Requiem for a Lost Future? A Hauntological Reading of Late-Soviet Underground Rock Through the Lyrics of Viktor Tsoi, Aleksandr Bashlachev and Egor Letov

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THE relationship between rock music and the Soviet Union was a passionate and fruitful one, though largely ignored westward of the former Iron Curtain. It gave rise to a vast and heterogeneous repertoire, marked by diverse styles, tones, and themes, and in which the Western influence blended with the motives and the style of the Russian bard tradition[1] – also known as *bardovskaia pesnia*[2], *guitar poetry*[3] (for its reliance on the guitar as accompanying instrument), *avtorskaia pesnia* [author's song] or *samodeiatel'naia pesnia* [amateur or homemade song][4] – with remarkably original outcomes. A particular branch of this lineage includes the musical offspring – here referred to as late-Soviet underground rock – of a period in which Real socialism was about to collapse and libertarian perspectives were fading against the looming prospect of capitalist eternity. Late-Soviet underground refers to that series of alternative cultural practices which developed in the USSR from the early and mid-1980s to the early 1990s, of which – due to space constraints – only the Russian production will be taken into account here.

Underground culture is often referred to as "unofficial", a lexical choice which, while being preferred by some for "its emphasis on the power structures – and, therefore, the inherent tensions – of Soviet life"[5], entails the risk of

> reduc[ing] Soviet reality to a binary division between the state (censored) and the society beyond it (uncensored), failing to account for the fact that many of the common cultural phenomena in socialism that were allowed, tolerated, or even promoted within the realm of the officially censored were nevertheless quite distinct from the ideological texts of the Party[6].

Far more complex than a mere antithesis to the totalitarian state, unofficial bard music – which flourished from the late 1960s to the late 1970s – has been critically read as a form of dissent "not without relation to official culture"[7], an expression of mimetic resistance from within the discourse of power rather than an external attack upon it[8]. Likewise, later unofficial Soviet music constitutes a field open to critical discursive analysis, owing to its complexity, nonlinearity, and ambiguous interrelation with official culture.

The combative lyrics of late 1980s and early 1990s Soviet underground rock songs, combined with their incisive arrangements and performative renditions, make them a sensitive trace of the countercultural response to a historical turning point. On the other hand, their more than vaguely nostalgic tones make them a joint expression of desires and regrets, oscillating between the subjective and the collective

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[1] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia*, Winchester [MA] 1987, pp. 40-41.

[2] B. A. Horne, *The Bars of Magnitizdat: An Aesthetic Political History of Russian Underground Recordings*, in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond*, ed. by F. Kind-Kovacs – J. Labov, New York 2013, pp. 75-189 (p.176).

[3] B. A. Horne, *The Bars of Magnitizdat: An Aesthetic Political History of Russian Underground Recordings*, in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond*, ed. by F. Kind-Kovacs – J. Labov, New York 2013, pp. 75-189 (p.176).

[4] P. J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music During the Thaw*, Oxford-New York 2009, p. 199.

[5] Ivi, p. 37.

[6] A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton 2005, p. 18.

[7] A. Komaromi, *The Voices of Samizdat and Magnitizdat*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, ed. by S. Lovell – G. Roberts, New York 2024, pp. 186-205 (p. 200).

[8] S. Oushakine, *The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat*, "Public Culture", 2001 (13), 2, pp. 191-214.

planes. This ambiguity unveils the presence of a nostalgic element beneath the vocalisation of dissent, which can be examined through Derrida's notion of hauntology[9]. Arguably, much of late-Soviet underground rock is permeated by the nostalgia for a lost future – that is, for an idea of the future that never came to pass. More specifically, it seems to voice an awareness, tinged with anticipatory bitterness, that the end of the bipolar world will not lead to a genuinely new and revolutionary social project, but rather to the crystallisation of global capitalism. It is in the gap between the old faith in the future and this stark realisation that a ghostly, almost mournful regret slips in – an elusive, serpentine presence, a mourning of the future that might have been. Hence, music chords echo like funeral bells for a failed social experiment.

The evolution of Soviet rock

Although rock music made its first appearance in the Soviet Union in 1961 (when what is considered to be the first Soviet rock band, the Revengers, played their covers of American rock'n'roll standards in Riga)[10], the first Soviet underground or unofficial music practices had taken ground long before. In particular, the countercultural movement of *stiliagi* had challenged the dominant culture between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, following a model sketched out in the West by the Beat Generation[11]. Captivated by the reverberations of the beatniks' mass scale rupture with official culture, the postwar Soviet youth had shaped their looks, lifestyle, reading habits and, of course, music tastes in accordance with the countercultural model that was gaining ground west of their own longitudes[12]:

> The Soviet stiliagi gave themselves American names like Peter and Bob, held cocktail hours, and listened to American jazz. In Moscow they "hung out" in restaurants and along Moscow's fashionable Gorky Prospekt, which they referred to whimsically as "Broadway"[13].

The *stiliagi* wore extravagant combinations and flashy garments in open defiance of Communist dress codes; they organised illicit parties; they smuggled and circulated censored records by copying them on used plastic x-ray plates – a practice known as *rentgoenizdat* [x-ray publishing], which gave form to the *plastinki na kostiakh* [bone records] and *na rebrakh* [on ribs], longed-for gateways to a forbidden world for the generation spanning the 1940s to the 1960s[14]. These records "prompted a jocular discourse that fostered imaginations of the West in two ways"[15], since "they represented something that was simultaneously visible and invisible, real and virtual [...], they created an uncanny kind of intimacy: one both saw and heard what was personal, tangible, and yet imaginary"[16]. Until Stalin's death in 1953, the repression of the *stiliagi*'s practices was harsh and uncompromising, since they were "manifestations of 'bourgeois decadence' and 'spiritual destitution'"[17]. Yet, desire triumphed over fear: a handful of moments of unbridled energy release was worth the risk of severe institutional punishment – including being altogether deprived of personal liberties. Freedom was non-negotiable and could not be reduced to the trickle of modest concessions meted out by the Soviet state.

Notably, the *stiliagi*'s notion of freedom largely coincided with the version promoted by Western counterculture (which caused them to be accused of "blind worship of the West")[18]: relaxation of moral norms, rejection of the values of the older generation, sexual liberation (although this aspiration remained more disembodied in the sexually repressed Stalin-era USSR than in the West)[19], frenetic dancing, alcohol-fuelled mind alteration – in short, op-

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[9] J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, New York-London 1994 [1993].

[10] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., p. 21.

[11] Ivi, pp. 13-17.

