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No Face, No Case: Russian Hip Hop and Politics under Putinism

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This article explores the phenomenon of Russian hip hop as part of a creative resistance movement in contemporary Russia. It argues that hip hop, which originally came to Russia during the country's 1990s infatuation with the West, links back to a long-standing tradition of music as counterculture in a Russian context. By placing Russian hip hop within a general shift of popular culture towards intellectual notions of political responsibility, this article discusses the emergence of a socially conscious form of high hip hop in Russia, contextualising it within the specific anti-Western and anti-intellectual cultural atmosphere created under the Putin regime. By investigating Russian hip hop's ties with the country's intelligentsia heritage and its relation to counterculture during the Soviet era, this article addresses two underlying concerns: what 'case' can be made against contemporary Russian hip hoppers, and what this conflict tell us about the contested frontline between popular culture and politics under Putinism. While the work of several Russian hip hoppers will be discussed as part of this analysis, particular attention will be paid to recent tracks released by the rappers Husky and Face.

In October 2019, the Russian hip hopper Face released a track titled *Serf Country* (Крепостная), the chorus of which provided a long-awaited hint at the meaning behind his pseudonym: the line “no face, no case”, kept in the original English, stood out as a political self-positioning that was as satirical as it was self-incriminating. While referring to a Western legal precedent that has little bearing in a Russian judicial context, where lack of evidence rarely stops arrests and “[c]orruption, predation, and the ‘unrule of law’” (Taylor 302) continue to prevail, Face reversed the phrase's meaning through his choice of moniker – opening up a criminal case against himself that draws attention to the heavily politicised nature of Russia's contemporary cultural sphere. When read in this context, Face's lyrics raise two underlying questions: what case can be made against contemporary Russian hip hop, and what does this conflict tell us about the contested frontline between popular culture and politics under Putinism?

Ever since its emergence, hip hop has occupied a contentious place within popular culture studies – often precisely because of its political content. On the one hand, the genre's contradictory creative principles of commerce versus social critique have led to a general differentiation between “socially conscious or high hip-hop and party or low hip-hop” (Sciullo 88); on the other hand, even hip hop that is “[not] riveting social critique [...] [is] in some ways

[...] always political” (13). Hip hop’s origins in African-American culture continue to influence the genre’s deep entrenchment in the contemporary socio-political discourse and automatically position it in close proximity to the contested frontline between politics and art – more so than is necessarily characteristic of other forms of popular culture. Yet in the “midst of a consumer culture that glorifies violence and eschews intellectualism” (Perry 1), hip hop’s slang-heavy lyrics also pose an aesthetic challenge to many audience members and scholars, who are faced with an artistic space that “may be democratic, but [...] not [...] inherently liberatory” (7). Indeed, a lot of hip hop is downright misogynist and sexist – but a lot of it also deals with “truth-revealing parables and pictures” (2) and espouses “a commitment to otherness” (47) that is often lamentably absent from other forms of cultural discourse.

In Russia, hip hop is a relatively new, but increasingly popular phenomenon. Over the course of the last ten years, rap has also become one of Russia’s most vocal art forms for the provision of creative snapshots of artistic resistance: according to Philip Ewell, “rap, in the face of the current political situation within Russia [...] has been able to provide a consistent avenue for artists to promote dissent and question power” (46), whereas Anastasia Denisova claims that “Russian rap culture has become the mouthpiece of resistance to the artifice of hegemonic culture, to the hypocrite officials, to the social vices and political wrongdoings” (1). Yet if we compare the Russian to the American case, two essential differences in the way hip hop expresses socio-political critique start to appear.

