Trofeinost' and the Phantasmagoria of Everyday Consumption in Late Soviet Culture

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And if anyone were to think seriously about a monument to that period, I would suggest that the empty mausoleum (should Lenin’s body ever be finally consigned to the earth) be filled with those deficit, prestige items for which Soviet citizens suffered torments standing in line.

Vladimir Sorokin, “Afterword: Farewell to the Queue” (253)

A common riddle told during the Soviet period begins, “What is long and green and reeks of sausage?” The answer: “The long-distance train from Moscow.” The riddle describes the excursions to other cities that many took to shop for rare items not available at home. It also points toward the many discourses constructed around shopping in the Soviet Union, giving the train a grotesque depiction, snake-like in shape and unpleasant. This article will look at what I label the phantasmagoria of everyday consumption in late Soviet culture, detailing the cultural milieu of the Stagnation period into perestroika, and its discourses on conspicuous consumption. Grotesque forms of material culture emerge from Soviet consumerism, as the state-ideologically defined tastes of kulturnost’ are deconstructed in texts.

Walter Benjamin noted the value of the commodity at world exhibitions and arcades throughout the 19th century, describing the phantasmagoric relation between flâneur and commodity: “Exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted” (7). In this process the person is elevated to the level of the commodity, where “he surrenders himself to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others…He ends in Madness” (7).

Benjamin’s notion of phantasmagoria is stifling, describing a society ruled by the commodity. Looking specifically at his 1939 expose on the Paris arcades, Margaret Cohen writes that Benjamin’s notion of phantasmagoria was constructed opposite of allegory: “Allegory’s
etymology implies the possibility of redemption and as such contrasts with the etymology of the phantasmagoria, which substitutes ghosts for the \textit{allo} that signifies allegory’s transcendence. Appearing as allegory’s \textit{Doppelgänger}, the phantasmagoria remains firmly footed in the haunted realm of commercial exchange” (96). Benjamin’s theorization of the arcades and the \textit{flâneur} is primarily interested in Marx’s notion of commodity fetishes, and while this discussion is certainly apt for a discussion of Soviet consumer culture during the Stagnation period, when prestige Western goods were sought after by many, I would like to use it as a departure point to discuss the Soviet culture of scarcity, and how the commodity was envisioned amongst these everyday conditions.

Russian definitions of everyday life (\textit{byt}) have historically never been neutrally labeled and often carried negative connotations. Iurii Lotman defines everyday life simply as the ever-present: “Быт – это обычное протекание жизни в ее реально-практических формах; быт – это вещи, которые окружают нас, наши привычки и каждодневное поведение. Быт окружают нас как воздух, он заметен нам только тогда, когда его не хватает или он портится” (10).\textsuperscript{2} Lotman’s conceptualization is defined in relation to scarcity when he states that the everyday only becomes recognizable when it is lacking in something. This aspect of insufficiency can be seen across many Russian definitions that confine everyday life to the material world, in contrast to its counterpart \textit{bytie}, which traditionally encompasses a higher realm of ideas and spirituality. In the context of the Soviet culture of shortage, we can begin to construct a definition of everydayness conceptualized in texts through the social realities of absence and the transcendence of this void.

In the following cartoon from \textit{Krokodil}, the cucumbers wait in line for the canning factory, and by the time they make it, they are already rotting (see fig. 1).

The cartoon comments on the quality of Soviet goods, which by the time they reach the consumer, are already past their prime. More importantly though, the cartoon conflates goods with their consumers by anthropomorphizing the product. The act of waiting is compared with the biological process of rotting, endured by both the low quality product and those who wait for it. Another joke depicts people waiting in line for blood sausage (\textit{krvianka}). When one person gets in line, he asks what is being given out (“Что дают?”). The person in front of him identifies that the line is for blood sausage, and
then proceeds to ask him if he has stood in the other line to first donate blood.

The cartoon and joke both recall Benjamin’s notion of the “debasement of things” (qtd. in Cohen 96) that occurs with the commodification of modern life. Whereas in the first world the debasement of things occurred by their price as commodities, in the context of the second-world and Soviet command economy, an analogous debasement occurred through shortages caused by inefficiencies in state allocation. People were forced to find personal connections, which were just as, if not more important, than the money used to buy goods. Discussing his novel The Norm (Norma [1979-1983]), Vladimir Sorokin comes to similar conclusions about Soviet produced material culture: “It’s a curious fact, but if you look around you’ll see that we’re living in a realm where the culture of things is not respected at all (“Interview” 150; emphasis in original). Sorokin’s critique describes the shoddiness of Soviet products, but although they were deficient, they became just as dear to Soviet citizens as prized foreign goods. Ol’ga Gurova describes this connection between Soviet consumers and goods through a play on the two words: “Вообще в условиях дефицита вещь очень недолго являлась товаром, быстро становясь товарищем” (“Ot tovarishcha” 41). As the “commodity”
is lifted to the status of “comrade,” the exact opposite movement oc-
curs that Benjamin described in his notion of phantasmagoric rela-
tions, and the “haunted realm” of shortage becomes rehabilitated. In
order to describe this attitude toward Soviet material culture, I will use
the term *trofeinost’*. The term, translated here roughly as “trophying,” describes
the act of sacralization of an object, the practices in which scarce
items or even their remnants, such as wrappers and empty boxes, took
on added meaning in Soviet culture amongst conditions of scarcity.
Products were divided into names that signified their availability
(“available goods” *dostatochnye tovary* and “branded goods” *firmennye
tovary*). People went to great extents to procure goods. Anecdotes are
prevalent of people jumping in queues without knowing what item
was available, or hoarding certain products, not knowing when they
would become available again. Likewise, shoppers developed tactics of
local knowledge to try to outwit other shoppers. The *avos’ka* is a great
example of material culture that served as a tactical, malleable object
of the late Soviet era. The mesh shopping bag could easily be carried
around in case one stumbled upon a kiosk or store with something
worth buying, and would expand to carry products home. The name
derives from the word, *avos’,* meaning “on the off chance,” and indi-
cates the ways in which Soviet shopping forced the consumer to adapt
to uncertain situations.