[12] A. Yurchak, *Everything*, cit., pp. 170-175.

[13] T. W. Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, New York-Oxford 1990, p. 23.

[14] B. A. Horne, *The Bars*, cit., p. 179; A. Yurchak, *Everything*, cit., p.182.

[15] A. Yurchak, *Everything*, cit., p. 182.

[16] Ivi, p.183.

[17] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., p. 15.

[18] Ivi, p. 17.

[19] I. Kon, *Seksual'naia kul'tura v Rossii: Klubnichka na berezke*, Moskva 2010, pp. 271-277.

position to the prescriptions through which institutional bodies exercised their repressive authority. The *stiliagi* were driven by a desire to push further the boundaries of personal liberty – a drive fuelled by exuberant, optimistic endorsement of a lifestyle founded on rule-breaking.

In a likewise optimistic fashion, the youth of the 1960s rode the wave of social upheaval unleashed by the libertarian stances of the hippie movement. This optimism, further nurtured by the wishful atmosphere of Khrushchev-era *ottepel'* [thaw][20], found its musical expression in the birth of the first Russian rock bands. Initially, these bands played covers of English and American artists (especially the Beatles) [21], while later on they started composing lyrics in Russian, thus beginning to appropriate – not just replicate – the genre[22]. As Mark Yoffe points out, "approximately by 1965, feathers started to fly when Soviet rock musicians evolved to the point of producing original sound and, moreover, started writing their own lyrics in Russian"[23].

In the 1970s, the optimism of the previous decade curbed significantly, since "for young people, the Brezhnev era, which spanned the entire 1970s, was marked by a tragic isolation from their Western peers and by a hopeless feeling of cultural stagnation"[24]. Among the professional bands of the time – called *vokal'no-instrumental'nye ansambli* [Vocal Instrumental Ensembles] or VIA – are groups such as the Moscow-based Tsvety (later renamed Stas Namin) and the trans-Uralic Ariel', both prevalently active in the 1970s and whose lyrics stand out for their predominantly sentimental, inoffensive content[25].

The ensuing decade and a half – the 1980s and the early 1990s – mark the entrance into the sooty, liminal territory of late-Soviet and immediately post-Soviet underground rock music. Its liminality is manifested on multiple levels: besides flaunting a borderline geographical collocation (just beyond the threshold of the former Iron Curtain as well as within the complex cartography of the Soviet territory hallmarked by multiplicity), it also features a historical duality in its bridging the very passage from the pre- to the post-*raspad* [dissolution] of the USSR. Finally, its borderline nature also covers the psychological domain, as it carries the double burden of a decisive frontier-crossing: narrative rupture on the one hand, shattered utopia on the other.

Liminality was a distinctive feature of the perestroika years. Psychology-wise, perestroika "required altogether novel behaviours and attitudes, many of which contradicted arrangements developed over nearly three-quarters of a century. In a very real sense, perestroika demand[ed] psychological restructuring as much as the transformation of economic or political institutions"[26]. The disintegration of political institutions wreaked havoc in the Soviet sphere. The features of reality became unrecognisable, thus triggering mass-scale confusion. The reference points that had until then – both for better and for worse – guided Soviet citizens had disappeared and the new order was perceived as riddled with loopholes, due to the unexpectedness of the change[27].

The ambivalence of the music scene in the late 1980s widely reflected the confused – even latently schizophrenic – character of the age: on the one hand, the declared openness to the West compelled official bodies to adopt a less severe stance toward the different forms of artistic expression; on the other, a strict selectivity was still in force regarding content and modes of performance. While it is true that some artists managed to slip through the mesh of censorship despite their rock affiliation (as the genre

[20] See G. Yelshevskaya, *The Thaw and the 1960s. The Birth of the Underground*, "Arzamas", 14.12.2016, https://arzamas.academy/materials/1234 (latest access: 30.10.2025).

[21] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., pp. 23-27; A. Yurchak, *Everything*, cit., p. 191.

[22] M. Yoffe – D. Laing, *History of Soviet and Russian Rock Music*, in *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World. Volume VIII: Locations: Europe*, ed. by J. Shepherd – D. Horn – D. Laing, London-New York 2011, pp. 57-72.

[23] M. Yoffe, *Soviet Rock Carnival: Times and Traditions*, in *The Oxford Handbook*, cit., p. 552.

[24] Ivi, p. 554.

[25] See for example A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., pp. 37, 39-40.

[26] D. E. Powell, *Review: "Perestroika" in the (Former) USSR: Psychological, Political, and Economic Dimensions*, "Studies in Comparative Communism", 1992 (25), 2, pp. 193-207 (p. 193).

[27] See A. Yurchak, *The Canon and the Mushroom: Lenin, Sacredness, and the Soviet Collapse*, "HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory", 2017 (7), 2, pp. 165-198 (pp. 166-167).

was by then too popular to be outright banned), they were still bound by the obligations of decorum and alignment with the official ideology[28]. Musicians allowed to perform in the Houses of Culture – and thus to make a living from their music – had to adhere to a set of binding prescriptions: their lyrics were not to address compromising themes and the sound's impetuosity, so vital to rock music, had to be constrained. Performances were permitted provided they avoided reckless dissonances and, above all, physical involvement of the audience: an indispensable condition of official concerts was that they be listened to while seated. Musicians who failed to comply with these clauses could not perform officially and thus had to find alternative employments, under penalty of being charged with parasitism[29], a very serious offence at that time[30]. What was ultimately permitted, then, was a scrupulously sanitised version of rock'n'roll, purged of its most corrosive aspects.

Within this precarious balance between substantial intransigence and faint flashes of permissiveness, the germinal wave of the late-Soviet underground burst forth with virulence, finding in rock music one of its most urgent expressive channels. Underground is a fitting term for this sub-culture: performances took place at Leningrad's legendary Saigon café[31] and Rock Club – where the first concert was held in March 1981[32] – but mostly in the literal underground of urban life, particularly in Leningrad and, from 1983, Moscow[33], in shadowy spaces, shielded from institutional scrutiny: boiler rooms, basements, residential buildings. Spreading with youth's adrenaline-fuelled speed, the phenomenon of *kvartirniki* and *kommunalniki* took hold. Those were informal gatherings organised in private apartments and communal flats, respectively. Admission to these events was by word of mouth and they attracted crowds of young people eager to amuse themselves beyond the permitted limits. Within the practice of *magnitizdat*, which had previously developed in the context of the bard scene[34], home-made albums – playfully marked by © and ℗ symbols[35] – circulated. These recordings were characterised by "authenticity, spontaneity and human spirit"[36] as well as by the personal, individual quality of the lyrics[37]. They featured an inherently dialogic quality, enhanced by its amateur nature and lo-fi sound[38].