First of all, Russian hip hop connects to a long-standing tradition of music in the role of counterculture in a Russian context. Although the Pussy Riot trial of 2012, brought about by the group’s anti-Putin ‘punk prayer’ performed in a Moscow cathedral, undoubtedly received the widest media coverage of any politically inspired art trial in recent Russian history¹, the Soviet regime likewise grappled with the political implications that rested within popular forms of music. In the 1940s, a youth movement called *stiliagi* – an early forerunner of today’s hipsters – appeared all across the Soviet Union (cf. Gorski). Its members flaunted not only an open interest in American fashion, but also in American swing music and jazz, creating a veritable following of jazz enthusiasts whose musical idols were embraced by the official party line during the war, but put under harsh censorship following Stalin’s 1946 anti-cosmopolitanism campaign and the “1948 Resolution on Music [which] functioned to create deviance where none existed before, relabeling behavior considered acceptable previously as subversive and intolerable” (Tsipursky 357). Perhaps the most memorable outcome of this official disparagement of jazz culture was the catchy polemical phrase “today you’re playing jazz, tomorrow you’ll turn traitor of the motherland”

¹ A possible exception to this claim is the performance art of Petr Pavlensky, who is known to combine political protest with acts of public self-mutilation (cf. Mendelevich).

(‘сегодня ты играешь джаз, а завтра родину продашь’. All translations in this article are my own.).

Rock music posed a similar case: from the 1960s onwards, Western rock inspired a new wave of *stiliagi* that reached its zenith during the 1980s, when Russian underground rock bands such as *Akvarium* (Аквариум), *Mashina Vremeni* (Машина Времени), and *DDT* (ДДТ) acquired a mass following, not to mention the immortal Viktor Tsoi and his band *Kino* (Кино)². Much scholarly attention has been paid to the political significance of rock behind the Iron Curtain, the general consensus being that “rock in its Communist incarnation may be opposed to that in Western countries” (Pekacz 41) for the simple reason that it did carry political clout. Although opinions such as Peter Wicke’s, who claims that rock music “contributed to the erosion of totalitarian regimes throughout Eastern Europe long before the cracks in the system became apparent” (81) run the risk of overstating rock music’s real contribution to the break-up of the Soviet bloc, rock was indeed closely connected to “the fate of a young culture of refusal that arguably died when the system it questioned was replaced by a differently oppressive social order” (Romney).

The cultural atmosphere into which Russian hip hop was born was the opposite of oppressive – initially. Boris Yeltsin’s reign as President (1991–1999) was characterised by an open embrace of all things Western as an “incarnation of moral and aesthetic perfection, economic efficiency, and political freedom” (Koposov 209), meaning that hip hop’s association with American culture no longer dictated its condemnation from above. However, this early honeymoon phase of the perestroika-bred ‘fantasy of the West’ came to an early end during the mid-1990s, when Russia’s rapidly snowballing economic and social collapse revealed the glaring disconnect between the original myth and its real-life implementation in post-Soviet Russia.

The result was a widespread mood of disenchantment with the West, which not only started to find expression in Russian society, but which was also given official sanction from above following Putin’s rise to power on 31 December 1999. Subsequently, anti-Western attitudes started to proliferate both in official and in popular forms of culture. The immensely successful film *Brother 2* (Брат-2, 2000 – a sequel to the original *Brother* film of 1997), for instance, transferred its beloved gangster protagonist Danila to the United States, showcasing a general desire to no longer just passively, but actively contradict or “actually [punish] the West [...], striking a positive chord with post-Soviet audiences” (White 88). The closing scenes depict

² Tsoi’s career start was turned into big-screen material in the film *Leto* (*Summer*) by Kirill Serebrennikov in 2018, which was selected to compete for the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival. While working on the film, Serebrennikov was placed under house arrest following fraud charges that many consider political retaliation for his artistic work. Serebrennikov’s plays and films frequently voice criticism in Putin’s regime and have been labelled dissident in nature.

Danila's return to Russia, accompanied by lyrics from the memorable 1989 song *Final Letter* (Последнее Письмо), written by the rock band *Nautilus Pompilius*: "Good-bye, America [...] Your worn-out blue jeans / Became too tight for me / We were taught for so long / To love your forbidden fruits" (Гудбай Америка [...] Мне стали слишком малы / твои тертые джинсы / нас так долго учили / любить твои запретные плоды). Initially meant to symbolise Russia's optimism-fuelled turn away from the American Dream, the words were now used to symbolically capture Russia's *chernukha*-inspired turn towards anti-Westernism instead³.