The concept of *trofeinost’,* according to Vladimir Nikolaev,
relates to the ways that behavior is changed by economic shortage,
which encourages people to hoard products, devise strategies that in-
crease one’s chances of acquiring a product, as well as minimizing
one’s time in lines. He views product procurement and all its acts,
from queuing to unofficial forms of distribution such as a *blat*, as a
form of sport. “Trofeinost’ thus describes how both acquired domestic
and foreign goods acted as trophies that demonstrated an individual’s
tact (23). Nikolaev also describes *trofeinost’* as an opportunity for the
Soviet citizen to experience an “existential holiday” (“ekzistentsial’nyi
prazdnik”) through rarity (24). His analysis deals almost solely with
social practices and their behavioral implications in the commodity-
consumer relationship. Agreeing with Nikolaev’s analysis, conditions
of shortage did dictate people’s activities, social exchanges, and the
social strategic networks they created in order to obtain these goods. I
would like to expand his analysis to reflect the changing role of the
consumer product, especially in its cultural representation, that ac-
quires new meaning in a deficit economy. These “trophies” meant more than their intended manufactured use, and reflects on the many imaginative uses of Soviet commodity culture.

The topic of consumption has been widely discussed throughout the Soviet period across a variety of disciplines. While ethnographic studies of consumption under socialism typically draw attention to social relations and networks of distribution, Liviu Chelcea’s article “The Culture of Shortage during State-Socialism” instead views consumption through practices that stem from objects themselves. Her study looks at how the “culture of shortage” in Romania led to practices such as hoarding, rationing, intensive recycling, and extensive repairs (16). She notes that studies have focused on means of procurement rather than discuss possession of things, which in itself is a personalized, “unique activity” (19). Chelcea also notes that consumer items in second-world economies acquired new meanings: “Goods that would have been commodities in a market economy acquired the features of gifts or rarities” (20). Products were used opposite their manufactured intentions, used to repair other items, or residual packaging served as decorations, in what Chelcea calls “bricolage activities” (36): “Unlike the flâneur-like, browsing consumer

Fig. 2. “You got another one? Let’s hang it in the bathroom”
(“Esche odin dostala?”)
of the malls, the socialist consumer searched for useful contacts, made careful preparations and was hyperaware of how goods were used. The socialist shortage made most consumers spontaneous *bricoleurs*, by forcing them to combine, recycle, repair and trade goods or parts of them” (Chelcea 38). Appearing on one of the covers of *The Crocodile* in 1978, a cartoon plays exactly with this notion, as abundant carpets are recycled, hung on every wall and ceiling, and recycled into presumably a deficit product: drapes (see fig. 2).

Likewise, another cartoon shows a crying child who is forced to read scientific literature because the store is out of children’s books, but requests at least a copy with pictures, making do with what is available (see fig. 3).

![Fig. 3. “You can even given me quantum mechanics, as long as it has pictures” (“Daite khot’ kvantovuiu”)](image)

Chelcea’s discussion of social practices serve as an appropriate departure point to view the discourses surrounding consumption, shopping, and item procurement in fiction. The center of attention on these curious cases of consumption in literature is not specific to the late-Soviet era, but can be traced across Russo-Soviet literature, even dating back to the 19th century with Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls*
Likewise, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita* [1935/1966]) depicts the magical and grotesque side of Soviet consumer culture in numerous satirical scenes involving foreign currency, which had great purchasing power in Torgsin stores. The magical possibilities of money literally materialize out of thin air, as Woland tosses money out to the theater audience, and rubles magically transform into foreign currency, incriminating the theater director Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi. In the chapter “Последние похождения Коровьева и Бегемота” (“The Last Adventures of Korov’ev and Behemoth”), the two characters wreak havoc in a Torgsin store, devouring scarce goods such as mandarins and Kerch’ herring. Bulgakov’s interest in a culture of shortage extends across his works, as he satirizes the scarcity of apartments in both *Heart of a Dog* (*Sobach′e serdtse* [1925]) and *The Fatal Eggs* (*Rokovye iatsa* [1925]). I have chosen to look at this aspect in Soviet literature towards the end of Stagnation and into perestroika, where problems surrounding consumer culture are documented and satirized in a variety of media, from periodicals and film to literature. Vladimir Makanin refers to the time as the “furniture era” (“mebel′noe vremia”), reflecting the prized pieces people sought to acquire, but also the domestification of Soviet culture rooted in the details of everyday life.