The nostalgic allure of late-Soviet underground rock scene

In the years spanning from the end of the USSR to our days, the settings, practices and influential personalities of perestroika-era underground culture have undergone a tremendous popularisation. Indeed, the narrative of late-Soviet rock prevailing today tends to be celebratory, to label that subculture as a solely luminous expression of a forward-driving impulse toward the new. Carefully removed from this picture are the jagged edges and the ambivalences that would hinder a smooth retrospective reading. Thus, the musicians are fully cast in the role of daring pioneers who paved the way for an epochal liberation of expressive codes. As sharply synthesised by Horne, their songs have become "everyday commodities, mementos of Soviet life"[39].

The crystallisation of this imaginary has been reinforced by a late-Soviet and post-Soviet cultural production largely centred on nostalgic commemoration. Famous cinematographic examples include *Rok* by Aleksei Uchitel' (1988), a documentary following Leningrad's underground musicians through their lives (by day, but especially by night, a time

[28] See M. Maurizio, *Graždanskaja Oborona e Tardo Sovietismo*, "Quaderni di Ricognizioni", 2023, 14, pp. 121-130 (p. 122).
[29] T. W. Ryback, *Rock*, cit., p. 143.
[30] See G. P. Piretto, *Quando c'era l'USSR*, Milano 2018, p. 434.
[31] Ivi, p. 73.
[32] Ivi, p. 74; T. W. Ryback, *Rock*, cit., p. 213.
[33] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., p. 99.
[34] See A. Komaromi, *The Voices*, cit., pp. 187-188.
[35] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., p. 98.
[36] G. Sosin, '*Magnitizdat*': *Uncensored Songs of Dissent*, in *Dissent in the USSR: Politics, Ideology and People*, ed. by R. L. Tokes, Baltimore-London 1975, pp. 276-309 (p. 309).
[37] V. Frumkin, *Kazalos', chto melodii padaiut k nemu s neba*, "Vestnik", 21.01.2004, http://www.sergeytatiananikitiny.com/index.php/joomla-templates/158-2012-10-05-13-19-25 (latest access: 30.10.2025).
[38] See A. Komaromi, *The Voices*, cit.; V. Frumkin, *Kazalos', chto melodii*, cit.
[39] B. A. Horne, *The Bars*, cit., p. 176.

devoted to music), and earlier on *Assa* by Sergei Solov'ev (1987), with its visual celebration of underground spaces and artefacts: taverns, synthesisers, cassette tapes, colourful wigs, albums of psychedelic drawings, and other materialia[40].

A masterful example of nostalgia-infused post-Soviet attempt to evoke the atmosphere of the perestroika through the soundtrack provided by its scruffy heroes is Kirill Serebrennikov's film *Leto* [Summer, 2018]. One of the film's paradigmatic scenes is a sugar-coated depiction of a *kvartirnik*: toward the end of the film, an elderly woman is seen dancing with a dishevelled drunkard, his hair tousled, his voice howling, his movements wild – a character inspired by Andrei Panov, known as Svin [Pig], vocalist of what is considered the Soviet Union's first punk band, Avtomaticheskie Udovletvoriteli, known for their "ravingly absurd" songs[41]. All around, the crowd makes space for them, stepping back amid swirling smoke from countless cigarettes, hoarse laughter, and the chant of the song *Vsetselo* [Totally] – a blend of absurdist quips grafted onto the musical trunk of a romantic ballad.

Besides the effervescence – drenched in rivers of alcohol – of creative production and reproduction, the film portrays the material hardships that weighed upon the lives of underground artists. The character representing Mike Naumenko, vocalist of the Leningrad-based rock band Zoopark, is shown designing covers for smuggled Western records to make ends meet, then chatting and smoking on a windy rooftop with Boris Grebenshikov, leader of Aquarium, "the group which has largely set the tone of Soviet rock in the eighties"[42] and with which Naumenko played the guitar for a while[43]. The aforementioned Andrei Panov quarrels with a middle-aged man on the *elektrichka* [commuter train], after having been accused of being a drifter who sings the enemy's songs instead of working – an altercation that ends with him being brutally beaten by the police. In general, all the film's characters, who correspond to the best-known names in perestroika rock, are depicted as scrambling to get by: we see them strumming during a heavy-drinking picnic in the park or follow them through their songwriting process, sprawled on unmade beds or rehearsing in dilapidated practice rooms. Unable to officially work as musicians due to censorship of both music and lyrics, these underground tightrope walkers had to find cover jobs. Among these, the position of *kochegar* [stoker] was particularly popular. Working night shifts, stokers could devote their days and evenings to music. Moreover, those who performed such humble tasks were allowed not to join the Party, thus enjoying intellectual independence and avoiding entanglement with institutional spheres[44].

As Viktor Tsoi sang at the dawn of his musical career in *Ia khochu byt' kochegarom* [I Want to Be a Stoker, 1983], "Надоело ходить на работу, / каждый день к девяти на работу. / Я нашел выход: Я хочу быть кочегаром"[45]. For regime dissidents, unemployment was not a badge of failure. On the contrary, as it stemmed from their refusal to conform to the existing order, joblessness was claimed with pride. So much so that the young Tsoi would sing, with brazen satisfaction, what became a jovial anthem against regimentation through labour: "Я бездельник, мама!" [I'm a slacker, mama!, 1982].

What the above-mentioned scenes in *Leto* have in common is their reliance on the spectators' nostalgic sentimentalism, which in turn exposes the tight link between commemoration and adulteration. Indeed, despite the bitterness of the portrayed situations, the tones are ever-light and the photography exudes a yearning for vintage aesthetics that, albeit visually compelling, can't eschew the charge of verging onto the glamourisation of the past.

The nostalgic pull exerted on viewers through exposure to the simulacra of a brief era coinciding with the time of their youth has helped forge an imaginary that, while not utterly unfaithful, inevitably

[40] On materialia, i.e. objects that become vehicles of cultural memory, see A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, Cambridge 2011.

[41] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., p. 69.

[42] Ivi, p. 52.

[43] Ivi, p. 77.

[44] T. Cushman, *Notes from Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia*, New York 1995, pp. 57-58.