Thus, the emergence of the first Russian hip hop artists in the late 1990s occurred at a time when engaging with an American music genre once again performed "either [...] an act of protest or an act of American solidarity" (Ewell 59) – in either case, an act devoid of political innocence. Consequently, Russian hip hop was a political genre from the start, but for cultural reasons that differed from the American case and which had little to do with the actual lyrics produced in the tracks. Indeed, most of the early Russian hip hop from the 2000s can best be categorised as "an unintentional parody of US hip-hop" (Voigt) and a try-hard attempt at creating party hip hop. However, this "blanket imitation of [...] American artists" (Ewell 46) began to evolve into a more socially involved and politically engaged form of the genre around 2011, at a time when Putin's return to power after the Medvedev interregnum fuelled a nationwide protest movement that culminated in mass demonstrations in March 2012 and marked the beginning of increased youth participation in political protests (cf. Diuk).

Thus, the second reason for Russian hip hop's different political trajectory from the US lies in the nature of the Putin regime itself. Contemporary Russian hip hop is not just "political because it represents a sonic expression of joy that was historically prohibited" (Sciullo 13), but because "the type of political pervasiveness that is present in Putin's Russia could never be part of the artistic environment in post-Cold War America" (Ewell 60). As Kate Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu stated, Putin is a "*creative* authoritarian [...] The Kremlin's power game is more than just a form of repression: it is a constant source of production for Russia's national narrative and identity [original emphasis]" (225). One of the results of this peculiar set of political circumstances for cultural creation is that Russian hip hop has produced at least one pro-Putin rapper: Timati, a hip hop artist whose steroid-fuelled, aggressive masculinity caters to the patriarchal gung-ho-ism of the national leader. Contrary to Sciullo's slightly overgeneralised statement that "[if] one were to conceptualize a hip-hop political platform, the platform would certainly be left of center" (100), Timati not only proclaimed Putin to be his best friend in the eponymous track *Best Friend*

³ *Chernukha* is a slang term coined in the perestroika period to denote a state of unrelenting negativity and pessimism, derived from the Russian word for the colour black.

(Лучший друг, 2015), but also explicitly stated that “Who is ‘left’ can leave” (‘Кто ‘левый’, тот на выход’) – showcasing the wide political spectrum currently occupied by Russian hip hop.

Rather fittingly, the Russian-born and Oxford-educated battle rapper Охххумирон used his 2015 hit single *City Under the Sole* (Город под подошвой) to declare that “Today rap is a multi-party system” (‘Теперь рэп – многопартийный’). Охххумирон generally refrains from making explicit political messages in his work, but the remarkably intertextual nature of many of his lyrics – which have been read as allusions to Pushkin, the Bible, and other classical source texts of Russian literature (cf. Dement’ev) – conveys a recurrent sense of the strained relationship between the artist and the state in Russia. In the evocatively titled *Only a Writer* (Всего лишь писатель), Охххумирон states that “the people in power are clowns [...] It’s a game without rules, and I stand outside it” (‘власть – это клоунада [...] Игра без правил, я вне её’), and the album *Gorgorod* (Горгород, 2015) was lauded as “the first conceptual album in Russian rap [...] [telling] the story of a writer rethinking his role in the society” (Raspopina).

A similarly intellectual quality is also made manifest in the work of Vasya Oblomov, whose style cannot strictly be classified as hip hop, but who frequently mixes a rap delivery of his lyrics with Russian chanson elements. Oblomov – whose pseudonym creates an intertextual connection to Ivan Goncharov’s eponymous 19th-century novel – wraps political criticism about “the endemic corruption in the Russian police force [...] the shady side of Russian politics and the Russian judicial system [...] the hopelessness of the cultural elite [...] [and] the disputed elections of December 2011” (Ewell 52) into literary allusions, appearing more often than not as the quintessential 21st century Russian intelligent moved to pick up a mic. Lyrics such as “Morality will stand higher than any letter of the law [...] The thought that this will come to pass was left to us once by some classical writer / It is a shame that neither I nor you will ever see this blessed day” (‘Мораль станет выше любой буквы закона [...] Мысль о том, что всё это сбудется, классик писал нам когда-то в письме / Но жаль, только жить в эту пору прекрасную не доведётся ни мне, ни тебе’) recall the intelligentsia’s long, idealism-fuelled fight for a better society, and carry strong echoes of the Chekhovian man – a “pragmatic skeptic [...] believing in a few self-made and self-policed rules of honorable living” (Aron 155) who ultimately succumbs to a state of laughter through tears over his futile wish for Russia’s self-improvement.

