. Chapter 4]. I did not expect it. I just drove up to the gas station. Every hose is locked, only one works, and there is a line. I drove up and took a place in line behind a man. He takes his time. And then I see a car driving up from the opposite side, against the rules! I drove in to block it, and this woman in the Lexus [expensive, status car] just tries to push me over! I tell her, “You are coming from the wrong side!” She says, “So what, can’t you let a lady first?” I say, “Sure, god bless you.” She fills up—I try to move—there is another car right behind her. The guy in the car says, “I have been waiting in this line!” And he is a huge guy, you know. But I told him, “Listen, I already had a squabble with that woman. You can go after me.” He said all right.

He feels apologetic for his lament: “I have not had such situations for a while, you know, and it was a stressful day altogether.” Maksim always impressed me (and others) with his talent for steering any situation to the extremes of formality (by playing up the rules, he got out of a fine for bringing a hunting knife through airport security), or informality, according to his interest. Yet, this understanding of how quickly a situation can “descend” into an informal, uncertain, and violent turn (compare above “the Dobryanka zone of cleaning responsibility started on the steep downward slope!”) took a toll on his nerves. He tried to insist on the

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119 More in popular imagination, but also in practice, a baseball bat is a common travel-friendly tool of intimidation. A joke has it that “Yankees” must be puzzled as to the reason why Russia imports many baseball bats, but no balls.
formality of rules with the Lexus driver, who was clearly in the wrong, but she played the “gender card” by pointing to the informal customs of chivalry. He agreed. The next in line could not ask for a gender discount but instead looked menacing, playing the “violence card.” In matter of minutes, Maksim had to consider and change his perspective from the comfortable (but boring) alienation of formal rules, to informal (sentimental) flirting, to the possibility of violence.

The trajectory of the situation, however, does not always descend from rules into a bespredel (discussed in Chapter 4). A situation that starts with the expectation of profanity, shouting, or a fight, may unexpectedly progresses to flirting, and then toward a consensus on the legal resolution of the matter. Tatiana’s story had such an “upward” direction:

I ran into a truck the other day. Just caught on it lightly, with my bumper. And you know, the muzhik who drove that truck, was so normal, so funny! Usually, you know, people start shouting, “What are you doing! Ah! Eh!” And this one, he joked, said to me—“Miss, ordinarily, do you drive normally? Is it something special about today? Seasonal, perhaps?” He then asked, “Shall we call the police to make the report?” I looked and the scratch on my car was really nothing, so I let him go [without asking him to stay and help to arrange for her insurance claim; apparently, the tuck was even less damaged].

Money, that famous signature of modern alienation, is also wonderfully/dismally physical in the world of cars. This non/normality was not lost on Irina when we went to the market to sell her old car. When the deal was over and the money was counted, she noted, “Just like that, people do the exchanges right in front of the registration booth out there. You give us the documents, we give you the money! Imagine, millions of roubles are handed over, on the hoods of cars.” Instead of compressing time and miles, car hoods serve the same function that, some say, wooden barrels served to pirates who sought to increase the credibility of the deal through its visibility, without all the banks and their mediation.

The sale was a festive occasion and something of a graduation. Dmitry, Irina’s husband, said, “When you are a novice driver, you will beat your car, it is inevitable. So no one buys a good car for their first car. She killed her bumper, on the first day of driving. The whole thing. On the second day, drove into a post at our dacha. But the most serious so far was ‘catching’ four cars on the road, all at once. She stopped, and burst into tears right there and then. We gave away twenty grand. All our vacation money.” Irina is much more sure-footed now: “I spent
three months educating myself about how to recognise a lemon, on those forums on the Internet. You have to watch out. The distance between the wheels, the smoothness of the doors. You have to look at the car from the distance, to better catch a change in colour, the sign that it was repainted. Well, Dmitry helps too, he knows cars.”

The “watching out,” vigilance, started as soon as we drove into the large urban wasteland that was the market. The perekupy, market price hawkers, tried to stop the car, looking into windows, shouting offers into Irina’s ear: “Sixty!” “Sixty-five!” As if having poor hearing, they pressed on, not accepting her refusals, insisting on the prices and pushing stacks of money into the car windows. Finally, after getting through the rows of perekupy, Irina remarked with satisfaction: “I am blonde, but they think I am blonde.” The trade was brisk; in ten minutes the car was evaluated by five potential customers, and to one of them Irina gave a ride. The car was sold for seventy-four thousand roubles to a young couple whom Irina instructed with almost maternal care: “Watch out, the front doors lock automatically, but the rear doors you have to lock yourself.” The couple almost drove away with their purchase but returned to give Irina two packs of cigarettes she had forgotten in the glove compartment. Irina, in a rare show of affection, blew a kiss: “Drive safely! It was a good little car.” Her “graduate” acquisition is a Renault:120 “A presidential car in France, they say. It was not made for bad roads. But, well, now the president will ride the bad roads, to her dacha. The president should be closer to the simple [prostoy] people (chuckles)!”