Goods in late-Soviet culture are rendered with multifaceted, malleable representations, reflecting the social reality of their uses. Material culture, however, also becomes more than just an object of representation, but serves as the main structuring elements of works, and acts as a container for ideas. More authors begin to explore the role of material culture in Soviet society, and what objects’ existence or absence meant. I am most interested in how texts comment on the acquisition of goods amidst scarcity by developing comedic or fantastic plots surrounding these products, as seen in popular films such as El’dar Riazanov’s *Beware of the Car* (*Bereg′ avtomobilia* [1966]). Similarly, texts create absurd new uses for goods. Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moscow—Petushki* (*Moskva-Petushki* [1969]) features grotesque forms of consumption as Venia, the narrator of the story, concocts drinks from shoe polish, perfumes, and other household items. Many texts, such as Vladimir Sorokin’s *The Norm* and *The Queue* (*Ochered′* [1983]), strip the identity of the consumer product, completely obscuring the representation of objects. Yet another Stagnation era text, Aleksandr Zinov′ev’s dystopian fiction *The Yawning Heights* (*Ziiaiushchie vysoty* [1976]), features a seemingly never-ending queue for an unnamed
product. The product is referred to as “shirli-myri,” a floating modifier translated in the English edition as “thingammy-jig” (Ziiaiushchie 496: Yawning 735).8

By exploring the move away from state discourses of consumerism, I would like to show how material culture maintained a central role in Soviet culture, but deviated from its materialist grounding in Soviet ideology. The main text analyzed in the second half of this article, Georgii Danelia’s film Kin-dza-dza! (1986), is representative of many stories that begin to feature the consumer product and its distribution as a structuring element of narratives. This change deconstructs universal, Soviet notions of kul′turnost in favor of malleable representations that celebrate the consumer’s tact to procure his trophy. In analyzing films, novels, jokes, cartoons, and a wide array of other media, it becomes apparent how state-allocated identification between consumers and products was broken, producing new textual representations for both sides. Soviet culture begins to readdress the meanings of acquisitiveness under socialism, reifying items with new meaning: objects became trophies, not as signifiers of social status, but of the ordeals citizens went through for their procurement.

Personalizing Consumption: Kul′turnost and the Reprisal of Stalinist Acquisitiveness

In Thinking Through Things, Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell build off recent trends in anthropology that focus on the essential qualities of objects as opposed to traditional approaches to material culture, which interpret and separate meaning from objects. In exploring the connection between materiality and culture, their “ontological breakthrough” seeks to destabilize the “a priori distinction between persons and things, matter and meaning, representation and reality” (2). Similarly, in their chapter “Waiting” Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren provide an example that it is not just people who wait, but also objects:

Some objects — the life vest under the seat, for example, or the emergency ladder on the wall — fall into the standby category. Other things inhabit a mode of alert passivity — the fire station, the rocket on the launch pad, the bottle of vintage wine being saved for a special occasion. Still others, among them certain electrical appliances, must
never go out; they must rest with one eye open, watchful technological wild beasts. (14)

This notion of the waiting object is extremely interesting, as it focuses on the value of the object at times irrespective of its subject. It separates an array of values the object simultaneously possesses, both intrinsically, and in the exchange of a future event or occasion. While the bottle of wine may be rare and acquire value in age, its act of waiting coincides with the special occasion being celebrated.

I would like to recognize this approach in looking at how objects were simultaneously conflated, yet separated from their state encoded definitions. Since the Stalinist period, Soviet everyday commodities were heavily conflated with ideology. An object acquires meaning beyond its intrinsic qualities when it is the state that distributes the item. Soviet culture ontologically encoded its items with ideological value that often transcended its practical use. This notion of kul′-turnost′, established a firm anchor of subject and object, as one’s consumption was equated with complicity to the state.

By looking at the representation of objects in late Soviet culture, we see this singular ontological path broken down, and objects acquire new value. Products derived value not only from state distribution, but also from personalized forms of consumption and private exchanges. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell view objects as having “multiple ontologies,” creating a heuristic value that incorporates local knowledge, strategy and individualized conceptions of the material world. This scope immediately draws ties to the late Soviet period, as people adapted consumer products for their individualized needs. Looking at Soviet material culture through this framework, it becomes apparent how a second economy developed out of the first economy of socialist allocation, and the cultural meaning that was developed in this movement.9

James Millar’s “the little deal,” a political-economic interpretation of the Leonid Brezhnev years finds continuities with Vera Dunham’s influential article on the late Stalinist period, “The Big Deal.” While Dunham addressed how the Stalinist regime appeased the middle class, what would become the bureaucratic elites, through the promise of social mobility, Millar views a similar process through the growth in private forms of trade that increased individual gain.10 The little deal describes the tacit contract between Brezhnev’s state regime and the population of the USSR’s urban centers in order to expand petty private economic activities (372). Millar writes that Stalinism had
provided the same material incentives, but at the same time had relied on the non-economic disincentive, where failure was not an option (370). Rather than rely on the same forms of coercion, the Brezhnev regime turned toward the private sector to accomplish these tasks: “As a general proposition, true for the Brezhnev years at least, Soviet citizens have been able to collect these kinds of economic ‘rents,’ attributable to scarcity of desirable properties, because the state does not” (374).

