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# A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom

Alexei Yurchak

the parasite is . . . a joker, . . . grimace . . . greasepaint. . . . He goes on stage, sets up the scenery, invents theater, and imposes theater. He is all the faces on the screen . . . he is at the origin of comedy, tragedy, the circus and the farce, and of public meetings, where he gathers the noises of legitimacy.

—Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

## The Event

On 17 May 1991, the Fifth Channel of Leningrad television broadcast its popular program *Piatoe koleso* (The Fifth Wheel)—an episode that has since become one of the most notorious media events of the past two decades. The Fifth Channel acquired prestige during the period of perestroika reform, when it was broadcast nationally. Its programs concerned historical and cultural events in the Soviet past and present and were watched by an audience of several million viewers. Sergei Sholokhov, one of the hosts of *The Fifth Wheel*, had the reputation of being a young, dynamic, and pathbreaking journalist.

On that day, he began the program with the following words: “Today we are opening the *Wheel* with a new rubric. It is called ‘Sensations and hypotheses.’ I will host it together with Sergei Kurekhin, a famous political figure and movie actor.”<sup>1</sup> Kurekhin sat next to Sholokhov, behind a large desk in a scholarly looking office lined with bookshelves. A few years later, he would become a national celebrity, but at the time of the program he was unknown to most viewers. Kurekhin began to speak: “The goal of this rubric will be to introduce absolutely new approaches to well-known historical events in our country and the whole world, to well-known facts.” The first program, he announced, would concern “the central mystery of the October [Bolshevik] revolution,” a mystery that had “always remained,” despite all our apparent knowledge of the event.

During the next hour, speaking in a serious scholarly tone and displaying historical photographs, documentary footage, film clips, and interviews with scientists, Kurekhin put forward a remarkable thesis on the origins of the Bolshevik revolution. He began by admitting that it was hardly surprising that the revolution had “inspired whole generations of

The epigraph is taken from Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore, 1982), 63–64.

1. For this analysis I used a video-recording of the original program that aired on 17 May 1991. This original differs substantially from the video-recorded version that Sholokhov made available for purchase in 1996 under the title *Lenin-grib* (Lenin mushroom). The latter version is shorter than the original (32 minutes instead of 70), substantially re-edited, and augmented with additional materials and interviews, including a part of the program that was not originally aired, in which Kurekhin and Sholokhov break their serious tone and start laughing. It is video clips from this later re-edited version that are available today on YouTube.

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cinematographers and . . . that so many books [had] been written about it.” Every revolution, he argued, is indeed an impressive visual spectacle. Although we usually assume that visual representations of a revolution happen later, after the events have already taken place, Kurekhin argued that revolutions are simply too spectacular to happen on their own. Someone “first [has] to visualize certain images and later attempt to reproduce them in reality.” During a recent visit to Mexico, he continued, he had seen frescos that depicted the Mexican revolution of the early twentieth century in a style identical to the one used for the Russian Bolshevik revolution: “the same exhausted people, armed with primitive tools of labor, overthrowing some rulers.”

In order for revolutionary leaders in both places to have imagined these events in a similar manner, their minds must surely have been subjected to similar influences. In Mexico, the source of influence is clear. During ritualistic ceremonies, Kurekhin explained, the native peoples routinely used drinks prepared from *Lophophora Williamsii* or peyote—a Mexican cactus with strong psychotropic properties.<sup>2</sup> Although Mexican cacti do not grow in Russia, Kurekhin noted, Russian forests do have an abundance of similar hallucinogens: mushrooms, most prominently the fly agaric mushroom (*mukhomor*).<sup>3</sup> These mushrooms, he claimed, induce the same effects as the Mexican cacti: “people see absolutely incredible pictures very vividly and colorfully” and “enormous scenes of great events and revolutions fly before your eyes.”

Building on this premise, Kurekhin began to formulate his famous thesis: “Reading the correspondence between [Vladimir] Lenin and [Iosif] Stalin I came across one phrase: ‘Yesterday I ate too many mushrooms, but I felt great.’” Bolshevik leaders ate a lot of mushrooms, Kurekhin mused, and some of them surely had hallucinogenic properties. If consumed for many years, these mushrooms can permanently change an individual’s personality. Indeed, Kurekhin continued in an unwavering scholarly tone, “I have absolutely irrefutable proof that the October revolution was carried out by people who had been consuming certain mushrooms for many years. And these mushrooms, in the process of being consumed by these people, had displaced their personalities. These people were turning into mushrooms. In other words, I simply want to say that Lenin was a mushroom.”

Because the subject of this audacious claim was the leader of the com-

2. Kurekhin referred to the writings of Peruvian American anthropologist and writer Carlos Castaneda, whom Kurekhin first read in a Russian samizdat translation in the mid-1980s when it became popular among informal artistic milieus. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995. Castaneda studied the rituals of Yaqui and Navajo Indians and described their consumption of peyote as a way to gain insight into one’s life. Castaneda’s writings have been discredited in academia as largely fictional. See Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1968).

3. Fly agaric mushroom (*amanita muscaria*) contains psychoactive alkaloids that are deadly to flies and have a hallucinogenic effect on humans. In Russian traditional peasant culture, these mushrooms were used for their hallucinogenic and medicinal effects (as painkillers, as cures for neuroses and inflammations, and so on). See Andy Letcher, *Shroom: A Cultural History of the Magic Mushroom* (New York, 2007).

munist revolution, about whom public criticism and irony had always been taboo, the claim itself became even more believable. Had Kurekhin been speaking of anyone else, his words would easily have been dismissed as a joke. But Lenin! How could one joke about Lenin? Especially on Soviet television. Audiences could not help but attribute some credibility to the revelation.

During the broadcast, which lasted over an hour, the audience received no explanation of whether this was an ironic prank or a serious program. Millions of television viewers found themselves at a loss: some were completely confused about the program; others recognized the extreme irony of *stiob* but were stunned that such a genre could be performed on television and, moreover, that it could be directed at Lenin; and still others took the program at face value and were shaken by its iconoclastic revelations.<sup>4</sup> When the program ended, the studio was overwhelmed with phone calls from viewers—some wanting an explanation, some protesting, and some laughing.<sup>5</sup> Even educated and well-informed members of the intelligentsia were confused. The actor Konstantin Raikin, a member of Moscow's theatrical circles and an accomplished comedian himself, later described his reaction to the broadcast: "I took it as any normal Soviet person who was accustomed to trusting serious conversations [in the media would have] I was absolutely sold." Although he may not necessarily have "bought" the claim that Lenin was a mushroom, he certainly did not instantly recognize it as a hoax. In retrospect, he finds this astonishing: "Every one of us thinks that he is not a fool and is able to recognize a sham, so to speak, when he is being taken for a ride." Those who are comedians should presumably recognize such hoaxes with an even greater ease. And yet, Raikin, who had never heard of Kurekhin before that moment, failed to recognize his provocation. Another famous viewer, the singer Alla Pugacheva, also claimed to have taken the program seriously: "I was asking everyone: did you hear that? Did you watch that program?!"<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the words of these celebrities should be taken with a grain of salt. These quotes, after all, come from a special 1996 program that Sholokhov broadcast in memory of Kurekhin, who had tragically died that summer. So although the comedian and singer did admit that they were fooled by the hoax, we must remember that Sholokhov had a particular interest in presenting evidence of such. If his program had indeed fooled many people, it would demonstrate that he, its host, was, in 1991, already more enlightened and ironic than the majority of viewers. Sholokhov has,

4. On *stiob*, see Alexei Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in the Post-Soviet Nightlife," in Adele Marie Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev* (Durham, 1999); see also Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), chap. 7.

5. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995.

6. Sergei Sholokhov, interviews with Konstantin Raikin and with Alla Pugacheva on the program *Tikhii dom: Pamiati Kurekhina*, broadcast on RTR television channel, July 1996.

in fact, been making this claim for many years. In a 2008 interview he recalled:

The next day after the broadcast Galina Barinova, the chief for ideology at the [Leningrad] Regional Party Committee, was visited by a delegation of Bolshevik veterans, who demanded that she explain to them whether it was true that Lenin was a mushroom. “No!” Galina Barinova emphatically replied. “But how can this be,” protested the veterans, “if yesterday they said so on the television?” To which she replied: “This is untrue,” adding a phrase that put me and Kurekhin in a state of shock: “Because a mammal cannot be a plant.”<sup>7</sup>

Sholokhov’s claim to have fooled the gullible public, especially the Bolshevik veterans, seems suspiciously self-serving. It remains true, however, that at the time of the program’s original broadcast, most people did not recognize it as a hoax, even if they did not necessarily take its central claim at face value. Moreover, the program turned out to be such a remarkable event that today, almost twenty years later, it is still widely remembered in Russia as one of the first illustrations that the Soviet system was crumbling.