Read in this context, Craig Watkin’s statement that “the contradictory currents, ideas, and worldview that percolate throughout the phenomenal world of hip hop [...] both energize and expand the image and imagination of the hip-hop intelligentsia” (234) appears in a new light. On the one hand, Watkin’s indiscriminate appropriation of the Russian term intelligentsia – denoting the traditional cohort of culturally enlightened, progressive nation-builders in 19th-century Russia (cf. Tolz) – imbues it with a misleading universal applicability; on the other hand, the

reapplication of the term to the Russian hip hop scene correctly highlights the unexpected move of intelligentsia thought and heritage from high-brow cultural art forms into Russian rap. Following the profound sense of disillusionment about their societal standing after the perestroika, the majority of Russia's former intelligentsia succumbed to an attitude of cynical passivity (cf. Lipovetsky) and arguably “committed moral and ideological suicide” (Piontkovsky 199) by failing to oppose Russia's return to authoritarianism. As hip hop starts to problematise the Putin regime's regressive cultural policy along with the many ills of Russian society, it also signals the shift of critical intelligentsia voices to the fringes of the popular periphery.

Linking Russian hip hop's political self-positioning to a stance of outspoken intellectualism also adds another layer to rap's function as a form of artistic resistance in Russia. As pointed out by Rosalind Marsh, contemporary anti-Western attitudes in Russia are “predominantly anti-American or anti-Semitic” (Marsh 567) in nature – with the latter “actually and ultimately [meaning] ‘a member of the liberal intelligentsia’” (Aptekman 667). As a result, hip hop's use of an American genre for intelligentsia-style social critique not only addresses Russia's anti-Westernism as a whole, but also problematises the country's very specific – and often violent – culture of anti-intellectualism.

Several Russian rappers have had to experience this culture first-hand, the artist Noize MC among them. Noize MC uses his music to call for “personal growth and personal responsibility” (Ewell 6) and juxtaposes various societal problems in Russia with its cultural heritage, such as the issue of racism in *The Pushkin Rap* (Пушкинский рэп, 2012):

So where do all these pseudo-scholars come from

Who think that racism and Russia

Are words of the same root? [...]

You're mumbling something about Russian culture

Well here's your answer from that very culture!

Or are you tryna say Pushkin's no Russian poet?⁴

(Так откуда берутся грамотеи такие

Что думают, будто расизм и Россия

⁴ The reference to Pushkin refers to the poet's African heritage.

Это слова однокоренные? [...]

Что-то там мямлишь про русскую культуру

Так вот тебе от этой культуры ответ!

Или что, типа, Пушкин не русский поэт?)

In 2010, Noize MC had to serve a ten-day sentence for ‘hooliganism’ after being arrested during a concert performance that (somewhat ironically) featured a song against police brutality. Shortly after his release from prison, Noize MC attempted to disempower the language of this oppression by perpetuating it, turning the taped version of his coerced confession and apology – a standard element used by the Russian police to legitimise illicit arrests – into the refrain for his song *10 days (Stalingrad)* (10 суток (Сталинград), cf. Whitmore).

A second rapper who faced arrest at the hands of the authorities was the hip hopper Husky. Husky entered the music scene in 2011 with his debut track *October 7th* (Седьмое Октября), which was named after Vladimir Putin’s birth date and features explicitly political lyrics, stating “He is now the executioner-careerist, emperor and apologist / for a regime of ditches and dungeons [...] It’s the Tsar’s birthday today!” (‘Он ныне – палач-карьерист, император и апологет / Режима канав и темниц [...] У царя сегодня день рождения!’). In November 2018, several of Husky’s concerts were spontaneously banned amid a general crackdown on civil rights and in the run-up to a controversial 2019 law that criminalised public ‘disrespect for Russian society’ (cf. “Podpisan zakon”), leading the rapper to give an impromptu street performance on the roof of a car in Krasnodar. He was arrested on the charge of hooliganism, but the state intervention only led to a rise in popularity for Husky’s work both in and outside Russia (cf. Waugh).