The little deal was a glance away from the mainstays of socialist allocation and centrally organized economy: “The critical element has been the state’s willingness to permit an expansion throughout Soviet society of the quest for an individual’s, but especially of the individual household’s, gain, as opposed to the collectivist and traditionalist socialist aims” (378). Millar highlights how individuals took advantage of what the state failed to allocate, offering services in an economy starved for services and making a profit by queuing for others, as they literally bought and sold time (374). Moreover, with new methods of acquisition, networks outside of state channels became more important, with the family becoming a major unit of authority, employment, and distribution (378).

Millar’s description of the little deal highlights why many believe that blat, the practice of personal social exchanges, was most prevalent during the Stagnation period. Alena Ledeneva views blat similarly to Millar, noting that the Soviet state needed the practice to account for its deficiency: “Blat should be considered as the ‘reverse side’ of an over controlling centre, a reaction of ordinary people to the structural constraints of the socialist system of distribution – a series of practices which enabled the Soviet system to function and made it tolerable, but also subverted it” (3). Through practices such as blat, objects became untethered from state controlled ideological meanings: products that exhibited their owner’s tastes no longer only came from state-distributed systems of allocation. Moreover, goods were more fluid in their exchange and acquired new worth in trade, extending their pragmatic value.

Leonid Gaidai’s film Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Professions (Ivan Vasilyevich meniact professiu [1973]) serves as an appropriate illustration of the privatization of economies and consumption. The comedy depicts a scientist, Shurik, inventing a time machine in his own apartment flat instead of a state-run laboratory, much to the dismay of his neighbors, who experience repeated blackouts from power surges. The film in-
cludes a scene with a black-marketeer (*fartsovshchik*) on the street who sells transistors in his trench coat that are used to fix Shurik’s invention. Before Shurik buys from him, he visits a number of the state technological stores that are either closed for inventory, repair, or are out of the item (see figs. 4, 5, and 6).

Upon seeing that each store cannot serve his needs, Shurik ponders new ways of procuring the part. Shurik finally deals through the *fartsovshchik*, who carefully looks out for authorities while showing his wares. The scene creates absurdity around the character of the *fartsovshchik*, who deals in highly specialized products that one would not need in everyday situations (see fig. 7). At the same time, the scene also ridicules official state stores and their poor service.

Another feature of the privatization of everyday life under Brezhnev dealt with state attitudes toward consumption. Gurova labels these state discourses the “ideology of dematerialization” ("razveshchestvenie"), which stressed that the individual was free of commodity fetishism. She notes that in his speech at the twenty-fifth party congress, Leonid Brezhnev cited an increased supply of consumer goods and a growth of the ideological, ethical and cultural consciousness toward consumer goods:
This statement allowed consumer goods to appear in the everyday life of Soviet people because the negative connotations associated with the volume of consumer goods on shops’ shelves, one’s apartment or wardrobe were officially removed from official discourse, and shifted to personal attitudes. It is important to emphasize that attention has been moved to the person’s attitudes toward material objects: the person him/herself should be conscious about them. (“Ideology” 96-97)

Gurova differentiates the state’s attitude under developed socialism from the Thaw. The state sought to ensure social compliance by providing economic stability and supply, rather than actively control the consumer’s taste: “As a matter of fact, the aim of the Soviet state was to create a socialist post-materialistic world in which there would be plenty of consumer goods, but they would not have any excessive significance for the person. The Soviet person was not supposed to be obsessed with or adoring of things, rather, he should look upon them in a functional way” (“Ideology” 97). Despite these calls for a decrease of significance in the commodity, the once signifying world of Soviet consumerism becomes a nebulous space that can be appropriated for one’s individual needs. In the personalized representations of consumption, we also see the changing representation of the commodity, which acquires imaginary characteristics.