2 Automotive Emotions

Sensual desires for car-objects may have been truly felt and acted upon, but rarely admitted.121 Irina’s blown kiss to her “little car” was a rare show of affection, and perhaps,

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120 This car was bought entirely on credit. In 2014, their household unit consumer debt was about twenty times Irina’s monthly salary.

121 But cf. Pischikova 2014. In Rostislav Kononenko’s 2011 study of Russian automobility, it is also more prominent. The reason for that may be demographic and methodological: first, much of his field was conducted with the avtolyubiteli (lit., “auto-lovers”) clubs and car collectors. It also appears that his informants are on the whole younger than mine. Soviet antifetishism does not seem to be a part of their vocabulary.
more of a show of femininity. Perhaps it is because the car “is not a luxury but a means of transportation,” according to the famous slogan invented in the 1920s, when the young Soviet state started its own automobility project. In the 1970s, one was still allowed to need a car—for adventure, to fight the routine, the boredom; for spontaneous trips and merging with nature—but not to desire the car itself, not substituting “true” desires with a false one (see Chapter 3). Among my informants, the “desire for a car as a consumer object” still exists more as a reflection, and moralising projection, connected in the imagination with the West and with imported cars. A song about owning an Audi both mocks and admits this desire, hinting at foreignness at every line: “Here, look at me, I am the Lord of the Rings.”

Tim Dant (2004) suggests expanding the ways we look at the modes of ordinary relationship with the car. Car repair, and not consumer desire, is what seems to draw the interest of sociologists and anthropologists who look at post/Soviet car cultures. Daphne Berdahl (2000) describes the national love in the German Democratic Republic for the car model “Trabi.” While entirely unrepresentative of the famous German quality, it became a major symbol of (socialist) nostalgia (or Ostalgia, ibid.). People seem to miss the particular type of affectivity these cars symbolised: the dogged obstinacy of an ordinary guy who would spare no effort to “get” and maintain his beloved lifetime possession of the locally made auto.

The Russian counterparts to the Trabi continue to be “resurrected” today. In narratives, fixing and caring is linked to themes of personal maturation and masculine identity (Kononenko 2009, 2011). Similarly to the DDR, the culture of do-it-yourself maintenance and the resurrection of older cars may be linked to nostalgia, to the relationship with older generations, and to historical consciousness. But for the same reason, such “car intimacy” might be stigmatised as a “Soviet” and “culture of poverty” “mentality.” It also may be that the coaxing, personalising attention to cars, “feeling that it is better my body was scratched than the car body” (Kononenko 2011:145), may be an unaffordable expenditure of “energy” (as discussed in the first four chapters), considering how close most of them come to scratching (at least) that car body. Sergey, when I asked him when the last time he had been in an accident, replied: “Ah, just this January. ‘Did not take into account the weather

\[122\] Audi’s logo is four interlinked rings.
condition’ [standard phrase from a police accident report]. Yeah, life taught me [byla mne nauka]. Had to sue to claim insurance, and spent half a year without a car.” Mikhail also spoke about almost getting in an accident:

Three times today, I almost got into an accident! First, I go on the green light, and some idiot moves out into the crossing. Not only that, he stopped and just stood there! Next, I turned in the direction of the city. There was a truck formation in front of me, so I started passing them. The trucks have like zero distance between them, and there is, like, only half a kilometre to the oncoming car. And then the truck to the right of me just stops, so I have nowhere to go! Brakes screeched like crazy, my father in law, usually a calm man, freaked out! Then on the way back I pass the same crossing and a man almost drives into me. With an unbuckled kid at his side! He gets out of the car and shouts at me, “Don’t you know the rules?” I pulled out my police id [which was outdated] and told him: “I read the rules every day, you moron!” He started hiccupping [with fear].

In public, both women and men treat their cars with respectful, rather than sensual, affection. Highlighting need and not desire, their romance with their cars is a voenno-polevoy (wartime) romance that focuses on off-road (or, as it was described above, on-direction) capability and pure physical toughness. Here is a sample of the expressions of admiration related by my respondents:

Anatolii: Niva, it may not be beautiful, but its prokhodimost’ [lit. “go-through-ability”] is unbelievable! There is a twenty-kilometre stretch before my dacha that is never cleared. I have pulled out all sorts of cars that stuck there…all these navorochemniye [heavy, and equipped with bells and whistles] kruzeri [cruisers]. And Niva…just wrap some chains on its wheels, and it is a tank!

Sasha: This crack in my window shield? The winter was frosty. Some air got stuck within, and it cracked. Apart from that, though, it is a sturdy little car.