Several important questions come to mind. Why did this provocation happen when it did? Why did it focus on Lenin? How exactly was it performed? What was funny about it to some people, not funny to others, and confusing to yet others? What were the social, cultural, and political effects of this provocation at the time of the broadcast and in the subsequent years? And finally, can the answers to these questions provide us with a new perspective on the dissolution of the Soviet Union and, more broadly, on the relationship between politics and irony?

### The Open

Kurekhin was involved in many activities. A brilliant and versatile pianist, improviser, and composer, he started playing with informal bands in Leningrad in the mid-1970s, exploring a diversity of styles, from avant-garde jazz to punk rock (figure 1).<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, he famously created and led Pop-Mekhanika—a multifarious musical orchestra and performance group, which brought together diverse styles and genres and united characters from a variety of official, informal, and amateur cultural scenes. Rock guitarists performed with classical opera singers, ballet dancers, boys’ choirs, avant-garde fashion models, free jazz saxophonists, characters from strange local “scenes,” and sometimes even animals (a scared flock of geese gaggling to pulsating music or a startled horse, which once, to everyone’s joy, began pissing on stage). Kurekhin conducted this motley crew by running, jumping, waving his arms, and shouting commands.

7. Dima Mishenin, “Tikhii Sholokhov” (interview with Sergei Sholokhov), in *Krest’ianka: Zhurnal o vkusnoi i zdorovoi zhizni*, December 2008, at [www.krestyanka.ru/archive/year2008/dec/dec\\_349.html](http://www.krestyanka.ru/archive/year2008/dec/dec_349.html) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

8. For a discussion of Kurekhin’s musical history, see Aleksandr Kan, *Poka ne nachalsia dzhaz* (St. Petersburg, 2008).



Figure 1. Sergei Kurekhin playing piano (late 1980s).

The resulting sound and spectacle were extremely unusual but surprisingly well organized.<sup>9</sup>

Performances of Pop-Mekhanika acquired a cult status among connoisseurs, but Kurekhin remained unknown to wider audiences. By the early 1990s, his activities had broadened beyond music: he published articles, wrote scripts and music for films in which he also acted, directed theater plays, and hosted radio and television programs.<sup>10</sup> The televised Lenin hoax was the first of his projects to have an audience of several million viewers. How, one might ask, was it possible for Kurekhin to conduct such a daring hoax within the state-controlled national media?

In order for the hoax to work, an unusual combination of political, social, and cultural elements had to come together. This type of televised provocation can only succeed under certain circumstances—before the provocateur becomes widely known and recognized, before the audience comes to expect this unusual genre of irony on television, and before important political ideals become common objects of public irony. In the case of Russia, a program of this kind could only have been successful during the limited historical window of the early 1990s. Earlier, the media was too tightly controlled by the Soviet party-state; television programs had to be preapproved, and any irony at the expense of the political foundations

9. The history and analysis of this remarkable artistic project still awaits its author. For some footage of Pop-Mekhanika performances, see Vladimir Nepevnyi's documentary *Kurekhin: Dokumental'nyi film* (St. Petersburg, 2004). Many short clips are available on YouTube.

10. Many of his scripts and movie performances also acquired popular cult status. See, for example, Sergei Debizhev's 1992 films *Kompleks nevmeniaemosti* (Insanity Complex) and *Dva kapitana 2* (Two Captains 2). For a comprehensive analysis of Kurekhin's cinematographic career, see T. L. Karklit, "Fenomen Sergeia Kurekhina v otechestvennom kinematografe kontsa 80—nachala 90-kh godov" (thesis, Vserossiiskii gosudarstvennyi institut kinematografii im. S. I. Gerasimova, Moscow 2004), at [kuryokhin.letov.ru/Karklit/diplom/](http://kuryokhin.letov.ru/Karklit/diplom/) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

would have been impossible. Although this control had weakened by the final years of perestroika, it had not completely disappeared. Later, in the post-Soviet 1990s, although irony about the Soviet system had become common, the media ultimately fell under new forms of control: the new political system and its newly introduced market considerations.

The early to mid-1990s, it is now clear, marked the beginning of a short and peculiar period of suspense, when the old forms of control, regulation, and governance were being weakened or broken, and the new ones had not yet emerged or stabilized. During that short period of “the open,” squeezed between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet future, popular mass media, including cultural programs on television, experienced unprecedented and unexpected freedoms.<sup>11</sup> Film director Sergei Debizhev, who worked with Kurekhin on several projects, described the atmosphere in Russian cinema and television during those years in almost utopian terms: “At that time it was possible to do whatever you wanted without asking anybody or saying anything to anyone.”<sup>12</sup> Although Debizhev’s words may be tinted with nostalgic exaggeration, the short period they describe was certainly unique in its relative lack of predetermined control.<sup>13</sup> Sholokhov claims that during that period he was able to choose the topics for *The Fifth Wheel* with relative freedom. He needed only to obtain the “air signature” (*efirnaia podpis’*) of Bella Kurkova, his boss at the Fifth Channel, to approve a topic for broadcast. By 1991, Kurkova usually approved any topic, as long as Sholokhov assured her that it did not deal with Boris El’tsin, who at the time was still an ousted member of the Politburo. When Sholokhov proposed Kurekhin as his guest for a program on history, Kurkova provided her air signature “without even looking.”<sup>14</sup> She also let him choose the length of his different programs, saying: “Seriozhen’ka, if you want, take two hours of air time. There will be no one else after you.” According to Sholokhov this free indeterminacy, which “cannot even be imagined on television today,” ended in the mid-1990s, with the privatization of television and the emergence of strict “programming formats, such as 26 minutes, 52 minutes,” and so on.<sup>15</sup> Kurekhin’s televised provocation was one of the earliest manifestations of this unusual, and short-lived, period of suspended political and economic constraints.

11. Slavoj Žižek defines “the open” as the “intermediate phase” of a historical situation, “when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by the new one.” Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, 1993), 1.

12. “Interv’iu s Sergeem Debizhevym (4 maia 2004 goda),” in Karklit, “Fenomen Sergeia Kurekhina.” For a discussion of this unexpected freedom and its effects in the Soviet cinema, see George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry* (University Park, 2000).

13. This period can also be compared with what Hakim Bey calls “temporary autonomous zone.” Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York, 1985). For a discussion of temporary autonomous zones during the early period of postsocialist transition, see Yurchak, “Gagarin and the Rave Kids.”

14. *Programma “Piatoe Koleso”: “Lenin-grib”* (nineteen years since the broadcast), host Svetlana Sorokina, 18 April 2010, Fifth Channel of St. Petersburg television, at [www.5-tv.ru/programs/broadcast/504896/](http://www.5-tv.ru/programs/broadcast/504896/) (last accessed 15 March 2011)

15. Mishenin, “Tikhii Sholokhov,” 2008.

At the end of perestroika, despite the changes in the media and the growing critique of the Soviet political system, most viewers were still prepared to accept serious programs on television at face value. Contrary to the common assertion that Soviet people did not trust Soviet media and always read between the lines, the mass media, especially television (in particular its programs concerning science and culture) actually received phenomenal trust and respect. During perestroika, the public's trust in serious media only increased, with new journalistic programs achieving unprecedented popularity. Indeed, it was the popular new genre of investigatory journalism that Kurekhin chose to imitate, skillfully playing with his audience's expectations.

### Visual Documentation

To make his outrageous claim appear plausible, Kurekhin had to present evidence that seemed credible. Sholokhov later recalled: "It was crucial that one loved assembling a body of evidence. Our viewers are extremely scrupulous. Every idea must be substantiated in practice, not only in theory . . . one needs to provide corroborating documents. And Kurekhin found lots of artifacts to support his thesis."<sup>16</sup> These artifacts included historical photographs; documentary footage; quotes from letters, books, and memoirs; and interviews with real scientists. When presenting these materials, Kurekhin tried to divert the viewers' attention away from the truth or falsity of his main claim (that Lenin was a mushroom), focusing instead on the smaller, unrelated question of whether each of the presented documents, photographs, or scientific facts was credible.

It was also important that the hoax be broadcast on television. In other forms of media—magazine articles, radio programs, or live lectures—it would have been next to impossible to pull it off. The televised format offered Kurekhin many visual techniques to convince viewers that his claims could be trusted. Among these, of course, was his skilled performance as an actor. Kurekhin's behavior in front of the camera never once betrayed his agenda; his apparent sincerity was buttressed by extremely articulate and learned speech, a genuine tone of voice, and candid stares directed at the camera. This effect was amplified by the physical setting of the program: the scholarly office, its large desk, shelves full of books, and stacks of folders and paper (figure 2).