The charge of hooliganism is an evocative one not only in light of Husky’s actions, but also because of his gopnik-like appearance, which is a far cry from the traditional image of the Russian intellectual. Husky plays with the Western stereotype of the tracksuit-wearing, Slav-squatting nogoodnik, but at the same time, his music marries violence and poetry in a way that takes “a historically American genre and [injects] it with a bleakness and melancholy that has defined Russia’s literature since the days of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky” (Waugh). The cinematographic black-and-white videos that accompany many of Husky’s tracks create an audio-visual whole that shocks as it pleases, merging banal settings and repetitive scenarios with profound messages about Russia’s present state and its likely future. In *Poem about the Motherland* (Поэма о Родине), Husky raps “Our people are at war and our people are in prison [...] My motherland is my love, where I at random (read poems) / Read poems to a machine gun” (‘Наши люди на войне

и наши люди на тюрьме [...] Моя Родина — моя любовь, где я невпопад (читаю стихи) / Читаю стихи в автомат⁵). The image of the machine gun is one Husky later revisits in the song *Stupid Bullet* (Пуля-дура), where he raps: “Lonely bipeds, a hundred-handed horde [...] I want to be a machine-gun, shooting people in the face [...] My rap is a prayer, but with a razor blade in my mouth” (‘Одинокие двуногие, сторукая орда [...] Я хочу быть автоматом, стреляющим в лица [...] Мой рэп — это молитва, только с бритвою во рту’).

As drastically reduced verses become lyrical bullets in rap form, Husky’s lines perforate the face of Russia’s complacent society and challenge the audience to question their herd mentality amid widespread deprivations of personal freedoms. From bullets to razor blades, Husky highlights the trajectory of violence in contemporary Russia as it moves from the outside world into people’s minds, only to find expression in words that take the form of (self-)harm. Even Husky’s prayer, an act meant to renew faith and bring hope, cannot occur without bloodshed, placing freedom of expression and intellectual wordsmithing in the same semantic field of violence. In the song *Panel Flat* (Панелька), the issue of domestic violence is also broached, portrayed as causing “the panel flats [to] moan [...] And smiles are but bruises under noses / On pictures of families that are none” (‘Новое утро, панельный стон [...] И улыбка — лишь ссадина ниже носа / На фотографии семьи, которой нет’).

Perhaps the most surprising embodiment of politicised hip hop in contemporary Russia is the rapper who started this discussion – Face. Face shot to fame as a stereotypical party hip hopper with the songs *Burger* (Бургер) and *I’m Dropping the West* (Я роняю Запад) in 2017, in which he blatantly parodied Russia’s pseudo-rejection of the West and heavily copied the mannerisms of American rappers. While delivering repetitive lyrics about robbing Gucci stores and comparing his sexual organ to a burger, Face catered both to the American and the misogynist stereotypes that pertained to hip hop, while superciliously stating: “I am better than 2Pac, Biggie, Eminem, Kendrick [...] / J. Cole, your dad and even Lil Pump” (‘Я лучше, чем 2Pac, Biggie, Eminem, Kendrick [...] / J. Cole, твой батя и даже Lil Pump’). Given that both Face’s recurring references to the Gucci brand and his oft-repeated catch phrase ‘eshkere’ – a Russianised version of Lil Pump’s similarly incorrect use of the word ‘esketit’ – are direct imitations of the latter’s work, Face’s lyrics tread a thin line between mimicry and parody, which subsequently became a characteristic feature of his work.

In 2018, Face released the album *Mysterious Ways* (Пути Неисповедимы), which raised a considerable amount of speculation because of the rapper’s sudden image change – both in his appearance and his lyrics. The record featured not only a religiously inspired title, but also a number of songs that addressed the corruption of the Orthodox Church (*Shiv* [Заточка], *Prayer*

⁵ Alternatively, this last line could be read as ‘to the sound of a machine gun’ or ‘sounding like a machine gun’.