[45] "I'm sick of going to work / every day at nine o'clock / I found a way out / I want to be a stoker". All translations are mine – *S.P.*

simplifies a much more complex experience, shot through with as many shadows as lights. The thrust forward of the bards of the Soviet twilight, while undisputable, was in fact accompanied by a darker undercurrent that traversed both personal and collective dimensions, surfacing in songs through sombre imagery and concepts, solipsistic feelings and sense of estrangement[46]. This sensibility unsettles the dominant narrative: rather than charioteers of a new future, these artists might better be described as elegists of an old future – that is, a future that was imaginable only in the past (and in this light, *Assa* itself may well be read as a premature funeral hymn).

Hauntological nostalgia

The notion of nostalgia is tightly woven into the Soviet trajectory: twentieth-century exiled dissidents spoke of the overwhelming sense of loss tied to a place and time which were equally unreachable, since the pre-revolutionary Russia of either their childhood's memories or their more abstract recalling no longer existed[47]. The so-called fourth wave of Soviet-born hybrid émigré writers, who left their homeland immediately after the *raspad* – usually at a young age – shifts the object of nostalgia without altering its fundamental nature: from their new homes abroad, they bitterly criticise their country of origin but nonetheless yearn for a return which the dramatic changes occurred since their departure has made impossible[48]. In addition, younger people with a solely mediated experience of communist life – often resulting, as we shall see, in an idealizing distortion of the imaginary to which they were exposed – direct their nostalgia toward what is no longer retrievable.

Late-Soviet rock songwriters seem to express a nostalgia for what might have been but never was, i.e. a nostalgia with a distinct hauntological quality. Conceived at the turn of the millennium, the definition of hauntology stands out as a crucial elaboration on the theme of nostalgia. The term, which plays on haunt and ontology, was coined by Derrida to define what is "neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes"[49], including those events that never fully came to pass but whose prefiguration continues to linger in the present, haunting it like a ghost. Borrowing this concept, nostalgia can refer not to the past, but to a future that was once imagined and promised but never materialised.

Mark Fisher, who revived and popularised hauntology, wrote about the nostalgia for "lost futures"[50], i.e. futures that never happened, in which what is longed for is the vanished possibility of a particular future. This nostalgia is experienced as a "present absence"[51], i.e. as the presence of what never was. This concept is closely tied to the author's elaborations on the weird and the eerie, both dissected in his writings that most clearly bear the postmodern imprint of Derrida's thought: "A weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet, if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid"[52]. Out of Freud's unheimlich or uncanny[53], at the heart of which Fisher identifies repetition and doubling, the concept of the eerie emerges along with that of the weird. Unlike the uncanny, which is about the strangely familiar, the weird and the eerie are about that which is strangely unfamiliar, conveying a disturbing sense of not belonging. For Fisher, the eerie refers to the perception of a presence where there shouldn't be any, or conversely, of an absence where there should be a presence. It arises from an inexplicable lack (for instance, a deserted village with no reason) or from some hidden agency (something acting without our being able to identify it, just like the inhuman – and inhumane – forces of capitalism).

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[46] See M. Maurizio, *Graždanskaja Oborona*, cit., p. 123.

[47] V. Nabokov, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, London 2025 [1951]; I. Brodsky, *The Condition We Call Exile*, in Idem, *On Grief and Reason*, New York 1995.

[48] See K. Ryan, *Failures of Domesticity in Contemporary Russian-American Literature: Vapnyar, Krasikov, Ulinich, and Reyn*, "TranscUlturAl", 2011 (1), 4, pp. 70-72.

[49] J. Derrida, *Spectres*, cit., p. 63.

[50] M. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Winchester 2014, p. 1.

[51] Ivi, p. 107.

[52] Idem, *The Weird and The Eerie*, London 2016, p. 11.

[53] S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, London 2003 [1919].

There is a clear link between these formulations of presence/absence slippage and the presence/absence vagueness at the core of Derridean hauntology. According to Fisher, for Derrida "everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does"[54]. Therefore, the spectre Derrida examines exists only in the ambiguous relationship it establishes with the two poles of absence – what is no longer and what is not yet – characterising itself as a hollow, alien, unsettling presence.

From the critical perspective of hauntology, an investigation can be undertaken into the differential space between the future imagined in the past and the present reality – a space haunted by the ghosts of what once could have been but can no longer occur. Within this interpretative framework, much of late-Soviet underground music bears the mark of hauntological nostalgia, as it articulates a call for change while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of its realisation. As Alexei Yurchak observes, "in the late 1980s, there was a widespread realization that the state socialism which had seemed so eternal might in fact be coming to an end"[55]. Hence, the call for renewal turns into something closer to a lamentation of defeat. Conflict with the existing system coexists with disenchantment. This tension, channelled through lyrics and music, engenders a crisis of thought and feeling: the impossibility of choosing between a censorious present and a market-dominated future, between a Soviet era in its death throes and an endless neoliberal nightmare.

The late 1980s were, in many respects, a time suffused with an impending end-of-things feeling. In 1992, Fukuyama's announcement of the end of history[56] would give a name to a widespread feeling of epochal impasse. Meanwhile, on both sides of the geopolitical arena where the Cold War was once waged, the bitter laughter echoing behind Thatcher's slogan "There is no alternative" – later pinpointed by Mark Fisher as the prophetic mantra of contemporary capitalist realism[57] – resounded ominously. In the West, the last ashes of punk were dying out, while post-punk trudged on funereally and the desperate flicker of what would be catalogued as the last counterculture – i.e. the rave movement – flared up amid the smoke, preparing (as early as by the mid-nineties) "to crash into various aesthetic and spiritual dead ends" and "to look back wistfully"[58].

Meanwhile, in the Soviet underground – whose Leningrad scene at the decade's end was still the most fertile outpost – those punk ashes were rekindled in a different hearth. Elements of local tradition were tapped, causing songs which punk etiquette would have expected to be textually minimal to border on *avtorskie pesni* crafted with meticulous linguistic care, in the tradition of Russian bards. These ashes joined the highly inflammable material of the aforementioned disenchantment, which bounced from the general to the particular, from the political to the personal, and back again. In this bidirectional movement, the artist's subjectivity rose as a paradigm for a generation, even – expanding the scope from political disillusionment to the acknowledgement of one's own mortality – for the whole human condition. From this angle, the despair over a specific historical conjuncture triggers a contemplation of the abyss toward which every mortal tends.

