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Reanimating/Resisting Late Soviet Monstrosity: Generational Self-Reflection and Lessons of Responsibility in Alexei Ivanov's *Pischeblok* [*The Food Unit*]

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Abstract

Remembering late socialism through child perspectives in (auto)fictional writing has been a prominent practice in contemporary Russian literature. In particular, the early 1980s focalized by young protagonists have become the subject of three recent novels, by Alexei Ivanov, Shamil' Idiatullin and Alexander Arkhangelsky. This article closely examines one of these novels, Alexei Ivanov's *Pischeblok* [*The Food Unit*] published in 2016, asking how it articulates the generation that was coming of age during the 1980s and considering the ethical implications of this articulation. The reading approaches this question by examining the genre characteristics of the novel which involve a tension between 'generatiography' and fantasy, and between the realist and post-post-modernist modes. It argues that this hybridity of genre and a metamodernist oscillation allow for creating a multilayered representation of the late Soviet as a space of improvisational possibilities involving play with petty monsters as well as of genuine monstrosity embodying the darker side of the Soviet. The article outlines the novel's generational self-reflection which involves re-familiarizing the readers with the ideals that existed within socialism but were not realized by the generation which internalized state socialism's monstrous side. At the same time, the return to the

moment of struggling with this monstrosity creates an alternative turning point and the possibility of responsibility-taking.

Keywords: remembering late Soviet period, generatiography, generational self-reflection, metamodernism, Alexei Ivanov

Резюме

Воспоминания о позднем социализме сквозь «детскую» перспективу являются важной частью современной русской литературы. В частности, начало 1980х годов стало предметом повествования, представляющего события с точки зрения молодых персонажей, в недавних романах Алексея Иванова, Шамиля Идиатуллина и Александра Архангельского. В этой статье подробно рассматривается одно из этих произведений, роман Алексея Иванова «Пищеблок», опубликованный в 2016 году. Статья исследует способы артикуляции в романе поколения, взрослого в этот период, и этические смыслы этой артикуляции. Этот вопрос рассматривается в свете жанровых характеристик романа, в котором сталкиваются элементы «генератиографии» и фэнтези, а также реалистическая и пост-пост-модернистская модальности повествования. Согласно предлагаемой интерпретации, такая гибридность жанра и метамодернистские колебания создают возможность для многомерной репрезентации «позднесоветского» как области импровизации и игры с мелкими монстрами, а также сферы подлинной монструозности, воплощающей темную сторону советского. Статья анализирует поколенческую саморефлексию в романе, которая включает в себя новое знакомство читателя с идеалами, существовавшими в эпоху социализма, но не реализованными поколением, которое впитало в себя монструозность. В то же время, возвращение к моменту борьбы с монстром создает альтернативную поворотную точку и возможность взятия на себя ответственности.

Ключевые слова: воспоминания о позднесоветском периоде, генератиография, поколенческая саморефлексия, метамодернизм, Алексей Иванов

Pischeblok [*The Food Unit*], the most recent novel by Alexei Ivanov, a leading Russian author of historical and speculative fiction, has had a lukewarm reception by readers and critics alike. Most reviews evaluate this 2018 book as well-made craftwork and solid commercial prose but lacking the originality of *Serditse Parmy* [*The Heart of Parma*]

or *Zoloto bunta* [*The Gold of the Rebellion*]. These novels established Ivanov in the early 2000s as a master of a composite genre that intermingles local histories and mythologies (of the Ural region), realist writing, fantasy and postcolonial reflection (Kukulin 2007; Abasheva and Abashev 2010; Gorsky 2018). *Pischeblok* continues the series of Ivanov's novels reflecting on the recent past and present, and on the fates of his generation (people born in the late 1960s and early 1970s), such as *Geograf globus propil* [*The Geographer Drank His Globe Away*] (1993/2003) and *Bluda and MUDO* (2007). In contrast to these earlier texts, which only briefly recall the late Soviet childhoods of the main characters and are otherwise focused on the post-Soviet period, this novel is entirely situated in the pre-perestroika past—more specifically, in 1980, the year of the Olympic games in Moscow.

This article enquires into the turn this novel makes, in the context of Ivanov's writing and beyond, from the post-Soviet period or distant past to the late-Soviet period, particularly the early 1980s, and makes this time resonate with the present.¹ My reading engages with the meanings and resonances produced by this shift of focus from adult protagonists stranded in the post-Soviet time-space of indeterminacy to the childhood and child characters of the author's generation. Does this shift in perspective involve a different way of addressing 'the last Soviet generation' (and the broader society)? How does the novel articulate the values of/for this and the younger generations, and does it involve generational (self-)critique? I consider these questions by analysing the aspects of genre and mode. This approach will elucidate how these characteristics generate specific memories of late socialist normalization and associated practices nostalgia, reflecting on the possible social effects of these memories and nostalgic treatments of the past. While the novel explicitly aligns itself to the large corpus of representations known for generating 'Soviet nostalgia,' my reading suggests that its mnemonic 'reanimation' of the Soviet extends beyond the nostalgic optic (or what is usually interpreted as 'nostalgic').

The new modalities of remembering late socialism, as my argument goes, are generated by the novel's specific combination of genres and styles of recollecting late-Soviet childhood. The narrative is built upon the tension between the realist and the fantastic modes, the interfacing of the most typical and the exceptional, the natural and the supernatural. It tells a story of what is first presented as the most ordinary stay in a Soviet pioneer camp in the summer of 1980. The casual events of life in the camp, focalized by the twelve-year-old Valerka and the second-year student Igor who works as a pioneer leader, are narrated with the precision of an ethnographic gaze. The narrative evokes an autobiographical/autofictional modality by foregrounding the perspective of a child character who is of almost the same age as the author (Ivanov

was born in 1969) and by placing the story in the Russian ‘provinces’ on the Volga close to the locations of his other novels and nonfiction texts which are also the places where he spent his childhood and youth (Perm, Yekaterinburg). As such, the text seeks to communicate, or rather fictionally elaborate, an authenticity of late-Soviet childhood experience, by filling the narrative with countless details of everyday life from the period including the expressions, songs, rituals, material objects, attitudes that firmly remain in the past. But in contrast to many contemporary autofictions of late socialism narrated through a child perspective, Ivanov’s novel moves away from the personal and specific to focus on the most typical and, in fact, generational.