Mikhail: I was offered that car for 250,000. It is a very good price for such tough steel, so I think I will take it.123

Daniel Miller (2001:17–21) looks at automobility in Trinidad through the prism of the conflicted values of its inhabitants. A contradiction between obligation to family, on one hand, and radical individuality and sexual freedom on the other, is expressed in displays of

123 Brand managers catch up on these trends, foregoing the imagery of the sensual and the fetishistic “feeling of the wheels,” “sound of the motor,” and “new car smell.” The culmination of that was, perhaps, the 2008 Russia Jeep division campaign. To the tunes of WWII songs, several tanks swirled around in an open field, mauling several Jeep off-rovers. Jeeps were smashed, though not without giving a good fight, and strengthening the “like a tank” association.
automotive domesticity and comfort: the use of furs and fabric, elaborate colour schemes, toys and other domestic objects. Cars in Trinidad, Miller suggests, became both the expression of this contradiction and the means to resolve it—they are domestic spaces but they are “out there.”

Cars and garages in Russia have long been a separate “third space” specifically for males (Kononenko 2011) that exist outside the surveillance of the state and separate from colleagues and wives. Outside state, work, and family, driving finds itself in proximity to affective catharsis, in the form of dramas of love and “feats of madness.”124 In this anecdote, Lilia invokes danger, dreams, and fate:

He told me that story, why he thinks this woman is his fate. He was a passenger in a car and fell asleep. He dreamt about that woman, and she told him, in a dream, “Wake up!” He woke up and saw that the driver dozed off, and they were driving into the oncoming traffic lane. He reached the steering wheel just in time... He told her afterwards, “You saved me.”

Roman defined his “mad,” cathartic drunken cruising with his friend (Chapter 3), in terms of going “astral”—which may be understood as closer to an “out of body experience” rather than “the prosthetic qualities of the car-driver body.” Available today for both men and women, driving is an “affective fix” (Berlant 2007b), a feeling—or the promise of a feeling—that is taken for a sign that one is not affectively bankrupt. In other words, the “madness” of driving implies the normalcy of the driver. “I visited her at work. Bad luck—I entered without knocking, and she was kissing some boy, a young boy at that. I drove away, like I was rabid. X begged me [on the phone] to slow down because he could hear the speed I was driving at.” Tatiana described a time when the heat apparently made her drive like a madwoman:

My car air conditioner died. The heat started, and I went—I knew the road so well. I knew perfectly it was a roundabout. I saw perfectly the car in front of me. I realise that now, I have to stop, or I will drive into its bumper---and I don’t. I think that I need to press the clutch, and I don’t. I swerved aside at the last moment. Everyone

124 In my discussion of “outsourced subjugations,” I described how Tatiana bought a less powerful car to curb her desire for speed, and Batyr’s practice of watching accidents to keep himself from speeding. Another popular role of the car in the regime of outsourced subjugations relates to alcohol: “I would give up the car, but then I will sop ‘yus’ [ruin myself through drinking]. It is good to have a 100 percent-proof excuse when you are pressed to drink. It is a very big advantage of owning a car.”
was watching me like I was mad/stunned [v okhuye, derivative of okhuyet’ from Chapters 4 and 6].

Irina, during an awful health crisis with her husband, went out to sit in the car to escape work and her family, the places where she could show no weakness. Turning the radio on, she “bellowed” out songs and finished her “therapy” (my expression, not hers) with a cigarette.

But this status of a car as a “third” place is particularly contested by the family, especially by women towards their men, who still constitute the majority of drivers though the situation is changing rapidly. Gender norms proclaim men to be closer to the outdoors (in the domestic division of labour, taking out the trash is one male chore that women are adamant about). Men are more intimate with dangerous objects (if there are a lot of potatoes to peel, it is also likely to be delegated to the men of the family), chivalrous, and entitled to most, if not all, of the car time. Begrudgingly but stoically, men comply with endless chauffeuring obligations such as getting up at six in the morning to get the kids to the kindergarten and the wife to work. If the car does not start in the depths of winter, he takes it to the body shop for the purchase of new oil, and so on. Caught in the webs of self-appointed family passengering, Batyr could cope with the situation only by finding it veselo, “merry/fun”—and juxtaposing the ban on joking, or otherwise informal, relationships with mothers-in-law with the morality of useless “precautions” and “preparations” (see Chapter 5):

I was told by the cop, “Your passenger is not wearing her safety belt.” I told him, “It is my mother-in-law! Do you tell your mother-in-law to buckle up?” He says, “Ah, mother-in-law. Okay, just give me a hundred roubles and go.” Next time I drive, everything is fine. Midnight, my mother-in-law is strapped in. They stop me to check the safety certificate. They say, “It is already past midnight, so the next month has just begun, and your certificate is not up to date. Move your car to the retention lot!”