Another factor that destabilized the state’s influence to dictate taste was the increased presence of western goods. Alexei Yurchak writes in his chapter, “Imaginary West: The Elsewhere of Late Socialism,” that Soviet values were caught between the “internationalist and outward looking, yet at the same time insular, restricted to the boundaries of the Soviet Union” (159). He traces the creation of the imaginary West within the Soviet Union through foreign consumer goods, stating that it was an “imaginary place that was simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic” (159). An example of this can again be found in Ivan Vasilievich Changes Professions. The film plays with this notion of the imaginary west by inverting abundance with scarcity: in the medieval feast scene, Ivan Bunzha, who is masquerading as Ivan the Terrible after traveling through time, is served the Soviet staple eggplant caviar (baklazhannaja ikra), which in the past is a foreign delicacy available only in small portions, whereas Russian caviar is abundant. The film also features an
analogous scene in the present time. When the thief Miloslavskii breaks into an apartment owned by the dentist Shpak, he finds an impressive liquor collection, money, and other riches. The camera even zooms in quickly in a series of shots that identify a video camera and tape player, amongst other valuables. Miloslavskii, however, is immediately drawn toward a foreign floaty pen, a novelty for the average Soviet citizen who does not travel abroad (see fig. 8).

Yurchak uses mainly examples from fashion and music to illustrate his notion of the imaginary West. He covers the craze over western products such as jeans, and how consumers would copy and recreate western products. He also looks at strategic forms of distribution in the music world of magnitizdat and rentgenizdat, which recycled used items such as x-rays for recordings. All of the objects he describes formed a link to the west, constructing an image of their origin: “A diverse array of discourses, statements, products, objects, visual images, musical expressions, and linguistic constructions that were linked to the West by theme or by virtue of their origin or reference, and that circulated widely in late socialism, gradually shaped a coherent and shared object of imagination – the imaginary West” (161; emphasis mine). I would like to expand his notion beyond the limits of how a faux Western culture was constructed, which created in
Yurchak’s words, an “internal deterritorialization,” and extend this imaginary capability to include how Soviet culture viewed its own consumer world and its own products (159). While foreign products had an aura due to their otherness outside the confines of the Soviet experience, domestic consumer products shared similar attributes that arose out of their scarcity and remarkable means of distribution.

Anatoly Vishevsky notes how newspapers and journals were permitted to make fun of consumer problems in the late 1960s and 1970s, as the humor of cartoons and short stories did not enter into systemic critiques of the Soviet economy. They mostly dealt with lighthearted scenes from everyday life or were printed in unusual genres, such as children’s rhymes on the back pages of many periodicals (71). One rhyme “The Orange,” tells how to get more oranges, a foodstuff that was constantly in short supply:

Если нужен
Апельсин –
Вы зайдите
В магазин,
И купите
Пластилин
И следите
Апельсин. (qtd. in Vishevsky 71)13

Another rhyme tells the child how to make more soup:

Если в миске мало супа,
вам нужна большая лупа.
Поглядите в эту лупу,
Будет много-много супу! (qtd. in Vishevsky 72)14

The rhymes both play with the boundaries between the social realities of shortage and literary representational excess, which is able to transcend the physical world of absence and endow this space with an imaginative, humorous solution. Neither rhyme, however, offers an actual solution but instead offers a playful activity as a consolation.

Another example that creates imaginary situations of abundance is the skit “The Warehouse” (“Sklad” [1988]). The skit, by the comedians Roman Kartsev and Viktor Ifchenko, constructs an unanticipated opportunity where a Soviet consumer is given a pass
(propusk) for one day to visit a warehouse, where everything is available. The consumer is initially skeptical, first asking what he is actually seeing, and secondly questioning the availability of the warehouse: “Мне сказали, что здесь всё есть. Я не верю конечно” (“Sklad”).

The skit emphasizes the question, “What do I need?” to which the answer is everything. The character played by Ilchenko does not know how to react to the situation, at first asking for one of each item, and then increasing the quantity until the server becomes impatient with his indecisiveness:

“Ну что, восемь?”
“Да. Десять.”
“Хорошо.”
“Пятнадцать.”
“Хорошо.”
“Еще две.”
“Можно.”
“И ещё одну.”

The rapid back and forth dialogue creates an antagonistic relationship between server and customer. The server always speaks abruptly, asking the same questions, “What do you want?” (“Что вам?”) and “How many?” (“Сколько?”). His stern behavior contradicts the euphoria of the opportunity that the customer has, with statements such as, “Быстрее, рабочий день кончается.” The communication between the two also is disjointed, in that the server refuses to describe which items he has in stock and instead repeats the same questions. Likewise, the customer’s requests are also bewildering. He asks for a large quantity of each item of fish, jeans, and so forth, but when asked what kind he wants, can only qualify them with general descriptions such as “the freshest” or “the best,” but cannot provide exact types or brands. He is not accustomed to such wealth.

The skit highlights what the customer wants as opposed to what he can actually consume. When the server tells him the high quantities that he requests will spoil, the customer immediately replies, “Пусть испортится.” The skit turns the jokes of the customer’s greed on its head, when he asks for vodka in the quantity of 100. The server assumes he wants 100 bottles, to which the customer replies that he wants only a couple shots worth, 100 grams. In the end of the skit, fantasy is grounded by reality, when the customer realizes he does
not have room for all of the things he just ordered: “Куда мне это все везти?” These examples all show a refashioning of discourses around consumerism. A playful attitude toward fetishism and acquisitiveness becomes apparent, no longer carrying cautionary tones that existed from Stalinism through the Thaw period.