The late-Soviet nostalgic feeling, being inscribed in the wider framework of the then emerging postmodern sensitivity, may be understood as a psychological projection of that very exhaustion of future horizons which underpins the retro-futuristic aesthetics – academically codified in the 1970s following its explosion into pop culture[59]. Indirectly quoting the 1975 observation by the theologian Martin E. Marty, "the past is back in favor because the present is too unattractive to provide a base for looking with hope into the future"[60]. The nostalgic sensibility un-

[54] M. Fisher, *Ghosts*, cit., pp. 17-18.
[55] A. Yurchak, *Everything*, cit., p. 15.
[56] F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.
[57] M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, London 2009.
[58] S. Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*, New York 2011, p. 234.
[59] See E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival*, London 2006, p. 152.
[60] Ivi, p. 153.

derlying late-Soviet underground rock can thus be defined as a vision of the future which the present has erased from the realm of possibility: in essence, a future that could only be conceived in the past.

Emblematic cases of hauntological progression in late-Soviet underground rock

Finely attuned to the spirit of their time, perestroika-era artists create a shifting musical backdrop aligned with the political-historical oscillations. A close look at some of their lyrics shows their hauntological evolution – from the wishfully militant beginnings to later disillusion. An emblematic case is offered by the artistic career of Viktor Tsoi, former singer of Palata n° 6[61], then vocalist of Kino, a milestone of the late-Soviet underground scene. With his accessible lyrics, marked by simple vocabulary and essential syntax, yet profound and inspired, open to multiple layers of interpretation, rich in vivid and poignant images and references (Grebenshikov said that "no one's songs had so much tenderness and purity")[62], Tsoi encapsulated the essence of a pan-Soviet sensibility that still resonates with millions of listeners today. He is a figure cloaked in fascination for the ex-Soviet world, a fetishised as much as admired personality.

It is telling that in various cities of the former Soviet Union, the famous slogan *Tsoi zhiv* [Tsoi is alive] is still preserved today, immortalised by the historic graffiti in Moscow's Arbat alley. In 2016, an attempt to alter the slogan – replacing the predicate *zhiv* with *mertv* [dead] – was immediately rebuffed by the fan community, who restored the original inscription on the very same day[63]. As further testimony to the enduring collective memory, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, a pedestrian street is dedicated to Viktor Tsoi, ending with a statue that depicts him in the iconic pose from Rashid Nugmanov's cult film *Igla* [The Needle, 1988], in which he plays the lead role. In 2020, on the thirtieth anniversary of the singer's death, a monument to the singer – in the act of fiercely crossing his arms on his guitar – was placed in Prospekt Veteranov, St. Petersburg. The walls of Kotel'naia Kamchatka [Kamchatka Boiler House], the former Leningrad heating plant in 15 Ulitsa Blokhina, St. Petersburg, where Tsoi worked as a stoker (and performed unofficial concerts at night), are adorned with countless photos, drawings, and posters of Tsoi and other artists of the same scene[64]. The former boiler-house, now converted into a bar and concert hall, has become a must-visit pilgrimage site for the fans of the singer, around whom a veritable cult has developed – in part due to his untimely death at the age of twenty-eight[65].

A notable role in elevating Tsoi to the status of countercultural icon was played by the previously quoted film *Assa*: the iconic final scene shows the singer roaring "My zhdem peremen" [We are waiting for change] before a sparse audience that, as the credits roll, transforms into a stadium crowd. The invocation is the closing line of *Khochu peremen* [I want change, 1989], a song first performed in 1986, when the drive for change and faith in the unfolding of history animated the underground scene.

Dalshe deistvovat' budem my [We will take it from here, 1988], another Kino song, has been elevated to the status of liberation anthem for its brimming optimism. Optimism and hope for the future in spite of all adversities indeed characterise most tracks in the album *Gruppa krovi* [Blood Type, 1988]. One exception is *Boshetunmai*, a melancholic song named after the unintelligible word repeated in the chorus. The verses of this song capture a snapshot of late-Soviet urban life, infused with affection for certain elements – furnishings, situations, habits – that instantly evoke an era. Particularly striking is the list of features of a *kommunalka* phrased like an offer for a housing exchange, a com-

[61] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, op. cit., p. 60.
[62] Ivi, p. 79.
[63] See *Na stene Tsoia poiavilas' gigantskaia nadpis' "Tsoi mertv"*, < https://lenta.ru/news/2016/06/20/tsoi/ (latest access: 30.10.2025).

[64] In *Kamchatka*, included in Kino's second album *46* from 1983, Tsoi sings: "это странное место Камчатка, это сладкое слово Камчатка" ["It's a strange place, the Kamchatka, it's a sweet word, Kamchatka"], playing on the ambiguity between the name of the unofficial venue and the far Eastern Russian peninsula.
[65] The singer died in August 1990 in a tragic car accident in Latvia, while he was returning from the studio where he had just recorded *Chernyi Al'bom* [Black Album].

mon practice at the time – through which listeners can mentally reconstruct the evoked space and recall it decades later. The *starye kvartiry* [old apartments] of the song are described as equipped with light, gas, telephone, hot water, and radio, boasting parquet floors, separate bathrooms, brick buildings, many utility rooms, and a central position close to the metro. These lines would – whether knowingly or not – come to spark a mass retrospective longing. Indeed, while Tsoi expresses a pre-emptive nostalgia for the realia (culturally charged signifiers, untranslatable in other languages)[66] and materialia of late-Soviet life, listening to his songs decades later results in a mediated or delegated nostalgia. In other words, *Boshetunmai*, already imbued with a pre-emptive nostalgia scarcely distinguishable from *toska* at the time of its composition, unleashes pangs of nostalgia in those who never lived through the realities it describes and yet – or perhaps precisely for that reason – feel their absence.

A similar effect is arguably pursued by the lyrics of *Navsegda* [Forever, 1989] by the band Tsentr, led by Vasilii Shumov. It is a list of highly emotionally charged Soviet objects (such as balalaika, borshch, samovar, Sputnik, bliny, just to report those in the opening lines) and famous names – such as the poets Pushkin and Evtushenko and the nuclear physicist Kurchatov – followed by the assertive conclusion that "Vse nashe navsegda!" [That is all ours forever]. While, according to Mark Yoffe, such a disassembled and extravagant list winks at the absurd, nonsensical humour in the tradition of *steb* (in Yoffe's words, "a very complex form of humorous cultural discourse that permeates entirely most of Soviet rock and becomes one of the main techniques in rock's conceptualist practice")[67], it also seems to elicit a pre-emptively nostalgic response in the audience – the object of which, just like in *Boshetunmai*, will become the target of mediated nostalgia in post-communist societies. This mediated nostalgia, or "armchair nostalgia", is defined as "nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory"[68]. Because this emotional attachment invests something non-directly witnessed, it feeds mainly on products of cultural consumption, offering a manufactured version of the past. In light of Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative nostalgia – which "puts emphasis on *nostos*"[69], therefore is the desire to reconstruct an idealised past – and reflective nostalgia – which "dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, [...] lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time"[70], thus contemplates the past with an awareness of its inaccessibility – armchair nostalgia is closer to the latter, although it is more passive and mediated, often linked to the spectacularisation of the past. Armchair nostalgia is akin to "Ostalgie", the term coined to describe East Germany's longing for the GDR in post-reunification times[71], which indeed bears a metonymic relationship to the broader phenomenon of communist nostalgia in former socialist countries[72]. What is longed for in these types of nostalgia is an irretrievable past, idealised as a unique age of innocence, celebrated (and romanticised) for its simplicity, its attention to the details of everyday life; a time remembered as devoid of the material abundance brought on by consumer society, but also of the moral emptiness that inevitably accompanied it. Armchair nostalgia affects numerous exponents of younger generations who have known the communist regime only vicariously, through the stories of older relatives and material and cultural representations – such as Leonid Parfenev's emblematic photo project *Namedni*[73] – which commemorate that time with an almost elegiac sentimentalism.