The novel can be considered a ‘generatiography’ – the genre representing the life of a whole generation, usually through an individual’s story (Bohnenkamp 2011). Generatiography is a variety of autofiction which frames past experience in collective terms, includes multiple references to time-specific objects and habits, and typically involves ironic distancing from truth and sincerity claims (Bohnenkamp 2011, 122, 190). *Pischeblok* involves characteristics of this genre in that its main focus, as my reading demonstrates, is on portraying formative qualities and choices of a generation, and eventually, on generational self-reflection.

Similarly important for this novel are the elements of horror and the gothic. The narration of everyday life in the camp is interrupted by Valerka’s discovery that some of the children and adults turn into vampires at night. Together with Igor, he finds out that the ‘dark stratilat’ who transforms young people into his slaves is a hero of the Civil War and a former NKVD² officer who lives on the territory of the camp as an ‘honorary Soviet retiree.’ The fight against the stratilat and his power in the second half of the novel unfolds together with a reflection on the conditions that enable one to resist the corrupt underside of routinized life and to take upon oneself a responsibility to fight it. While the explicit context is the Soviet society faced with increasing internal contradictions, the narrative’s critique of zombification speaks to the present, particularly given the parallels that are often drawn between the late Soviet and late Putinist periods.³

This combination of generatiography and vampire novel conventions within the novel, as my reading shows, provides a new insight into the processes of normalization, or what Alexei Yurchak (2006) has called ‘hypernormalization’ during the late Soviet period, when the official language became an empty form that was filled with alternative meanings and performances of new subjectivities. In *Pischeblok*, dead rituals provide space for improvisation, but they also become a breeding ground for the forces that try to reify the older, monstrous part of the Soviet which comfortably hides behind the everyday. As research into late-Soviet children’s culture

has demonstrated, petty monsters and semi-human creatures populated everyday communication (Oushakine 2008). Ivanov's novel revisits this topos and juxtaposes the playful monstrosity in improvisational late-Soviet practices with true monstrosity that endangers the balance. It elaborates a subject position of a child character that allows for fighting the serious monster, but eventually entails complicity with the structures that this monster represents.

What seems to distinguish this novel from many mnemonic representations of the late Soviet as well as the cultural codes of the time is the question of responsibility that is foregrounded by the narrative. While Ivanov's earlier fiction consistently stresses the protagonists' reluctance to take care of others (Kukulin 2007), the new focus on responsibility may signal an attempt to speak to the infantilism of his generation and to elaborate an alternative positionality in the past, to be recalled in the present. As Ilya Kukulin's analysis of Ivanov's earlier novels pertinently shows, questions of (ir)responsibility are linked to imaginations of time and history. Within the plot of transition from history to post-history—reflecting the historical momentum during perestroika and its failure accompanied by disillusionment of the last Soviet generation—the only possible modality for a relatively ethical character is the 'heroization of survival' (ibid.). I consider the ways in which *Pischeblok* attempts to elaborate an alternative positionality, that of *resisting the politics of shape-shifting beyond mere (individual) survival*.

My reading begins by situating the novel within the currently mainstream literary and cinematic practices of remembering the late Soviet. It continues by considering the aspect of generationality in the novel's writing of the last Soviet generation. I then consider the representations of hypernormalization and of the possibilities and dangers this situation creates, which leads me to reflect on the protagonists' heroic response to those dangers and the gendered character of this response.

Familiar forms, unusual interplays

When reading reviews of the novel, by readers and critics alike, one comes across its evaluations as unoriginal, purely commercial and entertainment-oriented. These evaluations refer to three elements that seem to be perceived as part of a representational scheme overexploited by post-Soviet writers, film-makers and artists. The elements include, firstly, *(re)mediation of generational memories of the late-Soviet period* employing characteristic topoi (here, a pioneer camp) and motifs from children's literature and films of the period (such as the conflict between the 'real pioneers' and bandits, tests of friendship and loyalty, improvisation versus following

the rules). The second element expected by readers of these fictions is a *nostalgic mood*. Indeed, nostalgia for the late Soviet, with childhood and youth as carriers of positive meanings, has become a major trend in the cultural production since the mid-2000s. Identifying the paradigm of ‘normalizing’ the Stagnation in contemporary films and TV series, Oksana Sarkisova (2012, 262) observes that ‘the “Brezhnevian” years in cinema tend to appear as a flow of life, filled with little consumerist joys and universal private worries. Ambiguous and pragmatic producers of nostalgia put the emphasis on general equality and paternalistic protection by the benevolent if not fully potent leadership.’ This typically nostalgic poetics, however, is not so much a result of state projects as it is an outcome of ‘popular demand for the image of the “livable times”’ (idem, 263). The third element making the novel’s form recognizable and falling within the range of cultural expectations is its *use of the gothic* (characteristic of Ivanov’s writing and of post-Soviet literature in general, with the notable examples of Victor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, Tatiana Tolstaya, Dmitrii Bykov and others).⁴ In particular, combinations of Soviet pioneer symbolism with mystical horror narratives have been practiced since the early 1990s—both in children’s literature⁵ and in mass literature for adults.⁶

Since all these elements have been repeatedly utilized in contemporary popular fiction and film, a novel re-using them is perceived as yet another copy of the same. Typical reactions on literature forums rate the novel as ‘[a] book to relax and indulge in nostalgia for a bit’ or as ‘[a] superficial read. For teenagers of about 20, might be ok. [...] the plot is predicable.’⁷ Critics have produced similar evaluations, stating the novel’s lack of innovation and its re-playing of the familiar. In Galina Yusefovich’s (2018) words, ‘[e]very specific little word, every carefully sugared detail of the pioneer camp target directly the zones of readers’ brains that are responsible for nostalgia,’ or, in Yegor Mikhailov’s (2018), ‘*Pischeblok* is assembled from recognizable details, assembled according to an instruction, carefully oiled, and doesn’t command admiration, like a new meat mincer.’ This straightforwardness of the novel is also responsible for the fact that it was quickly turned into a script for a TV series, which was planned to be filmed in 2020.