Friends who become stuck on the road, or hear a troubling noise under their car hoods, cannot be refused help either. As in China, giving or withholding help to the victims of traffic accidents has become a measurement of society’s “moral health.” In 2011, the BBC reported that “a fierce debate [was] gripping the Russian internet forums over a police stunt

125 These may still be realised quite differently; cf. the article on “Good Samaritan’s new trouble” (Yan 2009). In China, the problem is that people who stop to help victims of traffic accidents are then extorted by the victims. For all the zeal on the part of the Russian media to find mediatisable examples of cynicism, I have not heard of such a story.
to highlight indifference towards the aftermath of traffic accidents. A fake accident scene was staged in a village in the Astrakhan region in which a boy of 14 was covered in fake blood and placed face down by a road. Some drivers slowed down but no-one called for help, police said.  

Similarly, Elena’s story about getting into an accident and being ignored by other drivers was a way to lament the moral degradation of contemporary Russia:

People have become zliye [from zloba, angry/evil, see Chapter 3], Anya. Me and my daughter, we were going on that highway from the airport on a winter day. The car skidded on ice and started turning, spinning. We spun for a hundred meters—smashed into the sign “Attention! This stretch of the road is accident-prone”—turned over, full somersault, and landed on four wheels in a gutter. People saw it happening, and no one even stopped to check on us! Two women in a car tumbling over, and no one stopped! What more can one say? What?

All sorts of contextual justifications can be imagined for all sorts of abominable acts—stealing, for sure, but also even murder. I once asked Roman if he would buy a house if it had been owned by a murderer. He said “Why [such a question]? First, how would you know such thing about a house? And second, well. I would wonder how he became a murderer, whom did he kill… There can be various circumstances in life [that is, anything can happen, see Chapter 5].” But the moral laws of terrain are unambiguous, and the fact that help on the road may be relativised, instead of being an absolute imperative, is abhorred as a bitter sign of an impotent/corrupt/state/modernity, as seen in this comment from Batyr:

We live cheerfully, something always happens. A buddy called me. He got into an accident. I came to help. The cars are still in the middle of X street. Two accidents, like, a hundred meters apart. In the first car, a pregnant woman was hurt. In my buddy’s car the hood got folded like an accordion, the radiator was pushed into the front seat, one passenger flew into the window shield, a woman in the back seat broke her nose against the headrest. And, you would not believe it, they are all laughing. They were all in shock, of course. Frightening to look at, but that is the organism’s defensive reaction [zaschitnaya reaktsiya organizma]. And everyone is on their phone, calling the police, the paramedics. But it took the paramedics one and a half hours to come. We call them, “Why are you not here?” They say, “We did not get a request!” A police car went by, they did not even stop! Traffic cops came after two hours, started measuring stuff. I asked one of them, “Why do you look so tired?” He said, “I was at ten accidents today—that is the accidents where people got hurt, and twenty-five altogether. I don’t go to all of them but choose the ones designated as ‘aggravated’ and ‘very aggravated.’ Here you have got ‘aggravated’ but in that other

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126 BBC News, June 17, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13815429. The outrage was, among other things, about the use of the child, but organisers pointed out that their intent was to show the lack of “the discipline of driving” on Russian roads.
car, where the pregnant woman is hurt, it is ‘very aggravated.’” They have only two or three inspectors for a district, imagine! One car! No wonder I waited once three or four hours. He said, “Be glad you did not wait till the next morning…”

3 The Chelyabinsk Meteorite: Scanning Regimes and the “Unemotionality” of Vigilance

Batyr drove a lot for work, and also tried to make a rouble by offering fares at night. I asked him to take me along. He picked me up at nine in the evening, and phoned his friends at once to announce that we were katayemsya, driving around for fun, a motorised equivalent of strolling (see Chapter 2). I realised that his “cabbage” had an additional—or perhaps focal—benefit of being a third space outside of work and home, where he, a teetotaller with a serious addiction, was not tempted to spend money or drink. Climbing in the low-slung Toyota, “white as snow” in its owner’s words, I inquired idly if picking up fares was legal and if he was worried about getting caught (thinking to myself that the familiar structures of vigilance and prudence would be accepted as a good conversation starter). It did not work. Batyr raised his bushy brows at me quizzically, repeating almost verbatim the words of my real estate agent in reference to potential landlords (in Chapter 5)—“So what? They cannot do anything about it.” This, apparently, was one danger not to look out for. It was laughable to assume that a local cop would fish for such trifles. “And besides,” added Batyr, thinking that maybe I meant a moral reproach, “my fares are cheaper than taxis! I save simple/prostoy people money.”

The talk then turned to banditry, which was highlighted in particular in 2009, when the city was shocked, if only for a moment, by a robbery and a brutal murder. The witnessing, the unsurprised surprise of the story was in the unexplainable, absurd carelessness with which the murderers disregarded the point of being identified by bystanders or actually gaining any profit from the crime. They explained later to journalists that they had flagged a car down planning to take it at gunpoint and leave the driver on the curb, but it somehow quickly descended into stabbing and bludgeoning the driver to death. All this time the cabin lights burnt on, yellow in the night, presenting the horror of the on-going tragedy to other drivers.
The murderers could not explain why they changed their minds. Life is a line-up of plans and intentionalities that drift, unaware, somehow awry.