The late-Soviet music landscape is rich in activators of armchair nostalgia: the soundtrack of a

[66] V. Florin, *Neperevodimoe v perevode*, Moskva 1986, p. 416.

[67] M. Yoffe, *Soviet Rock Carnival: Times and Traditions*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture* cit., p. 550.

[68] A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis 2005 [1996], p. 78.

[69] S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2002 [2001], p. 41.

[70] Ibidem.

[71] See D. Berdahl, *'(N)Ostalgie' for the present: Memory, longing, and East German things*, "Ethnos", 1999 (64), 2, pp. 192-211.

[72] See J. Ekman – J. Linde, *Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, "Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics", 2005 (21), 3, pp. 354-374.

[73] L. Parfenev, *Namedni. Nasha Era. 1946-1960*, Moskva 2014.

charming – albeit perilous – time in recent history unfailingly triggers idealisation in those who never directly witnessed it. It is partly because of this indirect nostalgia that late-Soviet music is still extremely popular in former Soviet countries, and perhaps it is precisely this nostalgic magnetism that has cemented Tsoi's popularity among subsequent generations. A relevant shift from the artist's early lyrics can be detected in his late production. In *Pachka sigaret* [Pack of Cigarettes, 1989], the singing voice expresses disorientation. Tsoi seems prescient about the turn that history is about to take and the rupture that is about to unfold. The landscape which was once familiar has become as unrecognisable as a foreign land:

> Я сижу и смотрю в чужое небо из чужого окна
> И не вижу ни одной знакомой звезды
> Я ходил по всем дорогам и туда, и сюда
> Обернулся и не смог разглядеть следы[74].

Konchitsia leto [Summer is ending], the opening song of *Chernyi Al'bom* [Black album, 1990] (published four months after Tsoi's untimely death) is dense in gloomy images that, according to Shadzhanova, epitomise the expectation and premonition of death which permeates the whole album[75]. "Я жду ответов, больше надежд нету" [I'm waiting for answers, there are no more hopes] is the chorus refrain which, together with the rest of the lyrics, conveys a sense of renunciation to past dreams.

Another legendary artist of the perestroika is Aleksandr Bashlachev, affectionately nicknamed Sash-Bash, a singer-songwriter active in Leningrad who died (almost certainly by suicide) at age twenty-seven in 1988. He is remembered as a great poet with feverish inventiveness and an astonishing talent for weaving together the personal and the social, capturing snapshots of his time and assembling them into collectively resonant tableaux. His style – voice and acoustic guitar, struck more than strummed – is reminiscent of the *tsiganskaia pesnia* that has largely inspired the Russian bard song[76]. He pays explicit tribute to the masters of Russian bard tradition, first and foremost Vladimir Vysotskii, Muscovite singer, actor, and poet active mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, whose "singing was an explosive mixture of pain, humour and desperate longing for truth [...], full of the real stuff of daily life and realistic, colourful characters"[77] and whose unforgettable *Spasite nashi dushi* [Save our souls, 1967] – a song that depicts the Soviet leadership "as a crazed captain leading the Russian soul on a suicidal course"[78] – is quoted by Bashlachev, as an acknowledgement of formal and ethical legacy, in a verse of *V chistom pole* [In an open field].

In Bashlachev's poetics, the gap between what could still be achieved and what ceased to be achievable progressively widens, marking the shift from hope to disenchantment. *Vremia kolokol'chikov* [Time of little bells], his most famous song, hailed as a fiery generational anthem, features an overlap of time frames, a densely layered diachronic patchwork where multifaceted representations of eternal suffering converge. Yet, there still lingers a spark of hope. Its splendid text is at once an elegy for a land forever afflicted with pain and a thundering promise of rebirth. The evoked imagery reveals a complex and, in some ways, controversial stance toward the imperial past: the verse "пусть разбит батюшка Царь-колокол" [let the Tsar-bell break] informs that the Tsarist Empire is now dust; the observation that "колокола сбиты и расколоты" [the bells are broken and split] and "купола растеряли золото" [the domes have lost their gold] (most probably a reference to the decline of Orthodox grandeur) is not without a hint of regret. However, amid the rubble of demolished greatness, a bud of hope for renewal sprouts, symbolised by the small tinkling bells that give the song its title. Hope, then, doesn't lie in the restoration of the triumphant imperial bells, but rather in the emerging vibration of new bells – both heralds and agents of transformation. For Bashlachev, these bells are the voices of his genera-

[74] "I sit and look at a foreign sky through a foreign window / And I can't see a single familiar star / I've walked every road back and forth / I turned around and couldn't see my footprints".

[75] E. Shadzhanova, *Evolutsiia semantiki kontsepta "Put'" v ramkakh kognitivnogo urovnia iazykovoi lichnosti Viktora Tsoia*, "Rusistika", 2015, 4, pp. 126-133.

[76] B. A. Horne, *The Bars*, cit., pp. 182-183.

[77] A. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, cit., p. 63.

[78] B. A. Horne, *The Bars*, cit., p. 176.

tion, plural voices capable of reshaping the present, unlike the singular voice of the empire – whether Tsarist or Soviet – with its paralysing stiffness[79]. It's worth recalling that the image of little bells was so dear to the musician that in some performances – as remembered by Dmitrii Reviakin, leader and founder of Kalinov Most – he would even appear on stage adorned with small bells[80].