The plot and settings are, indeed, extremely recognizable. The location of the summer camp on the Volga, nearby Samara, reflects Ivanov’s dedication to the ‘peripheries’ (most prominently the Ural region in his earlier fiction) and his close attention to questions of imperial difference (Gorsky 2018). The narrative zooms in on the events happening in the ‘backyard’ of the global Olympic spectacle in Moscow, conveying the idea that real struggles take place away from the centre. On the other hand, this spatial construction implies symbolic parallels between Valerka and Igor’s

battles with vampires and the last effort of the Soviet Union to imagine itself as a beacon of social justice and anti-imperialism. At the same time, the novel reflects on the politics of space and surveillance during the Olympic games as children exchange the rumours that the capital has been ‘cleared’ and ‘no one is allowed to enter Moscow’ (Ivanov 2018, 36). The twelve-year-olds relate to these realities in the form of urban legends: ‘all viewers [at the games] are dressed-up cops and militaries,’ foreigners ‘will be giving out chewing gums, and inside them are little razors,’ ‘negroes will be infecting glasses in the soda machines’ (ibid.).

In their analysis of the structure, practices and functions of telling horror stories during the Soviet times, Alexandra Arkhipova and Anna Kirziuk engage with the urban legends that circulated in the run-up to the 1980 Olympic games. They consider how this short period saw an explosion of such stories, spread partially by authorities as well as horizontally and often invented by children themselves (Arkhipova and Kirziuk 2020, 183–184). Since schools would recommend that children leave Moscow for the summer, referring to the possibility of overcrowding and ‘unexpected infections,’ the city became almost emptied of young people (idem, 184). Read in a dialogue with Arkhipova and Kirziuk’s study, the novel reflects, in an almost ethnographic fashion, the place of horror stories in late-Soviet society, their particular popularity among the children as well as their function of articulating social fears repressed within the official rhetoric and codes of behaviour (idem, 265). The novel reveals how living improvisation within the dead Soviet rituals, such as in the practices of storytelling that communicated the uncanny within Soviet life-worlds,⁸ involves internal limitations and faces fatal dangers when the monstrous within this sociality is activated, and the most zealous pioneers appear to be the vampires that collect the blood from their ‘herd’ and deliver it to their ‘master.’

The story behind this dark side of life in the camp dates back to the time of the Civil War that followed the October Revolution and involved violent fighting between the ‘Reds’ and the ‘Whites’.⁹ The village boy Sergei (who later adopted the name Serp, ‘sickle’), together with his brother Matvei (later Molot, ‘hammer’), decided to organize a local revolt, which entailed pillaging the homes of holiday residents and escaping with the loot to the Reds. An officer resisted their attack, and while killing him, Sergei shouted out a formulaic slogan of the time: he craves for the blood of someone who had been drinking people’s blood. Being a dark stratilat, the officer was obliged to give his blood to anyone asking for it and die right after. The blood-drinking became a baptism moment for those who adopted the names Serp and Molot and climbed the ladder of Soviet power to become NKVD officers. While Molot fell a victim of Stalin’s repressions and died, Serp, upon retirement, chose to settle down in a place with an

unlimited access to groups of children rotating every month. The children whom he used as blood-collectors would die months after they left the camp, so the source of their death could not be traced.

Having discovered that Veronica, Igor's romantic interest, is the next vampire destined for death, Valerka and Igor develop a plan to trap Serp in the food unit during full moon when, unable to drink more blood, he must die. However, the plan is derailed due to the unexpected presence of Anastasiika, a girl who Valerka fancies. In the final fight, in order to save Anastasiika from Serp, Valerka calls for his blood, thus becoming a new stratilat. In the end, all former vampires are saved, Serp is dead, and the overall balance is restored, but Valerka has a long battle of fighting his inner monster ahead, and Igor promises to support him in this.

Returning to the criticisms of the novel with its plot in mind, I suggest that automatic linking of form (autobiographic writing about pioneer childhood) and mood (nostalgia) leading us to interpret the text as musealization or rehabilitation of the past may not do justice to the text. The novel generally adheres to a realist aesthetics of remembrance (its faithful recapping of the minute detail of a childhood as experienced by a particular generation) but combines it with elements of the supernatural and with ironic distancing (familiar from postmodernist fiction). As mentioned earlier, the nexus of Soviet (pioneer) symbolism and the fantastic that enables ironic reversibility has in itself become a topos of postmodern expression. But unlike in postmodernism, the fantastic and gothic here does not serve the purpose of uncovering the inauthentic, simulated nature of the Soviet and revealing the uncanny side of it; or it does so only to an extent, by playing with postmodernist conventions and taking a distance from them. As Ivanov mentions in an interview,

Pischeblok sdelan v redkom esche nyne formate metamodernizma. Uproshchenno govoria, postmodernizm – 'pereigryvanie' klassicheskoi literatury, a metamoernizm – 'igra' zanovo. [...] V metamodernizme literatura sokhraniaet klassicheskuiu dramaturgiuu i vse prochie traditsii, no realizm sluzhit neskol'ko inoi tseli. On orazhaet ne veschestvennyi mir, a idei, kotorye etim mirom upravliaiut. Poetomu vozmozhno fantasticheskoe, no vsio ravno ono real'noe. (Bashmakova 2018)

[*The Food Unit* is made in the still uncommon format of metamodernism. Simply speaking, postmodernism is 'replaying' literary classics while metamodernism is 'playing' them again. [...] In metamodernism, literature preserves classical dramaturgy and other traditions, but realism serves a somewhat different purpose.

It reflects not the material world, but ideas which rule this world. This makes the fantastic possible, though the latter is real anyway.]

