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'The Popular Culture of Criminality'

VAV3, Gerrit Rietveld Academie

As fashion evolved throughout times, we moved from long gowns into mini skirts in less than a century. At the beginning of 2000s we were hypnotized by the Paris Hilton's glamorous pink and disgusted by the unsatisfactory living conditions of people labeled as a 'lower class'. From what I see we can develop even faster. We can be even more radical.

My research is about a modern popular culture and, in particular, the active exploitation of criminal aesthetics in the different forms of art, such as music, fashion, cinema, etc. My curiosity is built around an observation that just recently people that we would call 'upper-middle class' were often trying to ignore the presence of some particular urban areas known as 'ghetto' and its unsatisfactory social conditions that meanwhile developed in its individual culture. This lifestyle, fashion, music, slang, etc, was not highly appreciated by the other social classes. Yet now, what was considered as 'bad taste' ten years ago has a huge impact on contemporary art and media.

Therefore, I am curious about the reason of a rapidly growing interest and the frequent use of the ghetto culture that became the new popular culture nowadays.



Estonian rapper Tommy Cash

In addition to it, I would also like to get to know more about its connection with political and social propaganda. I find it interesting, how those two different things - *propaganda* and a *popular culture* - can be so interconnected the way they affect each other.

In my research, based on books, articles and interviews, I will analyze:

- **The connection of political propaganda and in general, popular culture.**

How those two things affect each other, changing people's minds.

- **The reason for the sudden interest in a street/ghetto culture and its exploitation in music and visual culture, that became a mainstream in the Eastern Europe.**

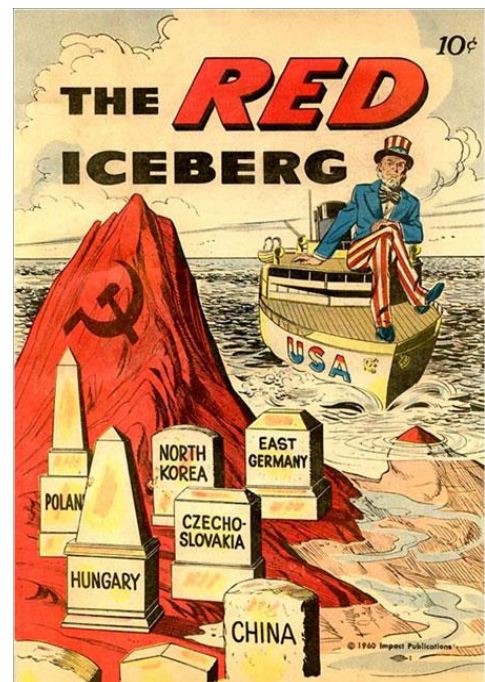
Why did it become so popular to use some particular set of criminal attributes, such as tattoos, slang or style, coming from the dysfunctional areas like ghettos? In other words, how did it happen that something, previously labeled as repulsive, suddenly became so attractive and widely used in the different forms of art?

To answer those questions I would like to start my research by looking for a reason of emergence and development of some popular subcultures, trying to find its interconnection with the global historical events. Using the history of rock as an example, I will analyze the relation between particular historical events and music culture.

If we look back over the past, we can see a lot of significant events, such as revolutions, wars and so on, that very much affected society. Big changes in the political system are usually accompanied by agitation materials and propaganda.

In other words, the massive political actions are hardly possible without the use of such a propagation of ideological influence as propaganda, which is often coming from the media. The main purpose of propaganda is to direct political actions of the large masses of people, creating certain necessary political orientations in their minds, that hopefully will be expressed in their readiness for a particular type of political action. Obviously, propaganda also has a strong influence on people's preferences, mindsets, lifestyle, and, consequently, development of popular culture in very diverse directions. They reflect the ideas of people, who had fallen under the influence of political propaganda.