However, there comes a point when all hope is painfully frustrated, as emerges in *Sevodniashnii den' nichego ne meniaet* [Today changes nothing], where the delusions of the past are described as follows:

> Мы ждали появления невиданной птицы
> Способной красиво и быстро летать
> Казалось, что сказка становится былью
> А все остальное – смешно и старо
> Что птица расправит могучие крылья
> И, может быть, сверху уронит перо
> Весь мир удивится пернатому чуду
> Весь мир изумленно поднимает лицо[81].

Eventually, though, a terrible stench spreads: "похоже, что где-то протухло большое яйцо" [it is as if a big egg had gone bad somewhere]. This image conveys a sense of rottenness, of irreversible degradation.

It is apparent that past dreams have shattered against the shore of disenchantment. The alternative to the repressive model of real socialism takes the form of the equally ruthless realist capitalism. The dream of a world of free and sensitive individuals (the time of the little bells) is warped into an individualism bent to the imperative of profit. The consumer society casts its dark shadow over libertarian aspirations; its prosaic inexorability chokes the poetry of the call for change; musical rhythms are regimented into the syncopated cadence of a drill march, whose new political colour fails to conceal its unchanged flattening force on thought.

In the above-mentioned *V chistom pole*, Bashlachev's cavernous voice intones a lament that is at once personal, generational, and existential:

> Я не знал, где я, где Россия
> И куда же я без нея? [...]
> Я не знал, как любить Россию
> А куда ж она без меня?[82]

In these lines, the artist's disorientation is palpable. He wants to know what is happening to the country, where it is heading to. He no longer recognises it. The path it is taking is not the one he wishes to follow. What is unfolding before Bashlachev's eyes (and those of his generation) is a fateful rift between ideals and reality, the disintegration of a vision of Russia and the future once imagined for it. The trajectory here is very different from the previously cherished one. The longed-for change is now foreshadowed as a deterioration. Social structures are collapsing, the country is in free-fall, and the flame once thought eternal is sputtering out, like the wick of a dying candle[83]. Hope in the future has become a relic of the past. In a short span of time, the question shifts from what might change to what might have changed.

The musical trajectory of the Siberian band Grazhdanskaia Oborona further exemplifies this growing darkening of tone, this evolution toward what Maurizio calls "a complete lack of hope, which excludes a priori any positive assessment not only of the history that was ending, but also of the future that would follow the end of the Soviet experiment"[84]. A transition may be observed from their initial lyrics, caustic but still hopeful, to the sombre realisation of the sinister form that the longed-for change is actually taking. The early lyrics of the band, formed in Omsk in 1984 and led by Egor Letov, are sharply focused on anti-Soviet criticism. The songs collected in their debut album *Poganaia*

[79] V. Koshelev, *Vremia kolokol'chikov, literaturnaia istoriia simbola*, in *Russkaia rok-poeziia: tekst i kontekst*, 3, Tver' 2000, p. 143.

[80] L. Naumov, *Aleksandr Bashlachev, chelovek poiushchii*, Sankt-Peterburg 2014, pp. 285-286.

[81] "We were waiting for an invisible bird to arrive / Able to fly wonderfully and fast / It seemed as if fairy-tale was about to come true / And that all the rest was ridiculous and old / That the bird would have spread its mighty wings/ And maybe dropped a feather from above/ The whole world would have marvelled at the plumaged splendour / The whole world would have lifted its face in amazement".

[82] "I didn't know where I was, where Russia was / And where do I go without her? [...] / I didn't know how to love Russia / And where does she go without me?".

[83] See A. Yurchak, *Everything*, cit.

[84] M. Maurizio, *Graždanskaja Oborona*, cit., pp. 123-124.

molodezh' [Lousy Youth, 1985] and in the following six albums released in 1987 deliver biting and outspoken attacks against the nomenklatura, party organs, Soviet institutions and mentality. In *KGB-rok* (1987), the attack is aimed at the political police and Communist leaders inside and outside Russia, whose socialist façade (signalled by the term *tovarish* [comrade]) is implicitly accused of concealing an essentially fascist nature, rendering the left indistinguishable from the right – as expressed through the initial repetition "Левой-правой" [left-right]. In this text, the references to the socio-political context are dense: fake comrades are denounced as fascists in disguise – figures like the Chinese leader Mao, the Nagant revolver used in the October Revolution, members of the anti-Western, fitness-obsessed movement Liuber, and defenders of Soviet Afghanistan against the US-backed mujahideen (1979-1989). In *Totalitarizm* [Totalitarianism, 1987], Letov's mordant irony spares no one: in the verses "Условный рефлекс. [...] Собаки Павлова исходят слюной" [Condition reflex. Pavlov's dogs drooling with saliva] he mocks the masses lobotomised by party propaganda and emphasises his non-belonging to such a collective that responds to stimuli with the mechanical reflexes of Pavlovian conditioning. His nonconforming individuality stands out against the bleak intellectual and moral uniformity epitomised by the slogan: "мы все одобряем тоталитаризм" [we all endorse totalitarianism]. In *My – led pod nogami maiora* [We are the ice beneath the major's feet, 1987], Letov's defence of free subjectivity – a defining element of his professed anarchist creed[85] – relies on a striking metaphor: the youth who refuse to bow to authority are likened to the ice beneath the feet of power holders, in turn represented by the figure of the major. It is this ice, still but treacherous, that will cause the oppressor to slip and fall.

In this early phase of their artistic career, the band alternates between politically charged lyrics and more existentialist ones where the feeling of suspension underlying their rage shifts from the political to the psychological realm. This is exemplified by *Klenovyi list* [Maple leaf, 1987], in which the narrator speaks as a fallen maple leaf:

> Меня сорвало с неба
> Меня сорвало с ветви
> И ветер тщетно ищет
> куда б меня закинуть.[86]

These lines are traversed by the awareness of an imminent and inevitable ending. There is also a sense of anguished suspension. The tear has already happened; there is no way to mend it, and life is consumed in the wait for certain death. The pain of forced separation and shattered illusions starts to resound. Letov's hoarse voice is carried by a syncopated bass line that seems itself to warn of the inevitability of decline.

"А перестройка все идет и идет по плану" [And perestroika just keeps going and going according to plan] Letov sings sarcastically in *Vse idet po planu* [Everything's going according to plan, 1988]. This line is embedded in a text filled with raw, almost grotesque imagery: "наш батюшка Ленин совсем усоп, он разложился на плесень и на липовый мед" [our father Lenin is completely dead, he decomposed into mould and fake honey]. These images alternate with opposite ones, evoking an implausible idyll, a paroxysmal utopia:

> А при коммунизме все будет заебись
> Он наступит скоро, надо только подождать
> Там все будет бесплатно, там все будет в кайф
> Там, наверное, вообще не надо будет умирать.[87]

The alternation between these polar images reflects the ambiguity of the double discourse of propaganda. This element, whose pervasiveness in Soviet society was denounced by Zinov'ev, lubricates the mechanism that turns into a mental habit the ingrained practice of saying something different from what one thinks and thinking something different from what one says[88]. Also, behind the manic shuttle movement of Letov's lines, there seems to be an

[85] E. Letov, *Ia ne veriu v anarkhiiu. Sbornik statei*, Moskva 1997.