If Kurekhin had presented his visual evidence in a published text, the hoax would have been more readily apparent. The temporalities of reading text and watching television are different: readers can reread passages and study photographs, while viewers of real-time broadcasts are far more constrained. Kurekhin used these constraints to his advantage. He displayed his historical photographs and documentary footage for only a fleeting moment, quickly replacing one example with the next, and providing assertive commentary about its supposed meaning. His barrage of fast-paced visual evidence and verbal narrative was designed to overload the viewers' perception, making it more difficult for them to contemplate

16. Ibid.





**Figure 2. Beginning of the television program. Kurekhin (right) introduces his main thesis.**

the literal content of each image or to question the claims made on its behalf.

In his essay, “The Photographic Message,” Roland Barthes argues that documentary photographs are unique among other forms of visual representation, such as drawings, paintings, cinema, theater, and artistic photography. Whereas each of those forms provides only an interpretation of reality, the documentary photograph can function as reality’s direct, uninterpreted, reflection or “analogon.”<sup>17</sup> Documentary photography is, of course, not devoid of subjective interpretation (by the photographer, editor, or publisher) but, as Barthes stressed, its interpretations are always dependent upon, and ultimately hidden behind, the photograph’s irreducible character as reality’s reflection. Every documentary photograph, therefore, incorporates a “structural paradox,” for it is simultaneously an objective reflection of reality and a subjective interpretation of it. The concomitant “ethical paradox,” therefore, is that by manipulating a documentary photograph, one directly manipulates the truth.<sup>18</sup> In presenting his fake evidence, Kurekhin was skillfully drawing on these structural and ethical paradoxes inherent in documentary photography and footage.

Kurekhin first showed a photograph that supposedly linked Lenin with Mexico (figure 3). He provided the following commentary:

Let us take this photograph. Look. This is Lenin with a group of his comrades. Look carefully. Some of them you know, others you do not. Notice that if we draw a certain structure, taking Il’ich [Lenin] as its top and then identifying five points—this is the first point, second point, third, fourth, and fifth, five points—and then connecting them into one whole, then what will we get? We will get a star. . . . A five-pointed star with one elongated section, the same kind of star that is found on almost all Mexican shrines.

He then quickly moved on to the next piece of evidence. What did this short display achieve? The photograph was genuine, and easily recogniz-

17. Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader* (New York, 1982), 196, 197.

18. As attested by numerous historical precedents of doctoring photographs.



**Figure 3.** Kurekhin traces a five-pointed star on a photo of Lenin and his comrades in a history book.

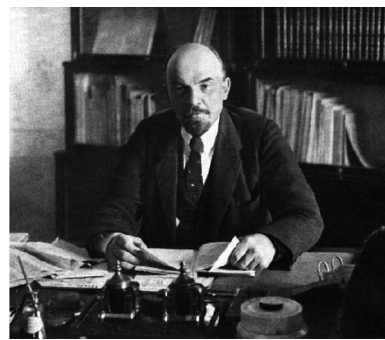
able as such by the viewers. Such photographs of Lenin and his comrades were ubiquitous in Soviet history books, documentary films, and museums. The interpretation that accompanied the photograph, however, was fake. There are no “five points” on the picture that could be identified and connected, but rather many faces, far more than five, and none of them stands out as a point. The star that Kurekhin traced was completely arbitrary, but because he showed the picture at such a sharp angle and narrated its description with such speed, this was impossible for the viewers to determine. The recognizable picture and its confident description produced a general sense of authenticity and importance, although what it all meant remained unclear or dubious. In truth, this documentary photograph had been “doctored”—not in its internal pictorial structure but through the manner of its perception and visibility. Kurekhin’s procedure emphasized a general sense of authenticity, while deemphasizing the concrete “fact” that claimed to be authentic. *How* the evidence was presented was more important than *what* was literally depicted.

Kurekhin, leaving no time for contemplation, moved on to a second example: another well-known photograph of Lenin, sitting at the desk in his Kremlin office. Before showing this photograph, Kurekhin provided a commentary full of specialized terms—all of which, although real, would have been largely unfamiliar to most viewers. Continuing his previous discussion of hallucinogenic cacti in which he had mentioned *Lophophora Williamsii*, he now introduced several more scientific terms (such as *Turbinicarpus*, *melocactus*, *cephalium*) and “facts” that he left unexplained. Kurekhin seemed to be leading to an extremely important revelation, and with a genuine scholarly enthusiasm, finally declared: “But there is something strange about *Lophophora* and *Turbinicarpus*—they do not have *cephalium*.<sup>19</sup> Only *melocactus* has *cephalium*, certain types of

19. *Cephalium*, from Greek *kefali* (head)—a real term describing a flat, round, woolen or bristly “head” at the top of a cactus, from *Dictionary: Botanical and Technical Terminology* at [www.cactus-art.biz/note-book/Dictionary/Dictionary\\_C/dictionary\\_C.htm](http://www.cactus-art.biz/note-book/Dictionary/Dictionary_C/dictionary_C.htm) (last accessed 15 March 2011).



**Figure 4.** Kurekhin discusses the picture of Lenin at his desk.



**Figure 5.** The picture of Lenin discussed by Kurekhin. The round “strange object” is at the bottom, right of center.

melocactus and certain types of discocactus. Therefore, this means that—well, let me explain it to make it clearer for you.” After this introduction, he produced a photograph that most viewers would easily recognize (figures 4 and 5):

Take a look. This is a photograph of Lenin in his office. Look here, you see? None of the researchers have paid attention to this strange object situated next to the inkstand. You see, it has a small top. . . . It is an astonishing fact that Lenin—the person on whom millions of monographs are focused, every day of whose life and work is researched—and yet all scholars and researchers failed to pay attention to this strange object. However, it is present on almost all photographs of Lenin at his office. Look, it is here, next to the inkstand.

Kurekhin showed the picture for only a short moment before quickly replacing it with several different photographs of Lenin’s desk, each with the same white cylinder. Then he said: “I want to explain what this is. This is reminiscent of, or rather, at first it seemed to me that this object is reminiscent of a melocactus with cephalium at the top.” Instead of explaining the meaning of this statement, Kurekhin started providing more complex terms and fictionalized facts to distract the viewers: “Why cephalium develops in the melocactus is still an enigma. Its function remains unclear.<sup>20</sup> Suddenly, for no apparent reason, a woolen hat starts growing on the top of a cactus slowly covering it up. *Lophophora Williamsii*, which we discussed earlier, does not have this woolen hat. But *Turbinicarpus*, which is an intermediary stage between *Lophophora* and melocactus, already possesses emerging elements of cephalium. You understand, right?” Building up the viewers’ expectations, Kurekhin delivered his final point: “The object that is located on Lenin’s desk is highly reminiscent of *Turbinicarpus* in the condition in which its hallucinogenic qualities are manifested.” According to Kurekhin, in other words, this object established a direct

20. Needless to say, Kurekhin exploited the ignorance of most viewers about such issues. In fact, the function of the cephalium is well known—this is where “flower buds and fruits are formed” in a cactus. From *Dictionary: Botanical and Technical Terminology*.

linkage between Lenin and the Mexican hallucinogens. Having already made his point in this protracted way, Kurekhin continued to distract the viewers' attention from how speculative it was by adding a further qualification: "This is a model of something that we do not yet know, which I will explain a bit later." Needless to say, he never returned to this explanation. Once again, a documentary photograph was "doctored" by making it only momentarily visible and by casting it in a complex rhetorical frame of serious sounding but unfamiliar terms. As before, this lent the program a general air of importance and authenticity that made it difficult for viewers to focus on concrete "facts."

Kurekhin introduced a third example: "I will now ask to show fragments of documentary footage from the film *Zhivoi Lenin* [Live Lenin, 1958, directed by Mikhail Romm], and you will understand, based on documentary materials, that certain things are directly linked." The fragments showed Lenin surrounded by different groups of people in different contexts. Kurekhin explained:

Look for a moment here, you see? Lenin is constantly [shown] with different people. Look carefully. On the right there is a boy standing. We will return to him later. Here he is again. You see? Some boy is always near Lenin. Here he is again. You see? Now we have moved to another part of the film. Again the very same boy. You see? Here he is, he just passed by. Now he has a slightly different haircut, but it is the same boy. And in these next frames it is again him. Wait, some more episodes. You see? The very same boy. In other words. Thank you very much, stop the film please. You see, the fact is that same boy always stands next to Lenin. Pasha followed Lenin closely all the time, because he was the only person who knew every [forest] trail and every place rich with mushrooms [*gribnoe mesto*]. And he brought Lenin to these mushroom sites. As you could see for yourself in the footage, this is not a speculation.