For instance, at the 20th century there were a lot of worldwide events, such as wars and revolutions, that have changed the habitual living conditions. It became one of the main causes of development for such a protest music genre known as rock. There is a common point of view, that rock was not just a music genre, but also a certain social phenomenon, that was mostly representing a massive conflict with social norms and changes in the society at that moment. In other words, rock had a nature of riot, pro-



The comic book cover presenting communism as the iceberg that could sink America. 'The Red Iceberg', published by St. Paul, MN: Impact Publishing, (1960)

test and the beginning of something new, better and independent. Indeed, unlike pop or classical music, rock has given rise to a particular subculture with its own philosophy and ideology, determining the lifestyle, and mindset of its representatives. Keeping in mind the worldwide events, which could have had an impact on the development of rock as a social phenomenon, we can think of some examples, such as:

- **The war in Vietnam in 1964–1973** and its reflection in the song 'Revolution' by The Beatles:

*'You say you want a revolution
Well, you know
We all want to change the world
You tell me that it's evolution
Well, you know
We all want to change the world
But when you talk about destruction
Don't you know that you can count me out'.*

The Beatles usually did not publicly express their political views, however, news about the Tet Offensive¹ spurred increased protests in opposition to the Vietnam War, especially among young people and students in USA and England. This made John Lennon decide to write the song 'Revolution' about the recent wave of social upheaval. In one of his interviews with Jann Wenner² John Lennon said: 'I thought it was about time we spoke about revolution, the same as I thought it was about time we stopped not answering about the Vietnamese war' - Rolling Stone, February 4th, 1971.³

Taking into account the immense fame of The Beatles, it seems to me that even such a mild and non-radical protest could widely spread John Lennon's opinion about the war and have a significant impact on a huge audience. Obviously, this song prompted immediate responses from the different media. Some of the magazines such as The Left Review and Remparts called the song 'betrayal' and a 'lamentable petty bourgeois cry of fear'.⁴ Others praised John Lennon for rejecting radicalism and advocating 'pacifist idealism'.

- **Cold War in the 1960s** and the protest against **a nuclear arms build-up** in the song 'Masters of wars' by Bob Dylan:

*'Come you masters of war
You that build all the guns
You that build the death planes
You that build the big bombs
You that hide behind walls
You that hide behind desks
I just want you to know*

¹ **Tet Offensive** - one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War on the 30th of January, 1968, by forces of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam against the forces of the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the United States Armed Forces, and their allies.

² **Jann Wenner** - the co-founder and publisher of the popular culture biweekly magazine Rolling Stone.

³ **'Lennon Remembers'** - Full interview from Lennon's 1970 interview in Rolling Stone magazine, published by Verso. ISBN 1-85984-600-9, (2000).

⁴ **'Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War'** by Ron Milam published by The University of North Carolina Press; New edition edition, (August 1, 2012).

*I can see through your masks.
You that never done nothin'
But build to destroy
You play with my world
Like it's your little toy
You put a gun in my hand
And you hide from my eyes
And you turn and run farther
When the fast bullets fly'.*

Bob Dylan's approach in this song is much more straightforward and radical compared to 'Revolution' by The Beatles. After releasing the song Bob Dylan said that he has never written anything like that before: 'I don't sing songs which hope people will die, but I couldn't help it with this one. The song is a sort of striking out... a feeling of what can you do?'.⁵

Later, in one of his interviews he mentioned that 'Masters of War' is '...supposed to be a pacifistic song against war. It is not an anti-war song. It is speaking against what Eisenhower was calling a military-industrial complex⁶ as he was making his exit from the presidency. That spirit was in the air, and I picked it up'.

According to Todd Harvey, author of the book 'The Formative Dylan: Transmission And Stylistic Influences' (2001): '...in this song Dylan allows the listener no opportunity to see the issue from the masters' eyes. 'I' and 'you' are clearly established and 'you' are clearly wrong'.

Of course, the lyrics of this song also caused violent reactions among a huge audience. As a result, in October 2016 Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, 'for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition'.⁷ Even though, it seems like Bob Dylan himself did not understand the exact role of his songs in the American Literature, I found a lot of articles by famous writers and journalists, who explain that Bob Dylan was awarded because he found the unique way of promoting his thoughts about some very serious social/political problems through poetry.

- **The August Coup⁸ in USSR on the 18-21st of August 1991** and a protest music festival 'Rock against the tanks'. 'Rock against the tanks' was one of the biggest music festivals in St. Petersburg. It was planned as a protest action against the attempt of a government coup, which took place on the main square of the city (Palace Square). According to several newspapers of that time, the number of visitors attending the concert reached 50 thousand people.