To avert the danger of banditry, Batyr suggested that he scans to discern the right kind of passengers:

> You have to watch how he stands, the manner in which he stands. Most are drunk, but if he is too drunk, it is no good, he will puke all over the car. And also they tell you the address, and then ask, “Where are we? Why did you bring me here?” And then there are those who are just plain dangerous. Now, when taxiing became profitable, lots of women started picking up passengers, and many of them got killed. Very recently, three girls got killed. So I never pick up more than two guys. If it is two guys and a girl, it’s okay.

But these rules of thumb were equally futile: another day, I asked another cabbie, “So, do you think it is safer if there is a woman in the company of your fares?” He replied, “Ha! It may have been before, but now the bandits have learned that women make people relax a bit, and they take girls with them on purpose.” I pressed, “So is there a way to know?” He responded, “No, not really. There are no rules. You just have to watch out.”

Drivers watch out—for potholes, the weather, other drivers, cops and bandits and pedestrians. Pedestrians are also wary, as they should be, and I was reminded again by a friend who was worried that I had gotten “relaxed” abroad and lost my habitual vigilance: “Do not cross in front of the car! So what if there is a zebra [crosswalk] here? I saw myself how drivers were jumping out of their cars to beat up pedestrians who [they thought] were walking too slowly. And on the radio, I heard about a man who died like that, beaten with a baseball bat. And the driver went to jail for only two years. As usual, he had friends in the right places.” Watching for oneself could easily turn into witnessing (in the genre-narrative terms of Chapter 6, but also in legal terms) for others. Pavel recounted, “A VAZ-99 drove by my side. I stopped for a red light, he brakes a little but goes through, and the green light turns on when he is almost over. And here traffic cops catch up with him: “Freeze!” One of them starts talking to the guy in the car, the other immediately goes to me! I ask, “Why, did I do anything wrong?” He said, “No, but you saw that he did. You will be a witness. Show me your documents!” And he says it so loudly, so the other guy can hear! Razvod na bablo [hustling people for money].”
Batyr kept driving through the night, keeping his head low, staring at the flickering street lights, his chin almost touching his palms, which were clasped together at the top of the wheel, turning sharply left and right to dodge the potholes. When another acquaintance joined us, the conversation turned to yet another pet peeve—the newly installed traffic cameras. They were indeed a popular annoyance. Batyr complained, “These days, it is scary to go even when the light is green. … Like, my buddy got a letter saying that he crossed on a red light. And he was recorded by a camera. That he entered the intersection 0.1 seconds after it turned red.” The turn in this lament is subtle and puzzling: from being a victim of the nervous people who drive through red lights, the narrator moves to complain about cameras that record those who drive through red lights. But everyone agreed that cameras were bad because, apart from being devices used to hustle money, they made people nervous. Irina in particular had bad luck with them and complained that she almost had an accident because she was intently watching out for cameras instead of paying attention to the road. Similarly, among those who went to cruise the town with Batyr and myself, limiting speed was not an option. Instead, the men discussed in detail where and when the cameras are installed, which of them might really work, how long before the camera one must start braking to avoid a fine, and the (probably apocryphal) stories of how these cameras stopped working in Moscow and no one noticed that they transmitted pictures in loops.

Mirroring the state’s Panopticon, drivers installed cameras on the dashboard of their cars. This was largely an insurance precaution, as another taxi driver reasoned: “Cars crash and will crash; it is normal. If you don’t crash into someone, someone crashes into you” (cf. “If you don’t know someone, someone will know you” in Chapter 4, “Believable Threats”). So, Maksim assures me, “cops respect the recordings—if you show them on your dashboard video that you were in the right, they do not object and let you go.” With the proliferation of cameras, numerous Internet “citizen journalism” sites became flooded with videos of accidents and road rage, creating a particularly visual aspect to the “anything can happen”

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127 On the general increase in visual surveillance, Dmitry said: “Look, a zeppelin hangs in the sky. Looking to catch some alcoholics. Powerful optics. Maintaining order, they say… In our backyard, some muzhiki [lords] sat down [to “rest,” chapter 2], and immediately a car drives in—‘What are you doing here.’ The city has money for petty trouble like that.”
discourse. But the everyday “anything can happen” of the road inspired Pavel to record stuff before it became ordinary:

I had an old phone, and I went on the interurban all the time. The things I saw! The shots I got, so zhestki [fierce, harsh], so many accidents. A truck stood on the road with an accident sign; [a car] goes to pass it; there is a truck in the oncoming lane going right into her; she goes back into her lane and smashes into the parked truck. The car folds in two, and you record the consequences with your phone. On the Kungur interurban, the scariest of them all. (AK: I heard they put a scoring chart for the number of dead on this road?) Yes, they put those everywhere at one point but took them down. They realised that no one cares.