Indeed, reading the novel through the lens of metamodernism highlights its newness compared to earlier fiction elaborating (post-)Soviet sensibilities through elements of the supernatural. Metamodernism, according to Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010, 2), is a 'structure of feeling' 'characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment.' In other words, it upholds modern enthusiasm for ideals and utopias, but keeps it in check through the use of postmodern irony – a sensibility which the scholars link to Kantian 'negative idealism' defined by the 'as if' principle (idem, 5). One can compare *Pischeblok* to Victor Pelevin's *Empire V* (2006) as a prominent example of vampire plots in post-Soviet fiction: whereas the former reanimates earlier utopias (through a combination of an earnest and ironic modes as embodied by the two main characters), the latter deconstructs both Soviet and post-Soviet ideologies. To be sure, Ivanov's novel involves obvious critique of ideology: it depicts utopian sensibilities as easily susceptible to appropriation by the likes of Serp; it is furthermore important to note that Serp had never truly believed or lived by socialist principles as his attack on the White officer was motivated by resentment and rage, and was as opportunist as his further career (Ivanov 2018, 171). However, this critique does not constitute the narrative's end goal; its main focus is upon the dialectics of resisting ideology in its reified forms and the resilient potentialities of utopian thinking.

Considering the novel as an example of metamodernism, furthermore, elucidates the character and functions of the detailed and fond recollections of late-Soviet childhood. While the descriptions of everyday habits, language and mythologies definitely (and purposefully) involve the pleasure of recognition, they may not be accompanied by painful longing (which the *algia* part of nostalgic yearning points towards). Most of the writing that explicitly engages with nostalgia includes a focalizing point in the narrative present (at least, as one of the narrative positions in a text), in which the autobiographical subject's fond memories reveal the lack of fondly recollected aspects of this past in the present. *Pischeblok* does not include such narrative framework; all events are focalized by the two main characters from the perspective of their present in 1980.

The descriptions of pioneer camp life accompanied with generation-typical language and folklore bear an ethnographic rather than nostalgic character. Certainly, since these realities are by now obsolete, it is reasonable to expect that their (re)mediations may cause nostalgia among the readers. However, this effect, I suggest,

is generated to introduce the readers to the carefully recreated world of late-Soviet childhood. Once they are immersed into this world and identify with the main characters, they follow the characters' quest and reflect on the possible choices within the situation with which they have been re-familiarized (as members of the same generation, those who lived during those times, or as consumers of narratives from and about the period). Readers may also reflect on how these conflicts and choices are relevant to present-day contexts as the struggle staged in the novel, due to the elements of the fantastic, takes on more universal character, beyond the specific realities of the past. This effect of distancing and de-individualizing is, furthermore, achieved through generatiographical writing.

Writing the 'lost generation' – finding an alternative turning point

'It's fun to look at ourselves today from the summer of 1980, the Olympic summer!'¹⁰ states a reader's comment on an online forum. The fun aspect, generated by a detective plot, fantastic elements and metamodern interplay of irony and sincerity, is accompanied in this response by a produced sense of generational unity (as it uses first person plural) and a reflexive perspective on this generation from a perspective in the past, imagined as a turning point. Ironically, while the overall implicit temporality of the novel is retrospective, the narration is entirely intradiegetic, and thus it 'transports' the readers into the past and generates a prospective glance onto the present.

Pischeblok articulates what is often called the post-Soviet 'lost generation'—the cohort of those who were born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, graduated from school during perestroika and went to university (the term usually refers to people with higher education) during the 'transitional' late 1980s and early 1990s. This generation's 'getting lost' is associated with the period of rapid societal transformation, and it is symptomatic, then, that the novel which involves and stimulates generational self-reflection focuses on the period just before that time. It can, thus, be considered as narrating an alternative turning point for the generation. The ambiguous ending (will Valerka be consumed by the dark forces, will he be able to resist them, or will his life be a permanent struggle with the monstrous side of the Soviet?) can serve both as an explanation of the generation's tribulations and as a site for positive identity articulation opening up possibilities for re-imagining the generation's trajectories.

The novel produces what Jürgen Reulecke (2008) has termed 'generationality'—a performative process of a generation's emergence through self-description or

ascription by others. This conception highlights the role of historical upheavals or a *Zeitgeist* which a generation emphasizes in defining itself or being defined, and the aspect of community-forming through these discourses. Along with generationality, Reulecke (2008, 122) points at the genealogical aspect which he terms ‘generativity.’ This diachronic perspective involves generations’ examination of ties with their predecessors along the filiative, family lines. In their study of generational thinking and writing in contemporary Eastern Europe, Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik (2020, 14) argue that, in contrast to the socialist period when generations were conceptualized along horizontal lines, stressing ‘the aspects of youth, beginning, breaking with the tradition of the ancestors,’ ‘the late- and postsocialist times aspire toward a definition of generation that emphasizes the role of origins, genealogy, and preserving ties to the ancestors.’ Furthermore, they foreground the role of gender in generational (self-)definition and its paradigmatic character in determining practices of inclusion and exclusion (*idem*, 13). The biologically-determined visions of generations that are now predominant only further eject women from history.

While practices of genealogical thinking about generation are common in present-day Russia as well (for instance, as manifested in World War II-related public rituals, both bottom-up and state-supported, and quite strictly gendered), the logic of narrating generations in Ivanov’s novel is mainly horizontal, reflecting socialist visions of the time it narrates. At least, this is the privileged logic within the narrative. In a pioneer camp, children are disconnected from their families and are made ‘equal’ through common rituals. We do not learn much about Valerka’s background besides the fact that his father ‘worked as an engineer in a classified design bureau, was drawing vehicles for military rockets’ (Ivanov 2018, 25), signifying that he comes from a regular family of technical intelligentsia. Igor’s background, likewise, is introduced only through his father’s profession as a captain for a dry cargo ship (10). A gender bias is visible here, and I will return to this aspect in the last section. For both characters, the brief references to their fathers’ professions are aimed to situate them within society rather than stress familial continuity (Igor studies philology, thus choosing an entirely different path). On the other hand, those characters who derive their status from parents are cast in an utterly negative light, such as Veronica’s fiancée who comes from a family of the Soviet nomenklatura: his ‘otets rabotaet v obkome, mat’ – kakoi-to zam v gorono. I u Sashki vsio budet: kvartira, mashina, dolzhnost’, zhenat’ (77) [‘father works in a regional committee [of the Communist party], his mother is someone’s deputy in the City’s Board of Education. Sasha will have everything: a flat, a car, a high office, a wife’]. Veronica tells Igor that she is being forced to marry Sasha by his mother who has the power to expel her from university.