⁵ 'The Formative Dylan: Transmission and Stylistic Influences 1961-1963' (American Folk Music and Musicians, No. 7.) by Todd Harvey published by Scarecrow Press, (December 15, 2001)

⁶ **Military-Industrial Complex (MIC)** - an informal alliance between a nation's military and the arms industry which supplies it, seen together as a vested interest which influences public policy. A driving factor behind this relationship between the government and defense-minded corporations is that both sides benefit—one side from obtaining war weapons, and the other from being paid to supply them. The term is most often used in reference to the system behind the military of the United States, where it is most prevalent^[6] and gained popularity after its use in the farewell address of President Dwight D. Eisenhower on January 17, 1961. - (*Oxford Dictionaries*).

⁷ www.nobelprize.org

⁸ **The August Coup** (Августовский Пutsch) - the attempt by members of the Soviet Union's government to take a full control of the country from the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The coup leaders were members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.



The August Coup on the 18-21st of August 1991, USSR

However, even though this subculture/social phenomenon was a protest against the certain norms of life and political system of that time, it is clear that quite often rock was also pretty commercial and has been widely spread in the mass media. Therefore, there were two powerful confronting factors - protest against the established social values, based on some system norms, and commercial success - successfully going along with each other.

'In fact rock, rather than being an example of how freedom can be achieved within the capitalist structure, is an example of how capitalism can, almost without conscious effort, deceive those whom it oppresses.... So effective has the rock industry been in encouraging the spirit of optimistic youth take-over that rock's truly hard political edge, its constant exploration of the varieties of youthful frustration, has been ignored and softened'. - Michael Lydon, quoted in *The Sociology of Rock* by Simon Frith, 1978⁹

This thought of Irish politic Michael Lydon has been mentioned in the book called 'The Sociology of Rock' by Simon Frith - british writer and a rock critic, who published some books about the rock subculture as a mainstream, where he combines his own research and other people's opinions. I found Michael Lydon's thoughts very interesting and fully responding to my question about double standards of this social phenomenon. I think, I will come back to this thought later in my thesis.

However, coming back to the first question of my research about the influence of propaganda and its relation to a popular culture, it became more clear to me that there is not only

⁹ Frith, Simon 'The Sociology of Rock', published by Canadian Journal of Sociology, ISBN: 9780094602205, (1978)

an unilateral impact of political propaganda on development of people's preferences and cultural trends, but also the popular culture itself has its own reciprocal influence in developing people's thoughts about political situation.

Later on, in the 1980s, we see that the role of spreading new fresh ideas opposing the established social/political system or consumer society's norms was mostly taken over by hip-hop, a music genre often associated with the provocative music/subculture coming from the dysfunctional areas.

The easily understandable lyrics was often about being excluded from society on the basis of race. For example, the idea of such a social protest can be seen very well in almost all the songs by African American artists, such as: Public Enemy, 2Pac, NWA (Niggaz With Attitude), who were calling themselves 'niggas' in protest to prove that derogatory terms often used by white people did not affect the African culture. It also shows the connection between political situation and popular culture.

*'Elvis was a hero to most
But he never meant shit to me you see
Straight up racist that sucker was
Simple and plain
Mother fuck him and John Wayne
Cause I'm Black and I'm proud
I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped
Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps
Sample a look back you look and find
Nothing but rednecks for 400 years if you check
Don't worry be happy
Was a number one jam
Damn if I say it you can slap me right here
(Get it) let's get this party started right
Right on, c'mon
What we got to say
Power to the people no delay
To make everybody see
In order to fight the powers that be'.*

- Public Enemy – Fight the Power¹⁰ (1989)

Using foul language and often talking about criminal lifestyle artists from the ghettos promoted their thoughts about inequality of society, representing the common point of view of the social group they belonged to. Obviously, their ideas could be easily understood by the mass of people. However, hip-hop was often misunderstood by the other social groups, which were still avoiding this form of a straightforward, tough and rude expression of art.

¹⁰ **'Fight the Power'** - song was made as a soundtrack for movie 'Do the Right Thing' by Spike Lee about the simmering racial tension in Brooklyn, 1989. In 2004 this song has been placed in the list of the '500 greatest songs of all time' by Rolling Stone magazine.

But time has changed and now hip-hop is not only a music genre, but also a social phenomenon with its own verbal and visual attributes. Even though, those attributes can be often associated with a criminal culture, hip-hop became one of the most popular mainstreams and reaches a large audience of people with the totally different social/cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, it brings me to the second question of my thesis - how did it happen that culture coming from the dysfunctional areas, which has been repulsive for a lot of people in the past, suddenly became so attractive among absolutely different social groups nowadays?