Once again, Soviet viewers easily recognized the film clips as genuine documentary footage of Lenin. The speed with which the clips were shown, however, left no time to consider the validity of Kurekhin's interpretation. If we watch the footage more carefully this interpretation appears obviously false. Instead of featuring "the same boy" standing next to Lenin, each fragment depicts Lenin with completely different groups of people, some without boys altogether. The last clip—with which Kurekhin concluded: "You see? The very same boy"—actually showed Lenin standing next to a man and a woman (figure 6).



Figure 6. Stills from the excerpts of the film *Live Lenin*, which Kurekhin showed during the broadcast.



**Figure 7. A prerecorded interview that Sholokhov conducted with a mycologist and later broadcast during the Lenin-mushroom program.**

### **An Interview with a Mycologist**

In addition to the documentary photographs and footage of Lenin, Kurekhin aired prerecorded interviews with real scientists, who, unaware of the claims that he would make in the program, had provided serious expert commentary. One interview was with a scientist from Komarov Botanical Institute in St. Petersburg, whom Sholokhov introduced as follows: “I decided to check Sergei Kurekhin’s theory and to interview a specialist. This is Aleksandr Eliseevich Kovalenko, a scientist specializing in mushrooms.” Dressed in a white robe, Kovalenko stood in the middle of a laboratory packed with equipment and glass jars, looking extremely self-conscious in front of the camera—all of which added scholarly authenticity to his words (figure 7).

*SHOLOKHOV:* Tell us please whether macro-mushrooms, as well as micro-mushrooms, possess any narcotic qualities.

*KOVALENKO:* Well, as a specialist in macro-mushrooms, I will speak only about them. So, yes, they possess such qualities. There are mushrooms that have been consumed since prehistoric times in different parts of the globe for this purpose. In places like ancient India and in other Asian countries. Also in our Siberia. And we know most about their consumption in Central and South America.

*SHOLOKHOV:* And what about Mexico?

*KOVALENKO:* The so-called Mexican mushrooms are a group of mushrooms belonging to one family that for many centuries have been used and are still used by American Indians in various rituals. These are very small and unremarkable looking mushrooms; I can show them if you want.

*SHOLOKHOV:* Oh, of course, yes.

- KOVALENKO*: All these mushrooms are so unattractive at first glance. For example, this mushroom [shows a mushroom in a jar].
- SHOLOKHOV*: Well, I think it is quite cute. . . . Do they need to be boiled or fried or dried?
- KOVALENKO*: Well, there is a whole science devoted to this. There are many recipes for cooking such mushrooms.

This interview, although conducted with a genuine scientist, had nothing to do with Lenin. Like the previous visual documents, it provided a general air of authenticity without explicitly addressing Kurekhin's extraordinary claims.

### **Ironic and Artistic Genres**

The most remarkable feature of Kurekhin's performance, then, was his convincing defense of a clearly absurd thesis by creatively supporting it with genuinely authentic documents, facts, and opinions. While Kurekhin invented many elements of this creative tactic himself, he also drew on an existing informal artistic tradition that emerged during the late Soviet period. It was within this tradition that Kurekhin had come of age as an artist, musician, and provocateur in Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s. A central element of this tradition was ironic "overidentification" with the authoritative symbols and meanings of the state—the ironic style that was sometimes referred to as *stiob*.<sup>21</sup> Among other things, this meant making false claims with an air of utmost sincerity and without visible irony. In overidentification, unlike other genres of irony, it is hard to differentiate between the assertions made seriously and the assertions made ironically. This genre became particularly widespread during late socialism in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (and, in the past ten years, has emerged in U.S. political culture and media as well).<sup>22</sup> In every instance, the irony of overidentification is directed at the formal organization, rhetorical style, and conventions of presentation in the dominant authoritative discourse. Soviet authoritative discourse during perestroika was characterized by its obsession with disclosing the previously unknown facts of Soviet history, ostensibly for the purpose of ridding real socialism of its alleged distortions. Kurekhin's televised provocation may be described as an overidentification with this discourse of disclosure.<sup>23</sup>

21. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

22. Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, "American *Stiob*: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (May 2010): 179–221.

23. Kurekhin's wife, Anastasia, later remembered that although he thought about faking perestroika media for a while, there was an immediate model on which he based his television appearance. A few months earlier he had watched a serious television program according to which newly discovered facts about the death of the poet Sergei Esenin suggested that he was killed, rather than committed suicide as was commonly believed. In the program this claim was "based on completely absurd facts. Showing photographs of Esenin's funeral [the program's author] provided such comments: 'Notice where this person is looking; and see, another person is looking in the opposite direction. Which proves that Esenin was killed.'" Having watched this program Kurekhin said: "In this way anything

Kurekhin also drew from the related informal artistic genre that Boris Groys has called, “art documentation.” Art documentation is not the creation of artworks per se, but the development of elaborate documents, descriptions, accounts, and other forms of evidence *about* real or imaginary events.<sup>24</sup> Groys associates this genre, which emerged among Soviet informal art groups in the 1970s and 1980s, with the “Collective Action Group” (Gruppa “Kollektivnye deistviia”), whose activities “took place outside Moscow with only the members of the group and a few invited guests present.” These activities were “made accessible to a wider audience only through documentation, in the form of photographs and texts.”<sup>25</sup> These documents, however, were never accompanied by an explanation of what the events meant or what the participants thought.<sup>26</sup>

Kurekhin would have been familiar with parallel developments of this genre that emerged in Leningrad during the same time. The “Necrorealists,” for example, organized absurd actions in suburban forests. Their live events were only open to group members; documentary footage was later publicly exhibited in private apartments. Members of the group never explained why they carried out these events and why they meticulously documented them.<sup>27</sup> Another group, the “Mit’ki,” focused on developing strange lifestyles and everyday rituals to problematize the boundary between life and art. Their activities were also known publicly only through the documentary writings and drawings about their lives that members of the group circulated.<sup>28</sup> These documented lifestyles—in texts, photographs, documentary footage, and other forms of evidence—interfered with the Soviet everyday, creating strange and often inexplicable distortions within it. Although the documents did not address the purpose of these actions, and although these actions did not fit into traditional understandings of political opposition, they nevertheless worked to displace the very definition of what constituted a political identity in the Soviet state. Kurekhin was not only familiar with these groups (and others like them) but had actually collaborated with them on several projects (particularly in Pop-Mekhanika). His televised hoax was informed by this established genre of *art documentation*.

At the same time, however, there was an important difference between Kurekhin’s hoax and the practices of late Soviet art groups. Instead of doc-

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at all can be proven.” Elena Pomazan, “Anastasiia Kurekhina: Sergei byl ochen’ svetlym chelovekom,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 18 August 2005 at [kp.ru/daily/23563/118278](http://kp.ru/daily/23563/118278) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

24. Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation,” *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 54.

25. *Ibid.*, 58.

26. Groys also traces the shift to art documentation in contemporary western art. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

27. Alexei Yurchak, “Necro-Utopia: The Politics of Indistinction and the Aesthetics of the Non-Soviet,” *Current Anthropology* 49, no. 2 (April 2008): 199–224.

28. Alexei Yurchak, “Suspending the Political: Late-Soviet Artistic Experiments on the Margins of the State,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 713–33. For the broader context in which such groups operated, see Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

umenting his own inexplicable actions, Kurekhin documented the role of Lenin and other leaders in the Bolshevik revolution. Instead of presenting documents of his own artistic creation, Kurekhin presented real historical documents. Instead of simply presenting them without commentary, he readily described them with and used them as evidence for his new interpretations. Finally, instead of publicizing his documentation in small, semiprivate spaces, Kurekhin presented it on state-run national television for an audience of millions. Because of these unique features, Kurekhin's provocation was able to interfere with historical reality with the kind of force that the genre of art documentation could never achieve. This was not a mere art project but a full-scale public hoax that actually fooled or confused many people. To understand it, therefore, it is crucial to compare it, not only with experimental art practices, but also with public hoaxes and forgeries more broadly.

### **Provenance**

A curious case of art forgery, which took place at about the same time in England, provides a particularly useful point of comparison. In the early 1990s, the international art world was shaken by the discovery of an art forgery masterminded by the English con man John Drewe. This forgery was unprecedented in both its immense scale—hundreds of fake works by Alberto Giacometti, Marc Chagall, Jean Dubuffet, Ben Nicholson, Georges Braque, and Nicolas de Staël were sold through respectable art auctions for a decade—and its method. While most art forgers produce perfect imitations of well-known masterpieces, Drewe produced original pictures of unremarkable quality, claiming that they were the previously unknown works of great masters. These mediocre pictures were then accompanied by perfect provenance—documentation of the pictures' origin and history. Instead of focusing on the internal quality of the paintings, Drewe focused on the external quality of their documentation. He forged not artwork, but paperwork.