[Молитва]) and its ties to the equally mendacious political regime (*Our Mentality* [Наш Менталитет]). *Mysterious Ways* also made references to the ubiquity of violence and helplessness among Russia's lost younger generation (*Out the Window* [Из окна], *Salaam* [Салам]), which are themes that Face subsequently revisited in the 2019 stand-alone track *The Humourist* (Юморист). *The Humourist* marries Americanised verbal bling to an explicit critique of Russian politics and renders Russia as a country that survives on curse words and cynical laughter alone ('Нам не выжить без смеха, прям как без русского мата'). Apart from describing how the Russian Santa Clause brings war rather than women ('Что принесёт мне Санта? [...] Может быть, жену? / Если русский Дед Мороз / Тогда он принесёт войну'), Face blames Russia's eponymous humourists and jokesters for ruining the country, yet does not specify whether these soulless pranksters are Russia's businessmen, the country's politicians, or the country's passive intellectual elite. However, in the refrain, the lyrical 'I' speaks as both the humourist and the artist that has fallen from grace, allowing Face to dissolve the boundary between the two and to extend complicity in Russia's downfall to the politically inactive artists like himself:

Gold on my wrist, I'm a humourist
 You joke the wrong way and end up on the blacklist
 I've got the sovereign's disfavour although I'm basically clean
 The sky belongs to planes and censorship to artists

(Gold on my wrist, я юморист
 Пошутил не так — и ты попал в blacklist
 Государева немилость, хоть я вроде бы и чистый
 Небо самолётам, а цензура для артиста)

As Face's subsequent album *12* proved, this sojourn into politics was no freak accident. The album's title could be read as a reference to Aleksandr Blok's 1918 poem of the same name, which estranged many of the symbolist poet's devoted readers by unexpectedly espousing controversial political views about the Soviet regime. Rather fittingly, Face's album provides a similarly politicised snapshot of a fragmented society caught in a state of upheaval. The first track begins with the image of a crying mother, clutching her dead sons' army tags (*Get Away* [Выходи]), followed by the track *The Labyrinth* (Лабиринт), which enters into Russia's ongoing

conversation about patriotism and the meaning of the word motherland: “To be against the regime does not mean to be against the motherland / I love Russia for its smell of blackcurrants / I won’t let Russophobes cash in on my views” (“Быть против власти — не значит быть против родины / Я люблю Россию за запах чёрной смородины / Не дам русофобам нажиться на моих взглядах”).

Face hints at the identity behind the ‘Russophobes’ mentioned in this song in *Serf Country*, where he states: “You don’t like gays, you don’t like immigrants / But what have you done against the real occupants?” (“Ты не любишь геев, ты не любишь иммигрантов / Но что ты сделал против настоящих оккупантов?”). *Serf Country* is an interesting track not only because it subverts the traditional process of crafting scapegoating narratives on invented ideas of otherness, but also because it links the concepts of own (‘gays’, ‘immigrants’) and other (‘the real occupants’) to the context of serfdom – a term for which the scholar Aleksandr Etkind offered a new interpretation in 2015 by linking it to Russia’s historical process of self-colonisation. In his book, Etkind describes how the majority of Russian serfs were Orthodox Russians, treated akin to ‘white negroes’ by the Europeanised nobility (cf. Etkind 125ff.). The resulting sense of oppression from a Russian-born group that was simultaneously the own and the other finds its modern-day equivalent in Face’s lyrics, which convey an updated sense of occupation not by an outside force, but by a homegrown, power-hungry elite.

Instead of succumbing to the historical timeline that this creates, Face presents himself as the break-out voice of a failing generation, claiming he has learned to look past the constraints of Russia’s historical self-limitations: “A lot is changing, a generation is failing / But I can say with confidence that I am walking outside time” (“Многое меняется, пропадает поколение / Но я могу сказать уверенно, что я иду вне времени”). By positioning himself “outside time” (‘vnye vremeni’), Face seemingly rejects the involvement in his own political reality or in Russia’s past. Yet the term ‘vnye’ effects the opposite by recalling the work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, who, in 2006, coined the concept of ‘living vnye’ to describe the peculiar Soviet mind-set of being “simultaneously inside and outside [...] neither simply in support nor simply in opposition [of the Soviet Union]” (288). According to Yurchak, the daily practice of ‘living vnye’ carved out a sphere of sovereign intellectual activity that was notably removed from all areas of official governance in the late Soviet era, and which was frequently accompanied by *stioob* – a peculiar form of humorous in-betweenness that drove consensus with the official party rhetoric to a point of over-identification, making it so ambiguous it was impossible to tell whether its use was intended as serious or not.