How do these intensities—the temporary madness, the racing down a busy street after a lover’s betrayal, the vigilance and multidirectional scanning of the environment—compare to the “emotionalisation” of contemporary capitalist consumerist cultures (Illouz 2007), including that of automobility? The answer to this question, curiously, may be connected to another act of watching. Russian drivers and their numerous dashboard videos are now watched by international audiences. A meteorite in the Chelyabinsk sky in 2013 attracted particularly close attention. YouTube users and the anchor of “The Daily Show” were awed by the meteorite, but also puzzled by how unperturbed the drivers seemed by the event happening right in front of them.

Figure 11. Screenshot from “The Daily Show,” video available at: http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/lstf5e/how-i-meteored-your-motherland (see 1:28)
The show’s (English-speaking) audiences interpreted the general lack of drama as emotional numbness, as affective bankruptcy, as this selection of comments following some youtube recordings of the “Russian meteorite” event, conveys:128

That’s a huge bright fucking object lighting up the sky and not a single one gives a shit. Russians are so boring and depressive to the extent its actually obnoxious. Stop being such bland cunts. If this happened in another country, people would be yelling profanity at the unusual sight, not just mumbling “cyka blyar” [a curious attempt to convey the look of words, a couple of ordinary Russian ‘nat’ profanities, using Latin letters] under their breath as they get on with their daily business. Seriously it annoys me.

How everyone looks so calm!? i would’ve shat my pants if i saw that!

Why is everyone acting like the meteor is boring them

Russians are not impressed

Russian people seem pretty relaxed about seeing this. If this was america or the UK people in the cars would be screaming ERGH MERR GERRD [Oh my God]

Indeed, the recording shows the full view of the meteorite, but also the fact that no car on the road has changed its speed or course in view of an explosion in the sky; the music keeps playing. So, are “Russians” “so jaded”? “Russians” “reply” that, indeed, “no one cares” how many die on the roads; Batyr says “people have atrophied” (see Chapter 3), and Lilia says she “prefer[s] to wear pink glasses.” My understanding is that the light of the meteorite put the spotlight on the differences of relationship between modernity, governmentality, and securitisation—described throughout this dissertation—that, in turn, created different economies of emotion. Getting out of the car screaming “Oh my god” assumes that “god” (or security services, or evacuators, or the police) will intervene. “Russian drivers,” instead, assume radical indeterminacy. Where video watchers expected recordable reactions, drivers concentrated on the intensity of maintaining an unrelenting disposition of vigilance. They kept scanning—preparing to act, just in time, when the course of action could be minimally discernible. Finally, automobility itself may have also played a role: a space of inarticulation, of nonsemantic agency, of bodily friction against terrain, of love and death. It fosters a

128 I transcribed the following quotes with grammar and orthography intact.
particularly silent sense of drama, one that avoids linguistic “commentary” or emotional “reaction.”

4 Blue Buckets Society: Car Power and Road Power

In his study of “police critique” in Russia, Gilles Favarel-Garrigues (2013) noted that by 2009, the genre of contesting the violation of laws by the police peaked in popularity and had become one of the few genres that projects social solidarity. Today, Maria Sidorkina (2014:13) writes, “ordinary citizens, rather than only experts, claim the right to publicize their complaints (during the Soviet and early post-Soviet years people had preferred to deal with police problems through private channels). People are now more eager to claim their rights, but to also connect their vision of the police with a more general vision of a common good.” In 2009 there was also a peak of public outcry and civil activity in particular against the impunity with which various privileged members of society, including policemen, violated traffic rules. (The focus of Sidorkina’s paper is precisely on such a case in the city of Novosibirsk.) Country-wide publicity was achieved in 2009 regarding an accident involving Mr. Anatoly Barkov, a vice president of Lukoil Petroleum Corporation. According to witnesses, his driver misused a blue emergency light, to which he was not entitled by the law, and entered the oncoming traffic lane. The resulting collision killed two women, one of whom was a doctor. A baby girl was orphaned. Other story elements underlined the disparity, both physical and symbolic, between the make of the cars involved. Barkov’s “monster” Mercedes 666 “weighing 3 tons,” “smashed to pieces” the lighter and cheaper Citroen driven by the women. The police blamed the victims since there were no cameras at this busy intersection (conveniently, some say). This case was soon seen as nothing short of murder, committed in public and broad daylight with impunity, and as inconsequential, apart from some public relations problems, for the official and the petroleum company.
Figure 12. “Gosudarstvennaya mashina” [The state car/the state apparatus]. The car-power hybrid and the murder on the road: a symbolic schema of social conflict. First published by the artist (anonymous), December 9, 2010, on http://pikabu.ru/story/zatsenyayte_kartinku_110599?a=1.

Figure 13. “Lukoil (company)—now with the right to murder”. A car sticker posted on the site of the community activists Drive2.ru, in 2012, https://www.drive2.ru/b/288230376151747207/

129 A play on the word “Mashina,” a common word for a vehicle, a mechanical device, and an (abstract) apparatus.
In Russian popular culture, the hybridity between car and driver has long symbolised demonically evil elites. The young rap star Ivan Alekseyev (Noize MC) produced a popular music video about the accident, wherein the oil baron was portrayed as a demonic entity who “disses” Satan for not being powerful or evil enough.