To prepare a perfect provenance, Drewe composed elaborate decade-spanning correspondences between people who had never existed, receipts for sales of these nonexistent pictures between different countries and family estates, beautiful art catalogs for exhibitions that never took place, and records of counterfactual restoration work. These perfectly crafted documents were not only presented to art dealers, but also secretly planted into the records of prominent archives and museum collections—London's Tate Gallery, the Institute of Contemporary Art, the National Art Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The fake canvases themselves were actually quite mediocre. The artist who painted them for Drewe worked quickly, sloppily, and using cheap vinyl paints instead of genuine expensive oils. This alone could have been easily detected, if the art experts had only bothered to check. The perfect provenances rendered the intrinsic quality of the accompanying mediocre canvases relatively invisible and fooled an army of experts, critics, and



auctioneers into authenticating them.<sup>29</sup> After Drewe's con was discovered, the director of the Tate Gallery admitted to having personally authenticated two of the fake works (supposedly by Nicholson) "not because the pictures were good—in fact, the general consensus was that they were unimpressive at best—but because the provenancing was flawless."<sup>30</sup> Other reputable academics authenticated the pictures based on the falsified pieces of evidence that had been placed in the archives. Before Drewe's scam, an art expert commented, "the security in archives and libraries focused on preventing valuables being taken *out*; there wasn't corresponding diligence to prevent stuff coming *in*."<sup>31</sup> By seeding perfectly faked documentation among genuine archival data, Drewe brought hundreds of previously nonexistent "masterpieces" to life. His, however, was more than a criminal scam, for it ultimately exposed a hidden principle at work in the contemporary western art world—that the value of a work of art is not necessarily rooted in its intrinsic quality. This reflects the provocative claim that Michel Foucault made in his essay, "What Is an Author?" For a work to be recognized as genuine art, Foucault argued, it must be positioned within a certain "index of reality"—the modern system of classification that defines the work in terms of external documentation and cultural conventions.<sup>32</sup> One element in this index is the author's "name," which in this case refers not only to the actual person who produced the work but also to the "cultural space" within which the work can be recognized as art, and outside of which cannot.<sup>33</sup> What Drewe skillfully forged was not art per se but an "index of reality" for the late capitalist art market, with which he could transform unknown mediocre drawings into outstanding artworks.

In this way, Drewe's forgery is similar to Kurekhin's hoax. Taken on its own, Kurekhin's statement that Lenin was a mushroom sounds irrational and absurd. In retrospect, it seems baffling, even ridiculous that anyone could have been confused by it. Kurekhin's audiences thought the claim appeared plausible, however, not because they were gullible enough to believe it, but because, like Drewe, Kurekhin had directed their attention away from the "intrinsic quality" (literal meaning) of the statement and onto the flawlessness of the documents (provenance) supporting the statement. Both Kurekhin and Drewe slipped fake evidence into genuine archival materials. In both hoaxes, what mattered was not simply *what* was presented but *how* it was presented.

29. Peter Landesman, "A 20th-Century Master Scam," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 July 1999, 32, 37. See also Laney Salisbury and Aly Sujo, *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art* (New York, 2009).

30. Landesman, "A 20th-Century Master Scam," 37.

31. David Cohen, "Review of Laney Salisbury and Aly Sujo, *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art*," in ArtCritical.com, at [artcritical.com/DavidCohen/2009/DCProvenance.htm](http://artcritical.com/DavidCohen/2009/DCProvenance.htm) (last accessed 15 March 2011). Emphasis in the original.

32. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in James D. Faubion, ed., *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, vol. 2 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954—1984* (New York, 1998), 205–22.

33. *Ibid.*, 210, 221.

Kurekhin's hoax, like Drewe's, also exposed a hidden cultural principle—the fact that in Soviet state and media discourse, a proposition could be accepted as factual, not because of its intrinsic quality (its literal meaning, the falsifiability of its argument, how plausible it sounded), but because it had been articulated in an authoritative form that, although “external” to the proposition's literal meaning, could mark it as belonging to the space of *unquestionable facts*. There was, however, also a crucial difference between the two hoaxes. Whereas Drewe's goal was to fool both the experts and the general public, and ideally to never have the con discovered, Kurekhin actually intended his hoax to be discovered and later to produce laughter that could expose something important about the Soviet system in 1991.

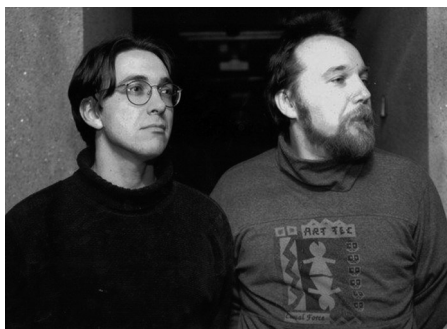
What, then, exactly did his provocation expose? And why have its political and ludic effects continued to resonate over the past twenty years? To answer these questions, we must first contextualize the event within Kurekhin's broader aesthetic and political project. What other activities did he pursue in this vein? How did he understand them? How did others react to them?

### The Other

In the 1980s, Kurekhin was known mostly in the informal artistic milieu of Leningrad and Moscow. After his Lenin-mushroom hoax, however, he was famous nationally and could pursue grander and more daring experiments. In 1995, Kurekhin publicly announced his support for Aleksandr Dugin, the ideologue of the extreme nationalist Eurasianism movement (*Evrasiistvo*), who argued that Russia's cultural, political, and religious identity made it incompatible with western liberalism.<sup>34</sup> The liberal intelligentsia was extremely hostile to Dugin's ideas, and Kurekhin knew it. In the fall of 1995, he convinced Dugin to move from Moscow to St. Petersburg and to run for a seat in the Duma. He promised to help Dugin in organizing his election campaign, participated with him in several meetings with prospective voters, and organized a Pop-Mekhanika performance entitled “Kurekhin dlia Dugina” (Kurekhin for Dugin) (figure 8).

The reaction of artists, intellectuals, and journalists to these activities was mixed. Some criticized Kurekhin, others defended him, and most were completely confused about his intentions. Was Kurekhin seriously promoting Dugin's nationalistic ideas or was he ridiculing them? Generating this kind of uncertainty in his audience was an important aspect

34. In the mid-1990s, Dugin was also associated with Eduard Limonov's National-Bolshevik Party, the NBP. Later the two had a falling out and became bitter political rivals. On Eurasianism, see Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C., 2008); Anton Shekhovtsov, “Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à la Russe,” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (June 2009): 697–716; Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Dugin Eurasianism: A Window on the Minds of the Russian Elite or an Intellectual Ploy?” *Studies in East European Thought* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 215–36. See also Sergei Oushakine, “The Russian Tragedy: From Ethnic Trauma to Ethnic Vitality,” *Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, 2009), 79–129.



**Figure 8. Kurekhin (left) and Dugin. A promotional picture for Dugin's election campaign. Kurekhin staged the photo as an ironic imitation of standard communist ideological portraits: face in a semiprofile, glance directed just above the horizon into the future.**

of Kurekhin's work more broadly; he cultivated it as part of his aesthetic and political project. This is part of the reason why Kurekhin and his project have always been difficult to describe. The film director Vladimir Nepevnyi, who collected hundreds of hours of documentary footage from Kurekhin's interviews and performances for the 2003 documentary *Kurekhin* concluded: "he never spoke in an open and straightforward way, in his personal voice, not hiding behind his dead irony. A certain character was always speaking instead of him. . . . This was always some provocation. This is why our idea [of showing the *real* Kurekhin] was quite risky and not easy to achieve. I literally had to look for microscopic fragments . . . where he appeared to the viewer without his usual masks."<sup>35</sup> Nepevnyi, who did not know Kurekhin personally, assumed that behind Kurekhin's performance he would find a different "real" person. That this different person never quite emerges in the documentary, however, suggests that Nepevnyi may have been mistaken. Most artists and intellectuals who knew and collaborated with Kurekhin claim that, although he was a genius, it is indeed difficult to explain what he did and who he was. One commentator in a popular weekly magazine wrote: "Every judgment of Kurekhin as a musician, composer, arranger, creator of 'Pop-Mekhanika' is inaccurate. . . . When you faced Kurekhin you instantly faced a problem: Who is he? How to define him, even in terms of his own occupation? What *was* his occupation?"<sup>36</sup> One literary critic agreed: "Maybe he was a genius composer, maybe a thinker-provocateur, maybe a mad showman. Each of these hypotheses, and all of them taken together, are still far from the