To answer my question, I would mostly like to research this movement in the Eastern European countries.



The Russian band 'Little Big'

I found the term a 'popular culture of illegality' often used by Dr. Rivke Jaffe in her research about popular culture, criminal authority and the politics of aesthetics in Latin America and the Caribbean countries.¹¹ Even though, Dr. Rivke Jaffe discusses slightly different subject, I would like to use the term 'popular culture of illegality' in my research, as it most closely matches my perception of this mainstream.

I am mostly curious about the culture of illegality in Eastern European countries, because in my opinion, this movement has been developing in its own way, being different than in the Western world.

¹¹ **Dr. Rivke Jaffe** - professor of Cities, Politics and Culture at the Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development Studies and the Centre for Urban Studies within the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research. **'The Popular Culture of Illegality: Criminal Authority and the Politics of Aesthetics in Latin America and the Caribbean'**, Dr. Rivke Jaffe, published by AISSR (23 September 2014)

For example, a few years ago I found out about the Russian Battle Rap called 'Versus'.

During the battles you can often hear an obscene lexicon and a street slang, just like in all the other analog Battle Rap, such as the Canadian - 'King of the Dot' or the Belgian - 'POB'.

Originally, the 'Versus' battles were popular among certain audience, but now it is already accepted to be one of the most important phenomenon in the modern popular culture in Russia. Such a sudden popularity of this Battle Rap totally struck me. The fact that such foul slang in colloquial speech has been often associated with Gopniks¹², and therefore, often evoked a negative reaction, which was a strong reason for an automatic rejection of such an art form. In other words, it would have been equaled to illiteracy.



Search of 'Gopnik' in Google Images

Perhaps, it can be explained by the whole political structure of developing countries. For instance, in the Post-Soviet states there was; (and still is) a clear segregation of society that used to divide people into proletarians, and the bourgeoisie. The second group, is often associated with the Intelligentsia¹³. The opposition of these two classes, can be observed throughout many centuries. For example, in the revolutions, the Great Purge¹⁴, and even in the recent anti-government demonstrations¹⁵, that took place in Russia and Ukraine.

The conflict of social classes has become one of the main subjects of the Soviet/Russian literature of the 20th century, the reflection of which can be seen in 'The Cherry Orchard' by

¹² **Gopnik** - Is a pejorative term to describe a particular subculture in Russia, former Soviet republics, and other Slavic countries to describe men or women of a lower-class suburban areas having poor education background and a usually low income. The word can be often used as a short, but a very clear characteristic of the person or the subculture of appropriation of prison culture by those have not been to prison yet. The synonyms of 'gopnik' can be: American 'white trash', British 'chavs', Australian 'bogans', etc. The closest analog of this subculture can be seen in the film 'La Haine' by Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995.

¹³ **Intelligentsia** - the Polish/Russian term that describes an unique status class of educated people engaged in the complex mental labours that critique, guide, and lead in shaping the culture and politics of their society. Isaiah Berlin, a British social and political theorist, described as intelligentsia: 'The phenomenon, itself, with its historical and literary revolutionary consequences, is, I suppose, the largest, single Russian contribution to social change in the world. The concept of intelligentsia must not be confused with the notion of intellectuals. Its members thought of themselves as united, by something more than mere interest in ideas; they conceived themselves as being a dedicated order, almost a secular priesthood, devoted to the spreading of a specific attitude to life'.

¹⁴ **Great Purge** - a campaign of political repression in the Soviet Union which occurred from 1936 to 1938. The term "repression" was officially used to describe the prosecution of people considered counter-revolutionaries and enemies of the people by the leadership of the Soviet Union. The purge was motivated by the desire to remove dissenters from the Communist Party and to consolidate the authority of Joseph Stalin. Most public attention was focused on the purge of the leadership of the Communist Party, as well as of government bureaucrats and leaders of the armed forces, most of whom were Party members. The campaigns also affected many other categories of the society: intelligentsia, peasants and especially those branded as "too rich for a peasant" (kulaks), and professionals. It has been estimated that 600,000 people died at the hands of the Soviet government during the Purge.