This and similar incidents gave birth to the “Blue Buckets Society,” an Internet-based group of drivers organising protests and serving as a watchdog by documenting and publicising witnesses’ accounts of everyday abuses of power on the road. The name “Blue Buckets” was inspired by the group’s initial protest: they attached children’s blue plastic buckets to the roofs of their cars, and sometimes to their heads, to imitate and mock the presumption of privilege implied in the use of the “right of way” blue lights so ubiquitously and visibly abused in Moscow.

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130 For an overview of the history of symbolic connection between cars and (criminal, demonic) “elites” in popular culture, see Arkhangel’ski 2010.
Today, when car ownership is no longer a unique privilege, the old dichotomies simultaneously break down—and get reinforced. The power of the demonic privileged driver is juxtaposed with the radical equality and the moral space of the terrain of the road. As one of the slogans of the Blue Buckets Society says, “In the bathhouse and on the road all are equal.” The road and the bathhouse share inarticulation, the uncertainty of life-form number one (see Introduction), a bareness of the body and the bareness of life, devoid of political or social markers. Some radicals are going so far as to claim that the sacred privilege of motherhood should be cancelled, as a social marker, in the “bathhouse of the road,” as in this story by Batyr:

A well-known case today—in Moscow, a woman smashed into two pedestrians, and her mother works in city administration, and she has just had a baby. She was first convicted uslovno [given a probationary sentence], but people rebelled and she was convicted again, with a sentence suspended until the kid turns sixteen—and still the people rebelled. People want justice—put her in prison!

The status-laden “car” is juxtaposed with the “bare life” road; the bad, demonic, “powerful” driver finds a counterpart in the responsible Blue Bucket driver. Those who “don’t know the rules” are always to blame; the good driver is always vigilant and always one with the road; and the elites kill on the road with impunity by means of their cars, in a frozen-off, instrumental, mediated manner.
In the Introduction, I mentioned that in the beginning of my fieldwork, I asked people a question—“What is uncertainty [neopredelennost’]?”—and was told a story about how a certain flat in Sergei’s condominium kept rising from existential bareness to the complex graces of modernity, the state, the market, and civilization, just to fall back into “the swamp.”

I want to conclude with a quote that was uttered by Svetlana, not in reply to any question, which also describes a type of duality or a dialectics. It conveys, no less, a view on the “very anthropological” question about the nature of culture:

[I think that we observe in people in general] a kind of schizophrenia, which, it seems to me, originates in the loss of culture in Soviet times. By culture, I mean not the culture that privivaietsya on you at school [gets vaccinated, or spliced, on you, as an alien branch is grafted onto a tree, a technique popularised in 1930s not the least due to Marxist-Leninist ideological reason, see Oushakine 2004], I mean the culture that comes iznachal’no [from the beginning/from the source]—I mean, everyone has some sort of culture. Any society [obschestvo], community [soobschestvo]—gopniks [street lads, chavs; the figure of the lack of culturedness] have it, too. But the culture makes sense and gives something [back] only when it is from the source, when you already kind of have it, and the environment only develops what [you already have]—but not when they give it to you at school [as if it were a vaccine]. One gets zero use of such a culture. It may become out of place in your life. One can speak exclusively by quoting Pushkin, and will remain bydlo [cattle] nonetheless. And sooner or later, your roof will leak [you will go mad]. This all started in Soviet times, when they tried to make governors out of kitchen maids [reference to a famous remark by Lenin]—. This is delirium, you know. When doctors and professors are sent to harvest potatoes. And people are conscious about all that, even if they are conscious unconsciously [soznayut, dazhe esli bessoznatel’no].

The “objectivist” in me sees in this quote, of course, various “rationalities in context”: customs being (re)produced; social relations (re)formulated; situations enacted. Normally, Svetlana is outspokenly nostalgic about the Soviet regime and ways of life (“Who told them that we lived plokho, in a bad way?”). This time, however, the Soviet time turned out to be a “loss” of some “organic” culture. Starting with an egalitarian acknowledgement that “everyone has culture,” an attempt that differentiates between “culture” and “culturedness” (which may have been the influence of her anthropologist friend), she then confuses them again, and slips into the familiar tenets of (pseudo)sociology, typecasting social positions—chavs and kitchen maids on one side, doctors and professors on the other. Lenin is referenced
for the politics of class, while Pushkin, the “golden sun of Russian poetry,” is symbolic of conventionally good taste.