The motif of generativity, furthermore, surfaces in association with the monstrous side of the Soviet as embodied by Serp. When Valerka is called to raise the pioneer flag together with him, the ritual places him in a grandfather-grandson relationship with the old veteran (30, 197). This uncanny pairing resonates with the ending of the novel when Igor observes that Valerka, struggling with his inheritance of the stratilat status, speaks about Serp ‘as though Ieronov was his grandfather’ (216).

This filiation is portrayed as being resisted by both Valerka and Igor. The affiliative connection between these two characters, in turn, constitutes a central moral value and eventually makes fighting the monsters possible. Depending on definition of generation, the two, born in around 1961 and 1968, could be considered members of different or the same generation(s), but in any case, they belong to different cohorts. Mikhail Anipkin (2018, 292–293) distinguishes ‘the generation of superfluous people,’ born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a specific cohort of the last Soviet generation (or even the one following this generation born in the 1950–60s). The self-perceived ‘superfluity’ of this cohort is traced back to their in-between position between the generation who carried out the post-socialist transformations and benefitted from them and the one that was socialized after perestroika. For this cohort,

[...] sovetskoe u informantov odnositsia glavnym obrazom k poliui mezhlichnostnogo vzaimodeistviia, k chastnoi zhizni, k agency. Poetomu sovetskie tsennosti v ikh vospriiatii – chasche vsego moral’nye, obraschennye drug k drugu, v to vremia kak rossiiskoe assotsiiruetsia s mirom formal’nykh institutov. Sovetskie tsennosti dlia etogo pokoleniia, po suschestvu, iavliaiutsia kharakteristikami sil’nogo grazhdanskogo obschestva. (298)

[... the Soviet [...] refers mainly to the field of interpersonal interaction, to private life and agency. Therefore, Soviet values in their perception are usually moral, directed towards each other, while the Russian is associated with the sphere of formal institutions. Soviet values, for this generation, are essentially the characteristics of civil society.]

This ambivalence of identification—feeling ‘Soviet’ and ‘Russian’ at the same time, with moral values associated with the ‘Soviet’ aspect of the self, for which there is no adequate framework in the present apart from the memories—is what, in Anipkin’s analysis, causes the generation’s resentment with regard to contemporary politics and society. Even the most successful of his interviewees expressed a sense of having no

perspective and no agency in the political order that had been established by the older generation. (303)¹¹

Given the alienation experienced by the generation whose childhood the novel recalls, the connections between Valerka and Igor, a (young) representative of the older generation, are meaningful as a figure for intergenerational connection and for transforming resentment into affiliation. As the logic of the plot shows, only through working together and supporting each other, the two can resist the evil. Such collaboration is significant especially due to the differences which the narrative frames as specifically generational. The narrative emphasizes these differences by switching focalization between the perspectives of Igor and Valerka and allowing the readers to observe the dissimilarities in their attitudes, particularly with regard to socialist ideals. Whereas Igor, like a typical member of the Komsomol during the 1970s and early 1980s, perceives ideals as only part of the coercive ideology and expresses deep scepticism towards them, Valerka is enthusiastic about socialist moral values and mourns every time he sees them being breached. This divergence is clearly introduced through the ways in which the two characters reflect on the Olympic games: 'Igor did not feel any piety regarding the global battle, nor any kind of nervous expectation of a forthcoming righteous deed: in fact, no one had promised this to anyone' [Igor' ne ispytyval ni pieteta pered vsemirnym ristalishem, ni kakogo-to nervnogo ozhivleniia ot nekikh griaduschikh blagodeianii: voobsche-to ikh nikto nikomu i ne obeschal] (11). Valerka, in contrast, is excited – not so much by the spectacle as by the celebration of team spirit:

Valerka zavidoval sportsmenam. Konechno, ne ikh sile. On zavidoval tomu, chto u sportmenov byli komandy, na kotorye mozžno polozhitsia vo vsoim, I komandy ne podvedut. A u nego, Valerki, svoei komandy ne bylo. I nadeiatsia ne nakogo, I vykladyvatsia ne dlia kogo. Chto ob'ediniaet ego s Titiapoi ili Kol'koi Gorokhovym? Palata v korpuse? Zhelanie posmotret' mul'tiki? Eto ne ponastoiiaschemu. Nastoiiaschego edineniia Valerka ne vstrechal nikogda. Druzhba – ne to. Druzhba – eto kogda tebe interesno s tvoim drugom, kogda vy pokhozhi. A komanda – eto kogda vse raznye, no vmeste delaiut odno delo, kotoroe nuzhno vsem, i eto delo ne sdelat' v odinochku. (35)

[Valerka envied the sportsmen. Not their strength, of course. He envied the fact that sportsmen had teams, which they could rely on in all matters, and the teams would never let you down. But he, Valerka, didn't have a team. No one to rely on, no one to try your best for. What unites him and Titiapa or Kol'ka Gorokhov? The room

they share on the camp site? Wanting to watch cartoons? This is not for real. Real unity was something Valerka never came across. Friendship is not the same. Friendship is when you share interests with someone, when you are similar. And a team is when everyone is different, but all work on one task which everyone needs and which can't be accomplished on one's own.]

These two generation-specific perspectives interchange throughout the novel to form a structural tension between enthusiasm and scepticism, the earnest and the ironic, which creates a metamodernist oscillation.