35. "Velikii mistifikator Sergei Kurekhin," Pravda.ru, 17 June 2005, at [www.pravda.ru/culture/music/modern/17-06-2005/51300-kurekhin-0](http://www.pravda.ru/culture/music/modern/17-06-2005/51300-kurekhin-0) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

36. Vladimir Chernov's introductory notes to Aleksandr Kushnir's "Kurekhin," *Ogonek*, 5 June 2000, 48–53. Emphasis in the original.

truth.”<sup>37</sup> Even the film director Debizhev, with whom Kurekhin worked on several projects, enigmatically insisted that he “was neither a musician, nor an actor, nor a thinker. He was Kurekhin.”<sup>38</sup> The words of another film director, Sergei Ovcharov, seemed to summarize these impressions: “Sergei was an enigma, and those who claim they know him are mistaken.”<sup>39</sup>

Many people have described Kurekhin in terms of some radical *otherness*—as a saint, a madman, a man from the future, or even an extraterrestrial. As a musical biography once argued: “Due to some anomalous mistake Kurekhin was born not in his era. He should have been born some time in the third or fourth millennium, when everyone will be as beautiful and intelligent as he is.”<sup>40</sup> Sholokhov himself recalled that, “When you faced Kurekhin you faced something divine. A young god descended to Earth, and we were lucky to have met him.”<sup>41</sup> The artist Viktor Tikhomirov went one step further, writing: “If we allow that extraterrestrials may live among us, then Sergei Kurekhin was one of them. Extraterrestrial origin is the best explanation of the unusual nature of his charm. . . . When he entered a room, everyone realized that before that moment their life was not life. . . . When he called you on the phone, the call always came as if from a different planet. Everything interested him acutely. Regular human traits expanded in him beyond the limits of the possible.”<sup>42</sup> As philosopher Viktor Mazin elaborated, “Sergei Kurekhin is beyond systems and definitions. . . . [He] is a man from outer space. . . . He is curious about life on Earth in all its manifestations. He is interested in the physics of microelements and in the art of ‘the New Wild’ [*Novykh dikikh*], in Russian religious philosophy and in different schools of semiotics, in psychoanalysis and in the aesthetics of the avant-garde, and in the music of Mozart and Cage.”<sup>43</sup> This extraterrestrial curiosity, Mazin suggested, also explained Kurekhin’s interest in Dugin: “He also does not fail to visit the headquarters of the National-Bolsheviks. His attitude toward them is the same as toward the democrats-bureaucrats: interest, curiosity, distance. He is an extraterrestrial. He comes to learn and understand, not to keep his distance.”<sup>44</sup>

When Kurekhin died unexpectedly in July 1996, at age 42, his death itself produced similar reactions. It seemed uncannily fitting that Kurekhin’s death was not only unexpected but also caused by an extremely rare disease, cardiac sarcoma (cancer of the heart). As a commentator in a popular monthly wrote: this disease “happens either once in a hundred

37. Andrei Pirogov and Tekle Gil’man, “Neopredelimi Kurekhin,” March 2001, at [www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/200478/](http://www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/200478/) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

38. “Interv’iu s Sergeem Debizhevym (4 maia 2004 goda),” in Karklit, “Fenomen Sergeia Kurekhina.”

39. “Velikii mistifikator Sergei Kurekhin.”

40. “Pamiati Sergeia Kurekhina,” *Music Library*, at [muslib.ru/band5444\\_biography.html](http://muslib.ru/band5444_biography.html) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

41. *Programma “Piatoe Koleso”: “Lenin-grib.”*

42. Viktor Tikhomirov, “V ozhidanii podrostka,” *Krasnyi*, April 2004, 36.

43. Viktor Mazin, “Inoplanetianin,” *Krasnyi*, April 2004, 38.

44. *Ibid.*

years, or once in a million patients, or does not exist in nature at all.”<sup>45</sup> Some even thought his death was staged, as yet another daring provocation. When the news of his death was announced, *Nezavisimaia gazeta* later claimed, “Everyone laughed: yes, of course, that Kurekhin! He invented yet another gag.”<sup>46</sup> Others thought his daring provocations themselves had inadvertently caused the death. One reporter suggested: “Perhaps he glanced into some forbidden spheres.”<sup>47</sup> Another elaborated: “According to one legend he died after he called the devil during a spiritual séance; according to another, he fell victim to his own interest in voodoo.”<sup>48</sup> Some of the critics who had attacked Kurekhin for his Lenin-mushroom program and his support of Dugin attributed his death to careless joking. Dmitrii Galkovskii wrote that because Kurekhin violated God’s command that “one should not mix life with farce,” he was exposed to the devil, who did not fail to make a joke in return: “Lenin—mushroom, Kurekhin—cancer.”<sup>49</sup> Tat’iana Moskvina agreed, claiming that Kurekhin died because he had lost the ability to distinguish between reality and play, between real human “blood that flows in our veins” and ordinary “cranberry juice.”<sup>50</sup>

Suggestions of radical otherness had followed Kurekhin from the beginning, long before he became engaged in political pranks. His first recording of piano improvisations, *The Ways of Freedom*, which was clandestinely made in the Soviet Union in the early 1980s and released in London in 1981 by Leo Records, was met with a mixture of admiration and suspicion: an ordinary human could not play like this. One British musical critic observed that, “Occasionally he plays so fast with such clarity, one is tempted to believe that the tape’s been sped up.”<sup>51</sup> A later critic, reviewing the twentieth-anniversary reissue of the record in 2001 noted that the tape had indeed been “sped up but it was accidental. . . . Sped up or not it is still a technically impressive achievement . . . it was his rhythmic

45. Ekaterina Sadur, “Sergei Kurekhin: Chernyi romantik,” *Domovoi*, no. 1 (2000), at [darlok.tomsk.ru/content/kuryokhin/black\\_romantic/Wcbf03dde48b97.htm](http://darlok.tomsk.ru/content/kuryokhin/black_romantic/Wcbf03dde48b97.htm) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

46. Dmitrii Galkovskii, “Grib: Rusofoby i fungofily,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 29 April 2004. Kurekhin’s death made the rare disease famous and led to the proliferation of stories about making death part of a scientific experiment, faking it for a joke or in order to change one’s identity and name. According to a 2005 bestselling novel by Pavel Krusanov, *Amerikanskaia dyrka* (American Hole), in 1996 Kurekhin staged his death, changed his name and appearance, and relocated to the city of Pskov, where he runs a firm specializing in outrageous practical jokes. The most recent is designed to fool the United States.

47. Ol’ga Tereshkova, “Kultura. Sergei Kurekhin: Ego urok drugim nauka?” *Moskovskii komsomolets*, no. 269 (30 November 2000), at [dlib.eastview.com/sources/article.jsp?id=77569](http://dlib.eastview.com/sources/article.jsp?id=77569) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

48. “Viktor Toporov: Kurekhin pomogaet zagranitse,” *Vzglyad. Delovaia gazeta*, 26 October 2005, at [www.vz.ru/columns/2005/10/26/10913.html](http://www.vz.ru/columns/2005/10/26/10913.html) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

49. Galkovskii, “Grib.”

50. Sergei Sholokhov, interview with Tat’iana Moskvina on the program *Tikhii dom: Pamiati Kurekhina*. See also Tat’iana Moskvina, *Muzhskaja tetrad’*, at [librus11.ilive.ro/tatjana\\_moskvina\\_muzhskaja\\_tetrad\\_57142.html](http://librus11.ilive.ro/tatjana_moskvina_muzhskaja_tetrad_57142.html) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

51. Chris Kelsey, *All Music Guide*, [today.answers.com/topic/the-ways-of-freedom](http://today.answers.com/topic/the-ways-of-freedom) (accessed 17 December 2010; no longer accessible).

accuracy and inventive imagination that allowed the sped up material to become such a phenomenon; a lesser musician would have undoubtedly been dismissed as a charlatan.”<sup>52</sup> An American music critic reviewing the same anniversary edition, however, wrote: “Originally released in 1981, this historic recording created controversy both inside and outside the Soviet Union . . . and no—the tapes have not been sped up—this is the ridiculous speed that Sergej excels in!”<sup>53</sup>

Kurekhin’s otherness has been compared to that of the traditional Russian figure known as the *iurodivyi* (holy fool).<sup>54</sup> Although some elements of his style can indeed be traced to this cultural trope, others are distinctly late-Soviet and therefore the overall effect is quite unique. A recent cultural history described the ethical position of the medieval *iurodivye* as “monologic,” “firmly authoritarian,” and infused with a sense of superiority. By breaking social norms, *iurodivye* demonstrated that there existed another, absolute truth to which they alone had access.<sup>55</sup> Kurekhin’s position was different: he did not believe in absolute truth let alone in the idea of having unique access to it. He approached every truth with “interest, curiosity, distance,” as Mazin described. This tactic has firm roots in the late Soviet period, when it was practiced by many members of the last Soviet generation, especially within informal artistic milieus. The approach affected not only their artistic style but also their senses of self—as ones in a position of *otherness* toward political and ethical truths as such.<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere I have termed this position *the politics of indistinction*.<sup>57</sup> This is precisely the position that Kurekhin cultivated as an artist and sometimes explained.