¹⁵ **The Ukrainian revolution** - the revolution took place in Ukraine in February 2014, when a series of violent events involving protesters, riot police, and unknown shooters in the capital, Kiev, culminated in the removal of the Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich. The events were followed by a series of changes in Ukraine's socio-political system, including the formation of a new interim government, the restoration of the previous constitution, and a call to hold impromptu presidential elections within months. Fifty seven percent of people in the government-controlled east regard the change in power as an 'illegal armed coup'. Opposition to the revolution in some eastern and southern regions escalated into the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, its later military intervention and the subsequent War in Donbass.

The 2011–13 Russian protests - the protests against the Russian legislative election results. The protests were motivated by claims by Russian and foreign journalists, political activists and members of the public that the election process was flawed. According to the New York Times, the leading element has consisted of young urban professionals, the well-educated and successful working or middle class people such as workers in social media.

A. Chekhov, 'Heart of a Dog' by Bulgakov and so on. Thereby, here we can also see how political events together with propaganda influenced culture.



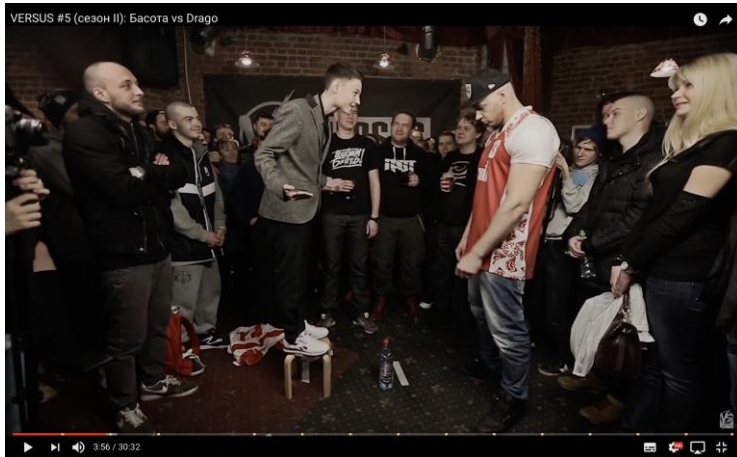
The Ukrainian revolution, February 2014, Kiev

In the developed countries with a democratic political system, we do not usually see such a significant contrast between different social groups. The largest social class of society 'the middle class' usually performs a number of functions, the most important of which is the 'fastening' of society. For instance, in some developed countries we can see the practice of progressive taxes. This automatically removes the striking contrast between poor and rich groups of people.

The second aspect, which I also found very important, is the emphasis on integrating people into society. This can be seen on the examples of educational programs designed not only for educating young people, but also for integration of the elderly people or migrants in the modern society of this country.

In my opinion, these measures already blur some boundaries between different social groups, making society more complete. Based on this, it seems to me that I would not be consciously/subconsciously relate themselves and others to the particular social classes, trying to avoid the clash with the other social classes. As a result, the use of slang and other attributes of street life can often be a reason for putting a person in a particular social group.

But, as I mentioned before, the 'Versus' battles became such a popular event, that even middle-aged and often conservative people, who often subconsciously automatically identify themselves with intelligentsia, suddenly started quoting lyrics from the 'Versus' battles. At some point, I even noticed that many famous artists, businessmen and even politicians started having jesting rap-battles with each other on Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. Why?



'Versus' Battle, Basota vs. Drago, Russia

Perhaps, from the culturological point of view, we can regard the Battle Rap as a form of play. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga¹⁶ defined the definition of a game as 'a certain behavior that takes place in certain boundaries of the place, time, a visibly ordered meaning, proceeding according to voluntarily accepted rules, and outside the realm of material use or necessity ... This behavior is accompanied

by a sense of tension and ascent and brings relaxation and joy'.¹⁷

Battle Rap could be a modern embodiment of Flyting, which was a poetic exchange of insults practised mainly between the 5th and 16th centuries. Examples of flyting are found throughout Norse, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature involving both historical and mythological figures. The exchanges would become extremely provocative, often involving accusations of cowardice or sexual perversion. The poetic skill to ridicule the enemy was with its main reason used mockery, and the main subject of this was also used as boasting about their own poetic prowess.

One of the most famous examples of Flyting, 'The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie',¹⁸ that had been played at the court of King James IV of Scotland:

*'... You call your work rhetoric with your golden lips:
No, glowering, gaping fool, you are beguiled;
You are but black-kneed 'neath your gilded hips,
Which for your villainy many a lash has soiled;
Gray-visaged gallows-bird, out of your wits gone wild,
Loathsome and lousy, as wet as a cress,
Since you with worship would so fain be styled,
Hail, Monsignor! Your balls drop below your dress.*

...