'Normal people' and monsters within

The narrative describes two different but converging paths of the characters whom it imagines as standing for two distinct but close generational cohorts. The universe of the pioneer camp, mirroring the larger society, is portrayed as a direct example of what Yurchak theorizes as 'hypernormalization' in late socialism. After the end of Stalinism, when 'the "external" voice that provided metadiscussions and evaluations of [...] language' (i.e., the voice of totalitarian control) disappeared, 'language structures became increasingly normalized, cumbersome, citational, and circular' (Yurchak 2006, 75). This hypernormalization denotes a language in which the referential function is minimized, and which, in a circular way, foregrounds the immutability of the authoritative discourse (idem, 67). As a result, 'the constative dimension [...] became open and unpredictable, and authoritative language acquired a powerful performative function' (ibidem). This context of hypernormalized discourses and practices as well as their performative destabilizations is vividly conveyed in the novel; its main conflict points to the dangers of ideological appropriation and charts some ways of resisting zombification.

While everyone in the camp rehearses the clichés of late-socialist discourse which structure the life of this micro-society, each character does so, as the narrative gradually reveals, in order to create a space for their personal pursuits and small freedoms. Even the head leader of the camp who performs an example of Soviet morality and forces everyone into this mould, appears to 'live together' with a riverboat captain at the very camp site. In this totality of double thinking and standards, the characters develop varied tactics of adapting and resisting. For the young adults, Igor and Veronica, this involves public conformity with the rituals combined with an ironic tone (which was by then generally tolerated as marker of the youth) along with romantic fantasies that are kept private. The romanticism of this

generation, however, is distinguished from that of their parents, the generation of the 1960s (*shestidesiatniki*). When Veronica accuses Igor of not being heroic enough and not following moral principles, compared to the older generations, he admits to himself that though ‘he is not lazy or selfish,’ ‘not a philistine or petty bourgeois,’ ‘he is not interested in building a railway line in taiga’ (44). Instead, like many of his generation, he is enchanted by science fiction and the literary accounts of Thor Heyerdahl’s and Jacques Cousteau’s explorations (38, 45). Veronica’s gaze, in turn, seems to be directed into a distant past of imagined heroism while everything in the present, including her parents’ ‘dissent,’ seems pathetic and child-like. Her conclusion: ‘My vse deti. My vse zhiviom v odnom bol’shom pionerlagere po obschemu raspisaniuu’ (65) [We all are children. We all live in one big pioneer camp according to a common timetable], sums up the typical cynicism of the generation. ‘There is no choice,’ she says, and Igor echoes: ‘Vybora net – kak v stolovke pri pischebloke. Zhri, chto daiut. Ili sovsem ne zhri, kak delat etot smeshnoi Valerka Lagunov. On nakhodit v sebe sily dlia etogo’ (65) [There is no choice, like in the canteen of the food unit. Stuff yourself with what you are given. Or don’t stuff yourself at all, like that funny Valerka Lagunov. He finds the strength within himself].

Evoking the ‘food unit’ as a metaphor of late-Soviet life and the perceived impossibility of *real* alternatives, Igor’s phrase draws a distinction between himself and Veronica on the one hand and Valerka on the other. Like both young adults, Valerka is fascinated by the tales of Soviet heroism, but, being a child, he is not infected by the practice of cynicism, and upholds a belief in the ideals of collectivity. Valerka’s quest can be defined as an attempt to recover original meanings within the hypernormalized Soviet language. It is this quest that brings him in conflict with the vampires, that protects him from them, but also, in a tragic twist, turns him into an unwilling heir of the dark forces. Valerka’s sensitivity to the ‘false’ within the Soviet everyday, and his longing for realization of the ideals, enable him to see—and become suspicious of—the zeal with which some children begin performing pioneer rituals. Those who used to make fun of Soviet symbols, would suddenly become very formal, obedient, and showing strange attachment to their red ties. Liova, the captain of the football team who was failing to create a collective dynamic, would now have everyone listen to him and play as an ideal team. In a way, this team spirit is a realization of Valerka’s earlier dream; but the fact that this effect is produced by means of zombification makes him averse and determined to fight the sources of this false collectivity (194).

The line between the real and the false, the hero and the vampire, the moral and wearing a mask of morality, thus, appears to be even thinner than Valerka perceived

before. It is almost impossible to detect the vampires as they 'cite' the ideological discourse in impeccable ways. As we discover, the vampires are fully indoctrinated by the stratilat and obey the 'master,' as Veronica calls him (the name that evokes the ghosts of Stalin), because with him 'everything regains a meaning' (185). The confrontation between the protagonists and the vampires, becomes, then, a battle between convictions and fascination with power, moral values and abuse of authority, taking responsibility and obeying orders, the 'real' and the 'false' dimensions of the Soviet. The supernatural evil forces wear the mask of the Soviet everyday, and, as Igor reflects, 'nauka otritsaet ikh, potomu chto inache pridetsia usomnit'sia v povsednevnosti, kotoraiia ne mozhhet podlazhet' somnenniu' (181) [science denies this since otherwise the everyday will be questioned, and it is beyond all questioning].

This perspective suggests that hypernormalized language which structures the late Soviet everyday has created fruitful possibility for an earnest resurfacing of the authoritative discourse; but it can be resisted through the search for original ideals that had been appropriated by this monologic discourse. The idea of returning to origins is, however, fraught with danger as it pushes the protagonist too close to the source of monstrosity, turning him into a potential monster. The 'origins' are also represented as inherently imagined. For Valerka and his generation, they exist in a form constructed through popular films about the Civil War and early Soviet heroes. This link is strengthened paratextually: the epigraphs to the five parts of the novel are quotes from Civil War-themed songs which mnemonically mediate ideas of martyrdom for the new state. All of these quotes include the motif of spilled blood, which the novel reconfigures as a tension between breaking up with the old (killing a monster, sacrificing one's life for the new) and inheritance (forming a blood relationship).