### Parasite

Although it would be wrong to accept Kurekhin’s words about himself at face value, it would be equally wrong to dismiss them outright. In speaking about himself, Kurekhin combined serious commentary *about* his work with the provocative improvisation that was a *part of* his work. Any conversation with Kurekhin, therefore, potentially provided a unique opportu-

52. Bruce Coates in *Rubberneck*, British magazine of experimental music, at [www.btinternet.com/~rubberneck/cdlist11.html](http://www.btinternet.com/~rubberneck/cdlist11.html) (accessed 17 May 2006; no longer accessible).

53. Review for New York’s Downtown Music Gallery, [www.downtownmusicgallery.com/Main/news/20010413.htm](http://www.downtownmusicgallery.com/Main/news/20010413.htm) (last accessed 15 March 2011). Some musicians attribute the remarkable speed of Kurekhin’s piano playing to a “very non-academic position of his hands.” See, for example, Sergey Letov, “Brief History of New Improvisatory Music in Soviet Russia,” *Special Radio*, at [www.specialradio.net/art/003.shtml](http://www.specialradio.net/art/003.shtml) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

54. “Velikii mistifikator Sergei Kurekhin.” See also Chernov, *Introduction*.

55. Sergei A. Ivanov, *Blazhennye pokhaby: Kul'turnaia istoriia iurodstva* (Moscow, 2005), 382.

56. This position should not be confused with immorality—moral judgment was not suspended but instead the unspoken assumptions behind moral judgments were explored.

57. In addition to Kurekhin, two prominent examples of practioners of this politics of indistinction in Leningrad were the Necrorealists and the Mit’ki. See my “Necro-Utopia” and “Suspending the Political.”

nity to see his aesthetic-political method from the inside. When I spoke with Kurekhin about his work in April 1995, his improvised comments oscillated between serious analysis and dazzling irony. I started by noting that he often seemed to be laughing at people, ideas, and phenomena, and I asked whether he considered ridicule to be an important element in his artistic style. Kurekhin answered that ridicule is conducted from a position of certainty and that he was suspicious of such positions because they often fail to recognize the uniqueness of a given context:<sup>58</sup>

I do not relate to any cultural model from the position of ridicule. Because I understand that all cultural models are self-sufficient and internally comprehensive [*samodostatochny i samoznachimy*] and can be evaluated only from the perspective of their own internal dynamics. For example, the aesthetics of the late Soviet period cannot be evaluated against the criteria of postmodernism or the criteria of, say, an African culture. Their terminologies are internal. Certain things that existed during that period, before perestroika, made sense in that context. I understand this now and intuitively understood this then. This is why there is no ridicule in what I do. . . . When I see that something is joked about or ridiculed, I do not like it. I am not a joker. . . . Ridicule is rooted in skepticism toward something and for that reason seems inappropriate to me. Skepticism does not offer any positive program; it is unable to offer any positive construction. Many great thinkers reached skepticism, and it devoured them; among them my favorite philosopher Gustav Shpet. . . . But one must offer some positive construction. Because when a person offers a positive construction he is responsible.

Kurekhin continued: “What I do is something different—it is a form of parasitising on an existing archetype. This is precisely what I do—parasitising. I am a parasite. And also a bastard, a cretin, and a piece of shit.” These last words were added with a chuckle, to distance himself from didactic seriousness, but his analysis was anything but a joke. Kurekhin added: “I would like to introduce the word *parasite* as a new term.” Indeed, this term proves remarkably precise in describing the politics of his aesthetic method. Kurekhin explained: “A parasite is ambivalent. Being a parasite vis-à-vis a system means, on the one hand, possessing a structure that is completely independent of the system, but, on the other hand, being part of the system, feeding off it. . . . Parasitizing is like looking deep into things—not negating, ridiculing, or judging them, but making visible their internal criteria.” Kurekhin suggested that the relation of the parasite to the organism, or system, that it inhabits goes beyond the binary opposition between being a part of something and being an external intruder. Instead, their relationship is symbiotic: the parasite forces the system to *change* in order to accommodate or expel it. As Michel Serres famously pointed out, in French the word *parasite* has three distinct meanings—*social parasite*, *biological parasite*, and *noise* or *interference* (within a channel of communication).<sup>59</sup> This coincidence of meanings

58. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995.

59. Serres, *The Parasite*.

is not a chance linguistic occurrence, for the three concepts are actually linked semantically. Consider the meaning of parasite as noise in the channel of communication. In the usual understanding of communication, noise is an unwanted interference in an otherwise clear connection between sender and receiver. Serres argues, however, that noise is actually more complex. Because a communicated message always passes through a medium, we could also say that it passes through noise (from static white noise to mishearings, mistellings, rumors, and so on). Noise, therefore, plays an important constitutive role in communication. This can be extended to the other two senses of parasite—just as noise has a constitutive function in communication, a parasite has a constitutive function in the social or biological organism it inhabits. By means of disorder, the parasite infuses the system with a new order.

Kurekhin's aesthetic approach was to always occupy and cultivate the position of a parasite, who, having infiltrated the system, introduced noise into its authoritative channels of communication. His goal was not to ridicule the system but to give it a new, unfamiliar, way of looking at itself. In this way, he offered the kind of "positive construction" for which he had argued.

This understanding helps to clarify Kurekhin's intentions in the Dugin affair. Kurekhin, I believe, was neither seriously promoting Dugin's ideas nor ridiculing them. He focused on Dugin because the post-Soviet liberal intelligentsia was unanimously hostile to him. By overidentifying with Dugin's illiberal rhetoric, and by doing this through mass forms of communication (in the propaganda materials he devised for Dugin's election campaign, in meetings with the electorate, in the Pop-Mekhanika performance), Kurekhin provoked the moral outrage of the liberal intelligentsia. This outrage revealed the latter's Romantic attachment to the concepts of "freedom" and "democracy" (key terms in the discourse of the time), with each understood as a timeless, ahistorical value, disconnected from concrete contexts (such as the market). Blinded by this Romantic view, the liberal intelligentsia was unable to recognize a fact that would become obvious a few years later: that the post-Soviet advent of *freedom* had actually contributed to the production of new forms of *unfreedom*—particularly the mass impoverishment brought about by the neoliberal reforms of "shock therapy." As Kurekhin put it: "At first there was a feeling that the era of freedom was ascending. Then freedom arrived. But freedom is a dangerous thing."<sup>60</sup>

Many artists who collaborated with Kurekhin suspected that his support of Dugin was a provocation. Two of them even argued that the political campaign was "another version of his Lenin-mushroom [provocation]." By convincing Dugin to run for office in St. Petersburg, "where no one knew him and where most people supported democrats . . . Kurekhin tricked him."<sup>61</sup> The result was Dugin's complete and utter flop at the elec-

60. Sergei Kurekhin, interview, St. Petersburg, 13 April 1995.

61. The two are the musicians Sergei and Egor Letov, who participated in Pop-Mekhanika. See Sergei Zharikov, Sergei Letov, and Egor Letov, "Paradigma svastiki. Ne-



tions. Years later, Dugin himself noted: “Kurekhin was interested in . . . Eurasianism very ironically, with internal irony, if you will. But that irony was not obvious to those who surrounded him, because in that society this topic was taboo.”<sup>62</sup>

Several years after Kurekhin’s untimely death, Russian intellectuals began to develop a much more critical view of neoliberal reform. Some of the arguments that Kurekhin had articulated in his “support” of Dugin in 1995, all of which had at the time been branded “extremist,” ended up in the mainstream of intellectual and political discourse. Among these was his claim that Russia needed to have a viable *national idea* and that this idea would be different from the one in the west.