*Scrawny sterile sponger, crabbed throughout;
Fie! scorched skin, you are all scratched and wrinkled;
For he that roasted Lawrence had your snout;
And he that hid Saint John's eyes with a wimple
And he that struck Augustine had your pimples;
And your foul front had he that flayed Bartholomew;*

¹⁶ **Johan Huizinga** - (1872-1945) Dutch historian and one of the founders of modern cultural history.

¹⁷ **Huizinga, Johan 'Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture'**, published by Angelico Press, ISBN-13: 978-1621389996, (July 2, 2016)

¹⁸ **'The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy'** written by Dunbar William, 1460?-1520?, Henryson, Robert, 1430?-1506?, attributed name., Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400, attributed name. (Edinburgh: H. Chepman and A. Myllar, 1508), Ann Arbor, MI ; Oxford (UK) :: Text Creation Partnership, 2003-01 (EEBO-TCP Phase 1).

*The gallows gape for your disfigured dimples,
As you gape for haggis, like a ravenous mew.*

*Puny paltry pig-man, slave for half a glass,
Henpecked coward, not worth a drunkard's path;
Your commissar Quentin bids you come kiss his ass,
He holds no loves for such a useless loaf;
He tells me that you beg more beer and oats
Than any cripple in all of Carrick's town;
Other poor paupers are forced to fight you off;
Old women weep when Kennedy comes around...'*

It is amazing, how the modern Battle Rap can be similar to a poetical duel that is 400 years old in the way to insults towards the enemy.

Later on, this phenomenon also appeared in Russia, with quite a lot similar lyrics that were written by Alexander Pushkin¹⁹:

*'In the Academy of Sciences, look,
There sits Prince Dunduk.
It's said he doesn't deserve
To plan such an honoured role,
How does he have the nerve?
Because of his big ass-hole.'*²⁰

Even though, we see the similar poetical battles among various poets of the golden age in Russia, at that time such poetry did not have any significant impact on the popular culture yet. I think, this could be explained by several reasons. At that time, the aesthetics of art was completely different. Secondly, there were no tools for the wide-spread of information like with Media nowadays.

'The beginnings of the last few centuries are marked by the flowering of poetry. The beginning of the 19th century is the Golden Age of Russian Poetry, the beginning of the 20th century is the Silver Age of Russian Poetry. The present, perhaps, can be called the Plastic Age of Russian Poetry. Now, the battles are undervalued, but they will certainly have a strong influence on poetical form of the thought expressions.' - Den Cheney, one of the organizers of Russian Battle Rap show 'SlovoSPB'

This thought seems especially interesting and amusing because, according to Russian media a lot of Russian students begin to read popular rap lyrics, presenting it as the famous classical Russian poetry. And just a little later, a very famous online newspaper and news aggregator 'Medusa' published a test called 'Can you distinguish classical Russian poetry from the modern hip-hop?'

¹⁹ **Alexander Pushkin** - (1799-1837) a Russian poet, playwright, and novelist of the Romantic era, who is considered by many to be the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern Russian literature.

²⁰ **Pushkin, Alexander** 'Pushkin: Sobranie sochinenii', published by Nasledie, IMLI (2013), ISBN-10: 0761840559, (2008)

*‘...My song was out of tune, my voice was cracked,
but at least no chorus can ever sing it back.
That talk like this reaps no reward bewilders
no one--no one's legs rest on my shoulders.
I sit by the window in the dark.
Like an express,
the waves behind the wavelike curtain crash.
A loyal subject of these second-rate years,
I proudly admit that my finest ideas
are second-rate, and may the future take them
as trophies of my struggle against suffocation.
I sit in the dark.
And it would be hard to figure out
which is worse; the dark inside, or the darkness out.’²¹*

- Brodsky²² - ‘I sit at the window’

...and sometimes it was really difficult to distinguish quite tough lyrics of the *Brodsky's* poetry from the very melodic lyrics of modern rapper *Scriptonite*²³.