While showing the thin line, and even a relationship of complicity, between 'good' and 'evil,' the novel differentiates between varied uses and abuses of the same ideas. The main difference of the vampires from regular people is that they try to make the narrow rules even more dogmatic. Throughout the novel, it is the stringency of societal practices that both Igor and Valerka intuitively resist. To explain what distinguishes the vampires, Valerka says: 'Oni pravil'nye. A pravil'nym byt' nenormal'no!' (133) [They are proper. And being proper is abnormal!]. This phrase reflects a general perception in late-Soviet society: being too 'proper,' performing the official discourse to the letter, is simply not natural; using the hypernormalized language and filling it with creative meanings, on the contrary, is what 'normal people' do. 'Normal people' or 'svoi,' according to Yurchak (2006, 103), was a typical way of referring to the majority who were neither 'activists' nor 'dissidents.'

Displacing the official discourse within these creative practices did not contradict their adherence to communist ideals as such (idem, 93). In Ivanov's novel, likewise, being 'normal,' that is spontaneous, circumventing the dead rituals, is a condition not only for critical distance but also for moral integrity (without inner freedom, performing moral integrity is only a sign of fear, dependency and zombification).

As a whole, *Pischeblok* captures the state of society, in which the hypernormalized language has generated multiple performative dimensions and ways of being 'vnie' – both inside and outside the official Soviet discourse (Yurchak 2006). Various petty monsters, fantastic creatures and semi-human hybrids, particularly in children's and youth literature and films, were an integral part of this cultural condition. (Kukulin and Maiofis 2008) As Serguei Oushakine observes, in this situation of a normative crisis,

[...] osnovnoi zadachei pozdnesovetskikh monstrov sub'ektivnosti byla ne tol'ko otsylka k (destabilizirovannym) normam, skol'ko materializatsiia samoi nevozmozhnosti provesti chiotkuiu granitsu [...], proizvesti uporiadochivaiuschuiu differentsiatsiiu raznorodnykh i nesovpadaiuschikh chastei i svoistv, zakliuchionnykh v ramkakh odnoi figury. (Oushakine 2008, 28)

[the main task of the late Soviet monsters of subjectivity was not so much making reference to (destabilized) norms as it was materialization of the *very impossibility* to draw a clear border [...] to create a categoric differentiation of the heterogenous and incongruous parts and qualities within the same entity.]

Thus, 'Sovetskie monstry [...] ne stol'ko preduprezhdali o destabilizatsii sistemy, skol'ko priuchali zhit' v sostoianii promezhutka [...]' (idem, 29) [Soviet monsters [...], more than *warning* about destabilization of the system, were teaching how to live in a state of in-betweenness [...].] A clear representation of this in the novel is the way the twelve-year-old Anastasiika reasons that 'every girl has her own little devil' (86); this playful performance of superstition does not prevent her from wearing a cross, which eventually protects her from the vampires. In her worldview, all pioneer rituals and paraphernalia are 'make-believe' while 'little devils' are for real (Ivanov 2018, 88). For Valerka, this duplicity is not acceptable, especially given his insight into how the state of in-betweenness, of hypernormalization, is being appropriated by more serious monsters to instil total subordination.

Responsibility and questions of gender

There is, however, another reason why Valerka resolves to defy the vampires. His anger at their appropriation of 'real' Soviet ideals combines with his related belief that Igor and he together form a genuine 'collective'; as part of this team, he has to help Igor in saving Veronica and also, in the final twist of the plot, he has to sacrifice himself in order to rescue Anastasiika. Thus, his ideals of collectivity appear to be gendered in their realization, and the collective itself, within the heroic quest of the narrative, is imagined as masculine. Such heroic masculinity is a general characteristic of Ivanov's writing (Kukulin 2007), though it is interesting to see how this novel develops a new modality of heroism.¹²

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the ethical position in much of Ivanov's writing (at least of the 2000s) can be defined as 'the heroization of survival.' Emphasizing Ivanov's 'social sensitivity' in registering the *Zeitgeist* of the 2000s, Kukulin demonstrates how his novels, whether historical or engaging with the contemporary, capture the mentality of 'the surviving.' This mentality is characterized by 'the lack of belief in the future, unwillingness and reservation to make plans, anomie and especially the sense of shape-shifting, of cynical substitution all around' (Kukulin 2007). It has a pronounced focus on masculinity (all Ivanov's protagonists are male), which is represented as not necessarily 'hegemonic' (Connell 1995) but heroic nevertheless. This heroism is that of a 'surviving' person who perceives himself as living in a precarious, post-catastrophic present with no future horizon, and can therefore be only responsible for himself. Thus, the protagonist of *Bluda and MUDO* who 'is represented as the only possible contemporary hero' combines the tactics of 'helping all his women' with 'reluctance to take any responsibility' (Kukulin 2007).

The focus of *Pischeblok* on the 'optimistic' late Soviet topos of childhood may be an attempt to imagine a new, more activist 'hero' for the present, transgressing the survival topos and 'breathing in' future-orientation into the post-historical 2000s. This character, while being an 'ordinary' Soviet child, is capable of taking responsibility by openly challenging the evil. His capacity to resist the temptation of blindly following the rules ('find[ing] the strength within himself') and become responsible for others (all those children and young adults who are destined to die) by risking his life to eliminate the monster are represented as stemming from his commitment to collectivity. An important caveat is, however, that this collectivity is imagined as exclusively masculine (in his reflections on the Olympic teams, the local football team, and his comradeship with Igor) and that responsibility-taking is portrayed as protecting the gendered 'other.' Saving Veronica becomes the final reason for the anti-

vampire operation, and Valerka's self-sacrifice is motivated by rescuing Anastasiika. While both female characters are represented as performatively shifting the official discourse, their disobedience practices are depicted as individualized survival tactics. Veronica is pictured, through the eyes of Igor, as someone whose 'main mode of communication is defiance' (65), practiced as a way to hide her vulnerability, while Anastasiika adapts to performing the Soviet in-betweenness by creating own fantastic worlds (which are implicitly mocked by Valerka). Most importantly, as these examples show, we never learn about the thoughts and motivations of these female characters as the entire narrative is focalized by Valerka and Igor.