As with Kurekhin’s Dugin affair, considering the criticism that was directed at the Lenin-mushroom program will help us identify what this program ultimately managed to achieve. Dmitrii Galkovskii wrote that the program reduced Lenin from a dictator to a benign joke, averting public criticism from the “communist regime” and making the trial of the Communist Party unlikely.<sup>63</sup> “Of course one may also laugh,” argued Galkovskii. “There was much comical in Lenin. But only MAY and only ALSO, as in a free supplement or a cartoon on the last page of a newspaper. But when there is nothing else apart from that, when in the center there are short chuckles, while all over the country there are still monuments on various Lenin Avenues, then, dear sirs, who are you laughing at?”<sup>64</sup> Although Galkovskii’s critique was made from a liberal position, it paralleled, almost verbatim, the attacks on Kurekhin from antiliberal camps. Writing in the nationalist *Russkii kur'er*, the poet Konstantin Kedrov described Kurekhin’s provocation as an example of insidious postmodernism that holds no values and ideals dear, including the moral foundations of the socialist past: “For a long time all of you have been living in a postmodernist world. They promised you communism and then capitalism, but you ended up in typical postmodernism.”<sup>65</sup> Both Galkovskii and Kedrov, in other words, thought that Kurekhin’s hoax undermined an essential moral canon of life, without which good and evil could not be measured. The very fact that Kurekhin’s treatment of the Soviet system could be identically criticized from two supposedly opposite positions points to the deep paradox within that system, a paradox that Kurekhin’s program itself had intended to make visible. What was this paradox?

Before perestroika, political discourse was party-run and adhered to strict forms. The literal meanings of communist ideology were beyond

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dobitaia kontora,” *Kontrkul'tura*, December 2001, at [www.laertsky.com/sk/sk\\_003.htm](http://www.laertsky.com/sk/sk_003.htm) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

62. Aleksandr Lipnitskii, interview with Aleksandr Dugin on the program *Elovaia submarina*, Nostalgia television channel, July 2006.

63. Galkovskii, “Grib.” A similar critique was produced by western observers; see Ivor Stodolsky, “Lenin’s a Mushroom and Hitler a Superstar: Poshlost’ and the Politics of Russian Steb: Extremism and Irony in Russian Nonconformist Culture” (paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research, Budapest, September 2005).

64. Galkovskii, “Grib.”

65. Konstantin Kedrov, “Postmodernizm, khot’ imia diko . . .,” *Russkii kur'er*, 7 July 2004, at [www.sakharov-center.ru/museum/exhibitionhall/religion\\_notabene/rusk70704.htm](http://www.sakharov-center.ru/museum/exhibitionhall/religion_notabene/rusk70704.htm) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

public discussion, and, therefore, largely irrelevant in most contexts and to most people.<sup>66</sup> During perestroika, however, these literal meanings became the center of public attention. Arguing that the ideals of socialism needed to be cleansed of the distortions imposed on them during the previous periods of Soviet history, the party announced its intention to return to the original ideals, from which a healthier version of socialism could emerge. This goal, however, was marked by an ontological paradox that would become increasingly apparent by the final years of perestroika: since the original ideas of socialism *had* been distorted by the previous periods, it was unclear what they were and how to return to them. A typical article from 1990, published in the monthly party magazine *Kommunist*, reflects this paradox. The article begins by describing the central task of reform in the usual manner: “to cleanse socialism of Stalin’s distortions and once again endow it with the true ideals of Marx and Lenin, the soul and heart of socialism that Stalin had stolen.” Later, the same article presents the central task of perestroika differently, as, in fact, an attempt to “step on the path of experiments and not dogmas [and] to endow the ideals of socialism with new, earlier unknown content.” The task of returning to the *true* ideals of Marxism-Leninism, in other words, had become equated with stepping into the *unknown*.<sup>67</sup>

Kurekhin’s hoax aimed to illuminate this paradox. He infiltrated the system’s internal structure like a parasite, faithfully reproducing the forms of its political rhetoric (its language, mass media, system of presenting evidence, and its focus on recovering original and previously unknown meanings hidden inside canonical documents, images, and texts) and, in so doing, presented the absurd core of this system that its own reforms had inadvertently unclothed. In truth, the *authentic, uncorrupted foundation* of the Soviet system, to which the party claimed it was necessary to return, could not really be known and was, therefore, open to any interpretation, including the interpretation that it had been a mushroom.

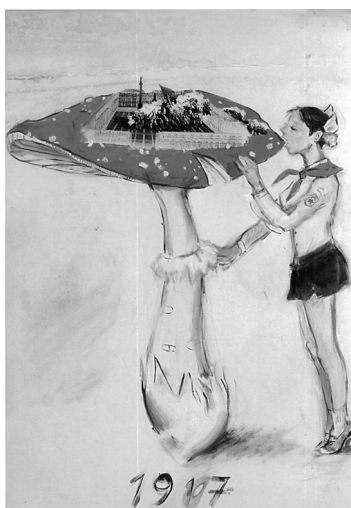
Kurekhin’s revelation was clearly comic, causing many people to laugh. It was, however, also tragic, because instead of suggesting that the moral foundation of Soviet history had been distorted during previous periods (by Stalin and others) and could, therefore, be recovered, it suggested that this moral foundation was ephemeral from the outset. Instead of undermining the foundational moral canon, Kurekhin made visible the fact that this canon had always been void.

While very few people claimed to have instantly recognized the program as a hoax, most remembered being perplexed, shaken, and uncertain about what to make of it.<sup>68</sup> They experienced a peculiar mixture of astonishment that such “insanity” could be shown on television, confusion

66. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

67. V. Sogrin, “Levaia, pravaia gde storona? Razmyshleniia o sovremennykh politicheskikh diskussiakh,” *Kommunist*, 1990, no. 3 (February): 36. See a more detailed discussion of this argument in Alexei Yurchak, “If Lenin Were Alive He Would Know What to Do: Banished Life of the Leader,” *Qui Parle*, 19 Fall 2011.

68. Some people who watched the program later published their memories of it. In 1991 and in 1995, during fieldwork, I also spoke with many viewers about their experiences.



**Figure 9.** *Red October, 1917* by St. Petersburg artist Dasha Fursey (2007, oil on canvas). A young pioneer girl is biting a hallucinogenic fly agaric mushroom (*mukhomor*) on top of which the central spectacle of the October revolution—the storming of the Winter Palace—is taking place. According to the artist, the picture is devoted to Kurekhin and reflects today’s nostalgia for the naive Romanticism of the Soviet socialist past. The pioneer girl on the picture was not brainwashed by the ideological rhetoric about the October revolution, but rather enticed, inspired, and intoxicated by the Romanticism of its heroic images. Dasha Fursey, interview, St. Petersburg, 21 July 2007. See an extended discussion in Alexei Yurchak, “Post-Post-Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts, and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today,” in Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon Jr., eds., *What Is Soviet Now: Identities, Legacies, Memories* (Berlin, 2008), 257–76.

about whether the program’s hosts meant what they were saying to be taken seriously or as a joke, and unpleasantness (though also amusement) that there might be some truth in what was being claimed. In the words of one viewer, “we were laughing, but at the same time looking at each other: what if this is true?”<sup>69</sup> For another, the program was “on the one hand, funny, but on the other, distressing. Physically distressing.”<sup>70</sup> For most people, the experience marked the radical break that was taking place in their world. Actor Konstantin Raikin, who was initially fooled by the program but later realized it was a hoax, “suddenly felt that life had changed. . . . For me, he [Kurekhin] is one of those people with whom I associate the feeling of a new era in the life of our country.”<sup>71</sup> This feeling was shared by many after the broadcast and continues to be shared today, twenty years later. Although some intellectuals have criticized Kurekhin’s

69. A participant in the Russian Web site Dnevnik (Diaries), submitted on 15 March 2006, at [www.diary.ru/search/?q=%EF%E5%F0%E5%E4%E0%F7%E0+%EB%E5%ED%E8%ED+%E3%F0%E8%E1](http://www.diary.ru/search/?q=%EF%E5%F0%E5%E4%E0%F7%E0+%EB%E5%ED%E8%ED+%E3%F0%E8%E1) (last accessed 15 March 2011).

70. Svetlana Nosova, interview, St. Petersburg, Summer 1995.

71. Sergei Sholokhov, interview with Konstantin Raikin on the program *Tikhii dom: Pamiati Kurekhina*.

prank, others, including artists and writers, continue to celebrate it as one of the turning points in the perception of the communist project and Soviet history. Some artists have even seen this hoax as an attempt to recover the pure and positive Romanticism at the basis of the communist idea, a Romanticism later forgotten (figure 9).

Kurekhin's prank also reveals something about the genre of comic overidentification more broadly. When this genre mimics dominant forms of political rhetoric, employing mass channels of communication and mediation (which is often possible during a time of change), it can expose unspoken truths about political ideologies that could not have been easily articulated in other forms of critique.<sup>72</sup> Kurekhin performed his comedy at the threshold of a crumbling civilization. His revelations were hilarious, liberating, and devastating all at once. Real comedy, as Serres once wrote, is truly "the parasite of tragedy."<sup>73</sup>

72. An example of how this may work in the west is the group The Yes Men. See Boyer and Yurchak, "American Stibob."

73. Serres, *The Parasite*, 232.