Both *stioob* and the act of ‘living vnye’ functioned as “a class and education marker among Soviet artists and intellectuals” (Roudakova 182), allowing them to parody the regime without

running the risk of arrest – mainly because the Soviet authorities lacked the intellectual finesse to decipher the various layers of meaning intrinsic to *stio*b, but also because its ambiguity functioned as a shield against denunciation. Face’s dissociation from politics and history appears on a similar level of ambiguity, making it difficult to judge whether his sudden political re-branding is the result of genuine politicisation or an expression of post-Soviet *stio*b that “mocks from no place of conviction” (183). In either case, Face’s use of the term ‘vnye’ places him in the intellectual tradition of the late Soviet intelligentsia, highlighting not only the shared authoritarian character between the late Soviet and the Putin regime, but also the shared shackles this socio-political climate produces for artists of different generations. Lastly, in the track *Mister* (Мистер), Face revisits the topic of morality within contemporary Russia’s intellectual sphere. He presents the Russian police apparatus and the sphere of organised crime as two mirror images, using colour symbolism to construct a visual bond of violence and bloodshed:

Black plus red, police plus criminal [...]

Tell me, how are you different from them? Morality?

‘The cops steal, the cops are corrupt

But we, the petty bandits, aren’t like that, although we thief all the same’ [...]

My talent was born in the panel flat ghetto

The country is freeing itself from that mentality, I believe in that

I believe, that somewhere on other planets

Honest police exist, I believe in that, I believe in that

(Красное плюс чёрное, полиция плюс криминал [...])

Скажи мне, чем ты отличаешься от них? Моралью?

‘Мусора воруют, мусора продажные

А мы, бандосы, не такие, но ворует точно также’ [...]

Мой талант, он родом из панельного гетто

Страна избавится от этого менталитета, верю в это

Я верю, что есть где-то на других планетах

Честная полиция, я верю в это, я верю в это)

While deconstructing the parallel between law enforcement and fantasies of masculinity, Face simultaneously calls out the diseased sense of morality that permeates Russia's self-stylisation into a bandit country – a process that started in the 1990s with heroes such as *Brother's* Danila, but which has since become institutionalised on the political level with “the new bandits of the Putin years” (White 92). According to Face, Russia will, one day, free itself from the anti-intellectual rejection of the once-adored West and its democratic principles – but just like Vasya Oblomov, he constructs an unstable utopia that not only relocates the belief in a fair police system to a place outside Russia, but to another planetary system altogether. The helplessness this signifies is not only emblematic of the wider struggle in Russian society for the protection of its basic human rights, but also of the Russian intelligentsia's inability to find a way out of its self-constructed cynicism trap.

What case, then, can be made against Russian hip hop under Putinism? Having started out as a politically contentious genre primarily because of its links to American culture, Russian hip hop has evolved from a playful confrontation of anti-Americanism to a multi-faceted confrontation of anti-intellectualism instead. It appears that Ewell was only partly correct when he claimed that “the sadness of being a rap artist, or any artist, in Putin's Russia lies in the fact that one *must* choose sides – either to be with Putin or to be against him [original emphasis]” (60). Not only do Russia's hip hoppers occupy a much more diverse political spectrum than the black-and-white opposition portrayed by Ewell, but the particular powerplay between Putin's creative authoritarianism and Russia's increasingly politicised popular culture also spawns more than just sadness. The manifold impulses for ironical distancing and parodic reflection that the Putin regime creates not only reactivate Soviet patterns of thought among contemporary artists, but also challenge them to discover new forms of expression capable of circumventing yet another trajectory of creative suicide. Russia's hip hop artists contribute to this search in experimental, yet politically provocative and socially critical ways, embodying a generational shift that transfers traditional intelligentsia questions to a younger group of intellectuals not afraid to transgress the established border between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. For as long as Russia's rappers continue to position hip hop at the historical crossroads between art and politics in Russia, their contribution to the rejuvenation of intelligentsia heritage in post-Soviet Russia will likely remain a thought-provoking object of study.

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