

• Author: [Maria Engström](#)

Conservative imperfection: The visual aesthetics of Leningrad



The aesthetization of imperfection today seems an interesting and important global cultural phenomenon. The contemporary individual is not ready for sacrifice in the name of a bright future, although they are “waiting for change”. So what’s left is to balance between integrity and fragmentation, hope and melancholy, irony and seriousness. This oscillation between deconstruction and reconstruction, typical of our time, is expressed in the dominance of post-ironic practices, aesthetization of the naïve, unfortunate and miserable, a revived interest in realism and “the little man.”

In the framework of this new aesthetics of imperfection, the art of Sergei Shnurov and the band Leningrad can be regarded the most successful project in Russia in ideological and commercial terms. In the context of Russian symbolic politics, Leningrad’s visual language is of particular interest - especially recent music videos (actually short films) created by director Anna Parmas: “VIP” (Вип, 2015), “ZOZH” (ЗОЖ, 2015), “Ekspонат” (Экспонат, 2016), “Sis’ki” (Сиськи, 2016), “V Pitere pit” (В Питере пить, 2016), “Ekstaz” (Экстаз, 2017) and “Kandidat” (Кандидат, 2017).

Leningrad’s semantic and visual range is characterized by a focus on “bad taste”, “low culture”, “the twilight of everyday life”; on linguistic and behavioral transgression. In many respects, Shnurov employs the method of Sots Art: [According to](#) philosopher and contemporary art theorist Boris Groys, he “reaches for cheap reality in

order to transform it into an expensive work of art.”

The object of Shnurov and Parmas’s aesthetic observations is the new “poor”: their provincially, desperate misery and existence outside history. The Leningrad videos directed by Parmas are populated by the notorious 86%, the “dumb majority,” objects of “internal colonization.” They act as tricksters and jesters, as parodies of cultural heroes, and demonstrate the superficial and conventional nature of all social norms and restrictions.

For example, not at all a Russian-American beauty Marina or the real Stas, who can only be met at an international airport, but Stas-impostor is the main protagonist of the video “Ekstaz” (Экстаз, “Ecstasy”, (16.5 million views on YouTube). The false Stas – an auto mechanic called Vitalik – is allowed to cross all boundaries, except for the state border.

Parmas’s [short film](#) for the song “VIP” (more than 40 million views on YouTube) tells the story of a provincial Russian beauty. The narrative parodies the 1990s blockbuster *Pretty Woman*, starting with a first visit to a market stall for an inaccessible luxury (a “limited edition” leopard-print T-shirt with the inscription “Don’t touch;” it costs 1300 rubles and is surrounded by the images of the President), followed by a manly struggle for love, and finally a triumphal return to the same stall for a T-shirt not with a millionaire’s credit card but with a handsome and brave robber. The style of the video is in line with the Gopnik aesthetics of fashion designer Gosha Rubchinskiy, the iconic Generation Z designer who triumphed over the conspicuous consumption of the glamour era.

Parmas’s video for “ZOZH” (ЗОЖ, “Healthy lifestyle,” more than 48 million views on YouTube) keeps up the tradition of Necrorealistic cinema, an art movement that originated in the underground of the city of Leningrad in the 1980s. It presents sedentary paramedics who drink and smoke, in between calmly picking up the bleeding corpses of the elite followers of a healthy (Western) lifestyle. They become a visual metaphor for the “Russian world,” which moves at a slow pace and is not in a hurry.

The Gopnik, grotesque and brutal aesthetics of the protagonists of the “VIP”, “Ekstaz” and “ZOZH” videos is clearly juxtaposed with elite glamour, and is perceived by the viewer as a contrast between authenticity and pretense, the people and the elite, Russia and the West. Unlike official Russian propaganda, which also employs this binary system but continues to coin images of iconic heroes while making references to Russian history spanning from the Middle Ages to the Soviet period, the anti-heroes of Leningrad’s videos live in the present; they could be our neighbors, relatives, friends or colleagues. Hence, despite the videos’ mostly dismal plots, they are perceived by viewers not as a negative reflection of Russian reality but as a recognizable and therefore positive self-image (it will suffice to read the comments on YouTube).