But the main thrust of the statement is not so easily “anthropologised.” The fact that culture is both “at the source,” “already with you,” on one hand, and fostered externally, by the “environment” on the other, is not just a fact but a problem. It bothers. We are all mad because of the “unnaturalness” of our cultures, them being a matter of conversion rather than a sort of baptism at birth. We are all “schizophrenic”—split—because of the attempts, guiding our techniques of the self, to “complicate” chavs with Pushkin, or to “simplify” professors through gathering potatoes. Or, by ordering both chavs and teachers to leave their factories and schools, and go, as Roman once said, “selling crap, from door to door.”

This statement reflects directly on what Moore (2009) draws attention to: What do we do with the fact that people themselves enquire about the nature, and the process of production, of their culture? Moore argues that the discussion about “tradition” that Kenyan young women have among themselves and their mentors is not about which knowledge is right and which is deviant, but shows awareness of procedural nature of knowledge. Knowledge is chosen according to need or “use,” for instance, to become a modern person or a citizen of the world. Protected by these “global” “meta-” truths, Kenyans are excited to splice their “culture” or “tradition”—for the first time so conspicuously, Moore implies—cutting out the custom of female genital circumcising, but leaving something more palatable for the “modern” person.

Svetlana offered a similarly functionalist view on culture as a tool or a resource that “gives back” (or does not). But there is also a difference. For her, this “consciously unconscious”—(what could it be in the parlance of contemporary social theory—trauma? affect? structure of feeling? practical sense?)—collective experience or memory of “splicing” in itself became a troublesome tradition. The problem is not in the “unfreedom” in choosing which “culture” to “splice” onto oneself. Rather than being excited at the very possibility of “splicing” “culture”

131 Roman also said once that he certainly was a gopnik in his youth, and sometimes still is, because “it is a state of the soul.”
in order to reach whatever utopia (of modernity, happiness of global citizenship, communist state), she doubts that a “culture” so “spliced” can be anything but debilitating. Regardless of the choice of parts, the “spliced” hybrid will not be the same as an “organic” culture, because such technology of production—of culture, of meaning—is pernicious for the “roofs,” or “superstructures,” of people’s minds. They will carry “the poisonous chalice” of “consciously unconscious” realization that their “culture,” however beautiful, is detachable.

Some of this combination of essentialism, organicism, and constructivism can be attributed to the legacy of vernacular Marxism. And although Svetlana talks about “us all,” I have reason to believe that worries about “schizophrenic” splitness may be more pronounced among the “split” generation, among whom she counts most of her friends. My point in describing vernacular Marxism is less about providing an objective analysis of the contradictions, genealogies, and typicality of this legacy, and more about describing how it may influence everyday living and local philosophies—of mind, will, language, desire, event. I described how it creates everyday anxiety, the everyday labour of moral and epistemological judgement, and specific ideals and mechanisms (often utopic, or ineffective) to discontinue this labour and this anxiety. The questions, however, remain the same: How does one theorise the “consciously unconscious” objectification of one’s own culture as being itself a composite, a “splicing” of primordial and alien elements that are entwined organically, yet make the whole tree of culture barren, “of no use”? How to work in, and “thickly” and fully account for, a culture of suspicion of culture? How to write not only about the “production of knowledge” or “regimes of truth,” but about the production of doubt and the regime of truth’s im/possibility—as well as about realizations that productions and regimes are not “free” but carry a (mysterious, but material, and in varying amounts) cost?

On the other hand, there is always an aspect of ethnography that becomes obsolete by the time fieldwork is transformed into a text. In 2009, I listened to worries about “uncertainty,” about the languid “about-nothingness” of the ways in which “society” represented itself to itself, all when Russia boasted of a “stable” economical revival. In 2015, the economic prospects are dim if not progressively gloomy, but “society” talks about itself in increasingly

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132 This is an expression used by Veena Das (2007:9), mentioned also in Chapter 6, section 3.
uncompromising and theatrical—“like a fist on the table!”—terms. The popular meme of 2014 and 2015, coming from a speech of the president, is “dukhovnaya screpa” [spiritual joint]—“screpa” being an archaic word for something that anchors movements, but also fastens, or “clamps,” the parts together. The annexation of Crimea seems to have put an end to Russia’s historical-teleological “boredom.” The population (habitually?) is split into “normals” and “progressives,” “laymen” and “intellectuals” (ref. Chapter 2). The level of optimism of the “normals,” if we are to believe some pollsters, is at historical highs. They celebrate the articulation of the Collective, and the end to the voluble, global (that is, “American”), “boring” culture that was “spliced” on their—suddenly, organic and primordial?—Russian/Soviet cultural backgrounds: Orthodox faith, historical outer-space exploration achievements, the victory in the war. The “progressives” (habitually?) scold “simple” laymen for their “nonthinking,” for being gullible voids, too easily filled with clever pro-government propaganda. They bemoan the excessive articulation, or voluble abuse, of the same: Orthodox faith, historical outer-space exploration achievements, the victory in the war. They remind that in “this country,” articulations have always meant violence and war. Optimists or pessimists, both agree that the Soviet sense of security is lost for good: the certain future is no more.

133 Tatiana, Chapter 3.
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