Conclusion

Alexei Ivanov's latest novel shifts his engagement with the author's generation from its quests for remaining human and relatively moral within the murky post-Soviet present towards this generation's childhood and youth. As it narrates a turning point in the life of the protagonist who is pushed to assume the responsibility of an adult, what are the 'lessons' that the readers learn about this character and the generation he stands for? In considering *Pischeblok* an example of generatiography, this article has argued that the novel aims at articulating the 'lost generation' anew: rather than the disappointing present or recent past, it zooms in on the time of the generation's childhood which, though shown as brimming with contradictions and dangers, is also a time of possibilities. The lessons of true collectivity which Valerka and Igor learn when mobilizing to fight the performances of false, zombified unity can be part of a narrative that constitutes an alternative to the narratives of resentment adopted by the generation of the forty-fifty-year-olds as well as the younger generations. The story of Valerka's challenging the conservative forces within late-Soviet society is, of course, also a story of failure. Read allegorically, it can be telling of the reform-oriented youth who, during the perestroika, were confronting the conservative tendencies of 'popular Stalinism' with attempts at returning to Leninist principles; this project failed as the youth appeared to have inherited more from the old order than they could imagine. It is important, however, that the narrative returns to the moment of (internal) struggle which remains open to possibilities.

My reading has, furthermore, suggested that the novel's representations diverge from typical examples of bitter-sweet longing for the late Soviet. As a metamodernist narrative, it plays with forms of nostalgia but reaches beyond its common modalities. Since the 2000s nostalgia for the late-Soviet has become reified and (hyper)normalized in representations of those times as 'livable' and comfortable (Sarkisova 2012) or as a

stage for the ‘last heroes’ who can fight internal enemies in a state of societal anomie (Kukulin 2019).¹³ Against this background, if the novel’s representations can be considered nostalgic at all, they may be regarded as what I called elsewhere ‘nostalgia inside-out’ (Robbe 2019)—a modality that mimics mainstream nostalgia, but ‘smuggles’ under its guise representations that are critical of the politics of establishing continuity with a past to legitimize the repressive present. Elaborating the protagonist’s longing for the ideals of collectivity as the main motivation of his actions (thus, his nostalgia for the early Soviet— shown to be an effect of late-Soviet mediations of revolutionary heroism, though still regarded as morally relevant), the novel counters the generation’s depoliticization with an image of what they could have been. This construction involving elements of nostalgia is complex and open to various readings, and so, the narrative’s potentially critical aspects may easily be overlooked.

The novel’s representation of late-Soviet everyday life as being inhabited by monsters is similarly multi-layered. The function of the supernatural here is not so much the defamiliarization of late-Soviet rituals—they are depicted as already performatively reinterpreted in various ways by the young and the old. Neither are the representations of ‘domesticated’ horror meant to accustom the readers to living in states of ‘in-betweenness.’ The narrative refers to these functions of late-Soviet representations and reiterates them, but also involves a dynamic of re-familiarizing the readers with the ideals that existed within socialism yet referenced values not restricted to socialist ideology as such. For readers who are used to conforming to official discourse and crafting ‘in-between’ spaces, such re-familiarization with possibilities of heroic action (confronting the monster), though with a grain of skepticism (can it succeed?), may stand for new ways of reflecting on the past and their past selves. Despite the almost fatal failure (Valerka ‘inheriting’ monstrosity), the act of defiance as responsibility-taking (challenging the monster (within) for the sake of others, the ‘collective’) is represented as possible and necessary. However, a serious pitfall within this tentative re-articulation of the generation concerns the aspect of gender. The overtly male-centred narrative offering a re-interpretation of subjectivity begs the questions of who is imagined as the subject of responsibility-taking, and thus the subject of history, and who appears as the object in this act.

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Notes

¹ This mnemonic turn to the early 1980s seems to constitute a tendency in contemporary Russian writing as two more novels recollecting this time from a generational perspective have been published almost simultaneously—Shamil’ Idiatullin’s *Gorod Brezhnev [Brezhnev City]* (2017) and Alexander Arkhangel’skiy’s *Biuro proverki [The Bureau of Check]* (2018). While consideration of these two novels is beyond the scope of this article, reading the three texts comparatively could be the next step.

² The People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the interior ministry of the USSR which was responsible for police work and the punitive system. It was succeeded by KGB in 1946.

³ Such parallels, drawn in journalism and academic discussions, involve most prominently the late Soviet cult of WWII, the irremovable leadership of the head of the state, economic stagnation, the unrestricted power of state security services, disregard of human rights and suppression of opposition.

⁴ For recent reflections on the gothic in twentieth-century Russian literature see the special issue of *Russian Literature* ‘The Russian Gothic’ (2019).

⁵ For instance, Eduard Uspensky’s collection *Krasnaya ruka, chornaya prostynya, zelyonye paltsy [Red Hand, Black Sheet, Green Fingers]* (1990) based on horror stories commonly exchanged in pioneer camps.

⁶ Some examples include Andrei Lazarchuk’s horror *Mumiya [The Mummy]* (1991) or Tatiana Koroleva’s mashup *Timur i ego komanda i vampiry [Timur and His Team and the Vampires]* (2012).

⁷ The reviews can be found at <https://www.labirint.ru/reviews/go>.

⁸ For a critical exploration of ‘the Soviet uncanny’ see Mark Lipovetsky’s (2007) study of the works by Pavel Bazhov, a writer who, like Ivanov later, worked with the material of Ural myths and legends.

⁹ Stories of the Civil War were among the most popular plots of children’s literature and films during the late Soviet period.

¹⁰ The review can be found at <https://www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/669693/>.

¹¹ Along with the resentment, they conveyed a vision of politics as “‘dirty business” (moral justification) and, most interestingly, a fear of finding themselves in the situation of 1991 when the Communist Party was banned” (305).

¹² A similar privileging of masculinity, even if not always heroic, is characteristic of contemporary children's literature which engages with questions of collectivity and re-writes Soviet representations of the collective (Rudova 2014).

¹³ Ilya Kukulín demonstrates this point in his analysis of the high popularity of Gleb Zheglóv, a character from an early 1980s TV series, readable even in Putin's discourse; this character, the study shows, was, in turn, an expression of late Soviet nostalgia for a Stalinist 'grip' on the post-war criminality.