Leningrad’s short films, with a total of more than 500 million views on YouTube, are an important consolidating and mobilizing factor today. By refreshing Russians’ self-awareness as a special entity that has preserved something genuine in this sham world, Shnurov and Parmas construe the image of the country as a unique “zone of imperfection,” resistant to false hierarchies. It is noteworthy that this mobilization originates not from the locus of power but from the sphere of (independent) culture, and that it is not built on the ideology of “traditional values” but based on transgressive emotions; on the negation of any form of hegemony, order, norms or established rules of the game.

Aesthetic populism in cinema

Leningrad’s videos are not the only resource of transgressive mobilization. They are part of an important cultural phenomenon in contemporary Russian culture, which can be defined as “aesthetic populism” or “new populism.” The rise and conceptual perfection of this new aesthetics coincides with Vladimir Putin’s third term in office.

Aesthetic populism entered Russian culture in 2012 along with the film *Kokoko* (Кокосо), written by Parmas and directed by Avdotya Smirnova. It is precisely the provincial girl Vika (Yana Troyanova), who combines the contradictory traits of unbridled trickery, sacrifice and sincerity, and not her intelligent antithesis Liza (Anna Mikhalkova), who becomes a heroine for the new, conservative era and the political aesthetics of imperfection.

In 2013, the film *Gor’ko* (Горько, “Kiss Them All!”), directed by Zhora Kryzhovnikov, was released, followed in 2014 by *Gor’ko 2* (“Kiss Them All! 2”). Here we can see the whole ensemble of characters that appeared in

Leningrad's videos at around the same time. The Gopnik character Lyosha, played by Aleksandr Pal, gained the most popularity. In 2017, Pal appeared in Leningrad's video "Voyage" (Вояж, directed by Ilya Naishuller, more than 21 million views).

The comedy series *Olga* (Ольга, 2016-2017) turned out to be the culmination of aesthetic populism. Troyanova plays the lead; the characters can be directly transposed into Leningrad's visual world. They're live, ready-made models of imperfection: a single mother, an alcoholic father, a debauched sister, a foolish daughter and her Gopnik boyfriend. Nevertheless, the image of the pedicurist Olga from Chertanovo, who sacrifices everything for her dysfunctional family, has come to embody the conservative demand for a non-pretentious image of the Motherland. The role brought Troyanova popular adoration, and the Woman of the Year award from the local edition of *GQ*.

Russia-trickster

In the global context, Leningrad's aesthetic populism fits into the avant-garde aesthetics of imperfection, while in the local Russian context, the choice of artistic language is often interpreted as political populism. The renowned music critic Artemy Troitsky judges Leningrad's art to be a patriotic and conservative message. He [describes](#) Shnurov as the most fundamental Russian "bond," "Russia's chief anesthesiologist" and "an object of national importance."

Indeed, transgressive mobilization leaves no space for political maneuvering, and rules out activism of either the right or the left (which is why both left-wing and right-wing radicals equally reject Shnurov's art). Having created a semantic, visual, polyphonic, practically Gogol-esque gallery of images of new Russian tricksters, who break all the rules, Shnurov and Leningrad have become a machine for the reproduction and consolidation of the nation, confident of their civilizational righteousness. Their convincing post-glamour parody of Hollywood, show business, the fashion industry, corporate culture and their Russian copy-cats harmonizes with the conservative discourse on a "crisis of the First World." The trash aesthetics of the 1990s and the secondary aesthetization of the post-Soviet cargo cult are currently the tool for deconstructing the dominance of the so-called West, while Leningrad's videos are a projection of Russia's trickster role on the global political arena.

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