[86] "I was torn from the sky / I was torn from the branch / And the wind futilely searches / where to toss me".

[87] "And under communism, everything will be fucking great / It's coming soon, we just have to wait / There everything will be free, everything will be bliss / And maybe, there, we won't even have to die".

[88] A. Zinov'ev, *Gomo sovietikus*, Lausanne 1982.

attempt to communicate the fragmentation of the self. Indeed, the dizzying swing between horror and (false) perfection aligns with the sense of disorientation, blindness, and inability to locate meaning or direction.

Letov's use of paradox is notable: the juxtaposition of pompous grandiosity – instrumental to oppressive rhetoric – and the exaggerated depictions of actual decay slaps the listener, forcing attention to the message hidden amid screams and guitar slashes. It can be argued that this use of paradox echoes and reinforces Oushakine's previously mentioned thesis that countercultural practices – specifically 1960s-1970s *samizdat* – drew on images of the dominant discourse in order to denounce its rhetoric from within, by amplifying it and thus exposing its dismal nature. If the band's mid-1980s lyrics show the repetitive phrasing and irreverent quips typical of punk, with the onset and consolidation of perestroika arrangements start to darken and bristle with dissonances, while lyrics grow more shadowy and cryptic.

By the late 1980s, the atmosphere has grown darker, more ominous and disenchanted. Perestroika has reached its peak, and the horizon is crumbling by the day. In countercultural circles, there is a widely felt impossibility of returning to a time when fragile hopes could still be clung to. In *Moia Oborona* [My defense, 1989], Letov's lashing voice denounces the infiltration of consumerist values within society, the penetration of their claws into the flesh of the world: "Пластмассовый мир победил" [The plastic world has won]. This world can no longer be defended. No civil protection (the literal meaning of the band's name) can save its corrupted soul. The only possible defence is that of oneself, one's individuality engaged in a desperate yet dignified struggle. In *Zdorovo i Vechno* [Healthy and eternal, 1989], the sardonic tones cloak despair over a future that threatens to be even worse than the present. Far from being eternal, the Party referenced in the verse "Партия – ум, честь и совесть эпохи" [The Party is the mind, honour, and conscience of the era] and the State police quoted in the verse "Сотрудник КГБ одобряет КГБ" [The KGB officer approves of the KGB] are just as fleeting as any other institution founded within oppressive societies. What is truly eternal is the mechanism of forced obedience and the repression of dissent on which all unjust orders feed – a mechanism lyrically captured in the line "инерция заведует послушными телами" [inertia commands obedient bodies]. For Letov, the only antidote to desolation is the perseverance of struggle, regardless of its outcomes – a struggle that dignifies life even though it is destined to fail. This message, distilled in the lyrics of *Poperek* [Against the Grain, 1989], inserts into the arc of late-Soviet disenchantment a fierce refusal to be regimented. The verse "в проигранной войне сопротивляйся до конца" [in a lost war, resist until the end] exhorts the cultivation of individual resistance in spite of disillusionment.

Conclusions

The arc of perestroika-era underground rock, far from being a festive prelude to the Soviet fall, appears to embody the painful awareness of a missed crossroads. Its protagonists – of which this paper presents only an indicative sample, though we are confident it may prompt more comprehensive future research – oscillate between dissent and disillusionment and give voice to a pre-emptive sense of loss: the realisation that no true alternative will come after the collapse of the existing order (notwithstanding the individual resistance invoked by Letov).

The inherent hauntological nostalgia of this music production has probably contributed to endowing its authors with that very magnetism which, in turn, ignites in subsequent listeners an insatiable longing for that time passé. A domino effect is thus set in motion: from the hauntological nostalgia once experienced by musicians to the armchair nostalgia now affecting their listeners. According to the hauntological reading adopted here – which has been inaugurated only recently with regards to late-Soviet and especially post-Soviet music production[89] and

[89] See C. Lonkin, *Radical Nostalgia: Molchat Doma's Monument to the Endurance of Joy Available to Purchase*, "Journal of Popular Music Studies", 2021 (33), 2, pp. 23-30; N. A. Büyükyüksel,

thus calls for further investigation – much of late-Soviet underground music, besides being a form of resistance, stands out as a requiem for evaporated historical possibilities, a singing that is aware of belonging to the realm of ghosts.

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◊ *Requiem for a Lost Future? A Hauntological Reading of Late-Soviet Underground Rock Through the Lyrics of Viktor Tsoi, Aleksandr Bashlachev and Egor Letov* ◊

Stefania Persano

Abstract

In the late Soviet years, a distinctive musical subculture emerged in Russia that fused elements of Western rock with the Russian bard tradition. This article examines the lyrical output of key underground artists Viktor Tsoi, Aleksandr Bashlachev, and Egor Letov, interpreting their songs through the lens of hauntology (Derrida, 1993; Fisher, 2014) and post-Soviet reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001). Their works are read as expressions of dissent permeated by a postmodern sensibility, at once criticizing the crumbling socialist order and mournfully anticipating the neoliberal future. In their lyrics, nostalgia for a future imagined but never realized triggers a second-order longing in later listeners – the mediated, vicarious form of nostalgia known as armchair nostalgia (Appadurai, 1996). Hovering between protest and introspection, their music gives voice to a generation suspended between two ideological failures, as well as between two polar stances – combative resistance and disenchantment.

Keywords

Late-Soviet Underground, Perestroika Rock, Armchair Nostalgia, Hauntology.

Author

After graduating in intercultural communication with a thesis on Soviet-Russian realia in the debut novels of Ania Ulinich and Lara Vapniar, *Stefania Persano* specialised in Italian as a Second Language and taught it in Ireland and Russia. She now teaches English in high school and Italian for foreigners in an NGO. She also works as a freelance translator – among her recent translations is *Leonardo da Vinci's Fables* (Progedit, 2025) – and subtitle maker from English and Russian. She has collaborated with the University of Turin as a language tutor. Her research interests include pedagogy, eco-feminism, postcolonial, Soviet and post-Soviet studies. She is part of the transdisciplinary cultural critique collective "Collettivo Trickster" and regularly writes for its website.

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