**Blat and “Inalienable” Objects: Georgii Daneliia’s Kin-dza-dza!**

Georgii Daneliia’s *Kin-dza-dza!* is an intergalactic travel-filled narrative that is thematically and formally centered on objects. It can be read as a fantastic representation of procurement and the social practice of *blat*, revealing a satire on Soviet consumer goods and how their value dictates human relations. The film, whose script was originally titled “Cosmic Dust” (“Kosmicheskaia pyl’”), was made at the tail end of the Stagnation period and released in 1986, in the first years of perestroika (Pustynskaia 86). It features the journey of a Russian, nicknamed Uncle Vova and a Georgian, Gedevan, who become stuck on the Planet Pliuk and are forced to find their way home by exchanging matches, an extremely valuable commodity in the galaxy, for transportation home. The film uses the location of Pliuk as a mirror for Soviet society, satirically exposing the greedy behavior of a society in a desert wasteland, where products such as fuel are scarce, and deficit goods afford one to acquire products that differentiate one from another. While the two aliens, Uef and his sidekick Mr. B initially are mistaken by Vova and Gedevan for being street peddling musicians from capitalist countries (“iz kapstrany”), their behavior epitomizes Soviet citizens’ fetishes for rare commodities in the Brezhnev era.

Blat as narrative can be conceptualized as a distancing of procurer with the procured vis-à-vis other objects in between. *Kin-dza-dza!*’s many repetitions and cyclical structure enact both the experiences of waiting and its physiological affect for the audience. The film’s looped soundtrack is a device that shows the tedious actions of the characters on screen. It begins during the film’s opening credits and is always played against the backdrop of travel scenes, which is presented not as a heroic, epic journey, but a tedious crawl across desert landscapes in order to exchange goods.

This reading of the film can be supported by the film’s use of the setting of Moscow. The journey is bookended by two scenes in Moscow, where Uncle Vova is initially asked by his wife to run to the store to buy noodles. This seems like a minor detail that opens the film, as Vova never makes it to the store before being accidentally
teleported to Pliuk, but it establishes a chain of exchanges, transactions, and negotiations that structure the film. Moreover, when Vova returns to Earth, sent back into time directly preceding his adventures, the opening scene is repeated: Vova’s wife again requests that he go out and buy noodles, completing the circular structure of the plot. The film ends in the streets of Moscow, with the noodles never acquired.

The film breaks down the prestige value of the commodity though an exploration of Pliuk’s material world. Vova and Gedevan are forced to wear little bells hanging from their noses, called “tsak,” which denote their race and status. The alien Uef spends much of the first half of the film extolling the virtues of Pliuk’s prestigious items, yellow pants that give the owner status over others who must “ku,” bowing to them in deference, or purple pants that force others to “ku” twice, and prevent the police from harassment at night. Mr. B proclaims the importance of such items in society during a heated argument: “Когда у общества нет цветовой дифференциации штанов, то нет цели!”24 The pants are never shown in the film until one of the final scenes, where an owner of a yellow pair happens to be a dwarf, comically small in stature, but still demanding social respect (see fig. 9).
Social practices and norms that arise out of the dominant consumer culture are turned on their heads throughout the film. At the close of the film, Gedevan reverses the social hierarchy by taking the tsak bell from the great leader PZh’s servant, and placing it on the leader himself, who does not take action to stop Gedevan’s disruption of accepted social norms.

Just as objects of status such as the yellow pants are stripped of their ideological importance and socially encoded value throughout the film through absurd, illogical representations, other items are endowed with more favorable pragmatic values. Vova and Gedevan look for pragmatic items such as food, water, fuel, and ship parts, and acquire them by trading matches, the most valuable commodity on Pliuk, but also something Vova needs in order to smoke. The criticism of acquisitive behavior and greed, which satirically lampoons the alien Uef, is contrasted with Gedevan’s curiosity and impulse to hoard alien products. An ordinary spoon becomes the source of one joke, as Gedevan wants to steal the “exotic Martian metal object,” but is caught and derided by Uef, who calls him a pathetic kleptomaniac, hardly the “first Georgian Cosmonaut” he envisions himself to be. Gedevan’s acquisitiveness saves the duo toward the end of the film, as
he unknowingly steals the curious-looking ship part they have been searching for the whole time (see fig. 10).25
The film shows the imaginative use of objects in playful ways. Many of the vehicles in the film appear to be a rusted hodge-podge construction of recycled low quality items, yet possess technological advancement, speeding through the desert and through space (see figs. 11 and 12).

More interestingly, the film’s extremely complex linguistic

register estranges the viewer from the Soviet consumer world. The film’s linguistic register is extremely complex, as new words are created for both familiar and fantastic objects. The film, which features two halves, includes a dictionary at the outset of the second part, recapping the alien language (see figs. 13 and 14). The dictionary acts more as a comedic device than a legitimate source that aides the viewer. Its humor stems from the meshing of the Russian and alien languages. The superfluous inclusion of the dictionary epitomizes the film’s use of language, which teaches the audience that on Plui there are only two words, and that all thought is transmitted telepathically, yet then introduces new words for all of the goods in
the film. The dictionary at first defines items in Russian, but then freely uses the new alien terms alongside the Russian to define other objects (see fig. 14).

The film as a narrative of blat is only reinforced at the conclusion. While Gedevan and Vova have no physical evidence for their adventure, the film celebrates their personal bond with each other and their bond with the aliens Uef and Mr. B. Vova does not come away with his noodles, but does reunite with Gedevan on the streets of Moscow, where they recognize one another and “ku” as a sign of friendship and respect. The film in this way shows that the need for connections triumphs over the desire for commodities, allegorically depicting the personal side of Soviet consumption.

These phantasmagoric discourses of consumption ultimately point toward a renewed emergence of materiality in Soviet culture, one no longer defined by the state, but now shaped by the consumer, who personalized his use of products to conform to the economic conditions of scarcity, his needs, but also his evolving tastes. While Benjamin described a phantasmagoria that enslaved the consumer and created an aura around commodities that transcended their use value, we are seeing something different here in the consumption of the second-world. Both cultural and consumer products begin to create spaces of excess that account for the inadequacies of what the state was able to provide. Narratives find new value and expression amongst the deficiencies of Soviet material culture. Literary and cultural production becomes an outlet of excess that counters material absence. They transform a phantasmagoria that haunts the consumer, to a fantastic, imaginative world where the consumer creates new meanings and new narratives out of his everyday surroundings and possessions. Sergei Dovlatov’s autobiographical collection of stories *The Suitcase* (*Chemodan* [1986]) and Vladimir Voinovich’s absurdist novella *The Fur Hat* (*Shapka* [1989]) explore these possibilities outside state notions of kul’turnost’, as each author tells personal stories through prized objects. In all of these examples, a central focus on material culture becomes a driving force that shapes narrative, an untapped source in a society that routinely struggled with the lines drawn between petit-bourgeois consciousness and socialist morality.

With the arrival of small-scale private ownership during perestroika, the Soviet landscape was flooded with new products, but also new opportunities for consumption and production. Sorokin tells the story of the coming of abundance that the free market provided, using the
familiar image of the sausage: “Entrepreneurial citizens who wanted to open their own stores and sell sausage, rather than stand in line for it, immediately left its ranks. They were followed by those active citizens who wanted to make money in the stores of the new sausage entrepreneurs” (“Afterword” 260). This nostalgic and playful glance by Sorokin reinforces the breaking of the connection between consumers and an ordered system of state allocation. The once grotesque description of the sausage, with its casing now removed, marked new opportunities to move beyond the Soviet material landscape, yet recall this lost space in new ways.

Notes

1. Iurii Olesha has an extended passage mocking the grotesque, yet virtuous sausage invented by the Soviet state in his novel Envy (Zavist′ [1927]): “Он – правитель, коммунист, он строит новый мир. А слава в этом новом мире вспыхивает от того, что из рук колбасника вышел новый сорт колбасы. Я не понимаю этой славы, что же значит это? Не о такой славе говорили мне жизнеописания, памятники, история…” (Zavist′ 34-35). [“He, the ruler, the communist, was building a new world. And in this new world, glory sparked because a new kind of sausage had come from the sausage maker’s hands. What did it mean? Biographies, monuments, history had never told me of glory like this” (Envy 40).]

2. “Everyday life is the usual flow of life in its real, practical forms; everyday life is the things that surround us, our habits, and daily behavior. Everyday life surrounds us like air, and like air, is noticeable only when there is a lack of it, or it is spoiled” (Lotman 10).

3. “In general under the conditions of shortage, the thing was not a commodity but quickly became a comrade” (“Ot tovarishcha” 41).

4. Yurchak defines firmennye tovary not for their specific brand name, but rather by their western origin: “Something was firmennyi because it was manufactured elsewhere and therefore established an authentic link with the Imaginary West” (196). His definition argues that people were not concerned with specific brands, but rather “authentic Westernness” (196).

5. Nikolaev notes that a typical conversation during the Soviet period dealt with how one procured an item. These conversations, he states, were simply about boasting, as the details of procurement, the what, where, and how, were no longer pragmatic pieces of information on a deal already long gone: “Демонстрация другому человеку своих ‘стратегических запасов’ (визуальная или устная) также обладает специфическим качеством выставки трофеев” (24). [“The demon-
stratification to another of one’s ‘strategic stockpiles’ (shown visually or told orally) also yielded a specific quality to the exhibition of trophies.”

6. Andrei Rogachevskii’s chapter “The Representation of Bribery in Nineteenth Century Russian Literature” looks at a related topic of informal economies, beginning with Gogol’s *The Inspector General* (*Revizor* [1836]).

7. Torgsin stores were state-run and accepted hard currency (foreign money) from Soviet or foreign citizens. The acronym is a short form for “torgovlia s inostrantsami,” or “trade with foreigners.” They existed during a five-year period from 1931 to 1936, until they were outlawed, and only reappeared in 1964 under Brezhnev, when the stores, now called Berezka, sold prestigious and scarce goods, but only to foreigners. The dates listed for Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* are the manuscript’s completion and the first complete Soviet publication.

8. The use of a floating modifier to describe anything is not uncommon in the Russian language, with playful words, such as “shirli-myri” or “figli-migli,” which convey little meaning by themselves. One joke about Soviet consumer culture makes use of this ambiguous word to describe deficit goods, as a man queues and asks the server for “figli-migli,” only to be told that “figli” has sold out, but there is some “migli” left. When he buys what remains, he arrives home and opens the package only to notice he received “figli.”

9. Steven Sampson’s article “The Second Economy of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe” develops the notion of how cultural practices and meaning emerged out of the second economies of late socialism. The privacy of consumption in the second, or shadow economy, created according to Sampson, new notions of “us” vs. “them,” developed not along the lines of borders, but between official and private networks of distribution (134).

10. Dunham’s article “The Big Deal” discusses the post-Great Patriotic War state under Stalin, which struck an agreement with the emerging middle class, providing affluence as a reward to social order:

> The middle class wanted careers backed by material incentives—housing, consumer goods, luxuries, and leisure time. Neither the regime nor the middle class was interested in ideology or further revolutionary upheavals. Neither objecting to a stratified society. Both proposed to build on the basis of what was there already. Both were interested in stabilization, normalization, and material progress. Both were interested in social mobility. The new careerism satisfied the upwardly mobile individual, who was then expected to be loyal to those who permitted him to be such. (204)

Dunham ultimately concludes that “The Big Deal was a giant shift that aligned *meshchanstvo* (petit-bourgeois behavior) with *kulturnost’.*
11. Ledeneva also notes the interesting paradox in how blat both created material inequalities, yet reinforced egalitarian ideals of Soviet society: blat-like phenomena resulted from the particular combination of shortages and, even if repressed, consumerism; from a paradox between an ideology of quality and the practice of differentiation through privileges and closed distribution systems. In so far as those who had no privileges in the state distribution system could by-pass rationing and queueing [sic] it had an equalizing as well as stratifying effect. It therefore had a bearing on the society’s egalitarian claims and its actual inequalities. (36)

12. The products of rentgenizdat perfectly illustrate the phantasmagoria of objects in the late Soviet period. Their construction combined the use value of a functioning record, but with the visual appearance of the human body inscribed on disc that was left over from developed x-rays.

13. “If you need / An orange / Go to / A store / And buy yourself / Some play dough / And make yourself / An orange out of it” (Vishevsky 71).

14. “If there is little soup in the bowl, / You need a big magnifying glass. / Look into this magnifying glass, / And there will be a lot of soup” (Vishevsky 72).!

15. “I am told that you have everything here. I don’t believe this of course” (“Sklad”).


17. “Hurry up, the working day is ending” (“Sklad”).

18. “Well, then let it spoil” (“Sklad”).

19. “Where am I to have all this stuff delivered?” (“Sklad”).

20. In a 2005 memoir, Danelia admits the parallels between Pliuk and 1970s Soviet society. The leader in the film, PZh, is supposed to resemble Brezhnev, with his numerous medals. The film took so long to write, that when Brezhnev died, they ran into problems with some of the film’s references: “А дня через три после похорон в группу пришел Леван Шенгелия и сказал, что главное слово сценария — ‘Ку’ надо срочно заменить на какое-нибудь другое! И показал газету ‘Правда’, где на первой странице жирным шрифтом было много раз напечатано: ‘К.У. Черненко’ (Taistvennyi 319). [

“And three days after the funeral, Levan Shengeliia came to the group and said that it was important that the word in the script, ‘Ku’ had to be changed immediately to something else! And he showed the newspaper Pravda, where on the first page in bold fonts many times was printed: ‘K. U. Chernenko.’]”

21. This satirical mode of comparison is common to the genre of science fiction, and specifically dystopian fiction, where alternative worlds share...
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similarities to the external social conditions of the reader.

22. Theorized from a first-world perspective in capitalist economies, Anthony Giddens writes that monetary exchanges in modern life create “disembedding mechanisms” that emphasize presence and absence (25). Money creates a spatial distance between the individual and his possession. The second-world practice of blat increases this distance, as people would buy items, only to trade them for others, adding another step in the act of consumption.

23. Danelia’s vision of Pluk is of a lethargic society, opposing visions of advanced technology and modern life that is usually found in the science fiction, dystopian fiction genre. The film was shot in Turkmenistan near the Caspian Sea, but resembles the environmental catastrophe of the drying up regions of the Aral Sea in several scenes that feature moored ships.

24. “When a society does not have color differentiated pants, then it has no purpose!” (Danelia, Kin-dza-dza!)

25. In a review of the film, Nikita Braginskii writes that buying parts for Uef’s ship served to create a parallel with Soviet life in the 1980s. Those who were lucky enough to own a car were nonetheless on a constant hunt for parts to make frequently needed repairs (395).

Works Cited


Danelia, Georgii. Kin-dza-dza!. Mosfil’m, 1986. Film.


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