*‘Once again I lost myself in one of the yards in the district.
You again call me to hear that I'm alive and well.
Among all of those lads, pushers and bulls, cars and cops
I promised to stop smoking hash and drinking, because this is love.
Hands are like the loops, hands are straight as knots, hands are locked.
Hands are in the ashes, lips on the lips, eyes towards the ceiling.
I'm back at the door, hands are apart and I'm sorry that I'm falling apart.
I promised again everything that I could, because this is love...’*

- *Scriptonite* - ‘This is love’

‘The idea that hip-hop is a new poetry, was in the air for quite long. Professors at Russian universities even give the lectures about rap. This spectacle is funny: serious people are searching for some links to Pushkin and Brodsky in the lyrics of hip-hop artists. The Battle Rap is equated to the rhyme of the ancient Irish people. In the past, hip-hop was reduced to simple rhymes like: ‘I walked, found the weed, found the chik and left.’, while today children from the ghetto open the dictionary, hearing some smart words in the hip-hop lyrics.’ - Marina Katsuba, the young Russian poet and the ‘Versus’ participant.

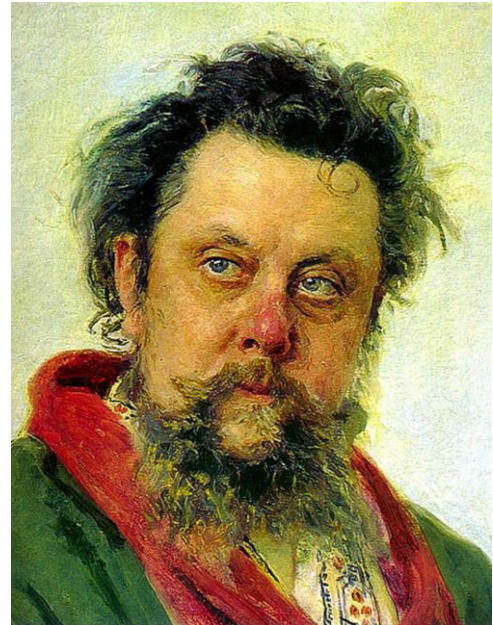
²¹ **Brodsky, Josef** ‘**Collected poems in English**’, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Reprint edition, ISBN-10: 0374528381, (April 1, 2002)

²² **Josef Brodsky** - (1940-1996) a Russian and American poet and essayist. Brodsky was awarded the 1987 Nobel Prize in Literature ‘for an all-embracing authorship, imbued with clarity of thought and poetic intensity’.

²³ **Scriptonite** - (1990) a Kazakhstani hip-hop artist. ‘Unlike the other Russian-speaking rappers, he experiments with a ‘thoughtful and meaningful’ lyrics.’

In seeing more of the 'Versus' battles it is impressive the play of word made up by performers. They combine a dirty criminal slang, with literary language; in a very poetic and melodic way. Showing their erudition, not only in the field of literature or history, but also for example, in their knowledge of new trends of modern culture, criminal life, politics, propaganda, etc.

*'There is an oil painting at front of us,
Which would have caused the pride of Repin²⁴.
Painted in black, white and red
The standard model of a Rapper.
Contours well emphasize the
Shape of the figure - point to point:
There are baggy antediluvian subcultural attributes.
There is not enough of the ball for the basketball,
the Onyx cap,
A bottle with a hole, the fighting dogs and the
graffiti paint.
In the rest, he seems like he was conceived in
vitro...
Well, you know what just says everything about him
right away, huh?
His favorite book is 'Master and Margarita'²⁵!
'The Master and Margarita'! Fuck, fucking is not
beaten.
Maybe a fairy tale about Aibolit²⁶?'
- Oxxxymiron²⁷ about his opponent ST*



Ilya Repin – Russian realist painter of the 19th century.

Despite the fact that a lot of hip-hop artists make grammatical mistakes or have poor knowledge of Pushkin's most famous lyrics, hip-hop has grown into 'the notion of an intelligent mainstream'.

This made me remember the book 'The Zone. A Prison Camp Guard's Story' by Sergey Dovlatov²⁸, in which he described the way of a criminal culture influence on the language's deformation into a new form of communication:

'In my opinion, one of its adornments is language. The laws of linguistics do not apply to prison-camp reality, inasmuch as camp speech is not a means of exchange.

²⁴ **Ilya Repin** - (1844-1930) realist painter. He was the most renowned Russian artist of the 19th century, when his position in the world of art was comparable to that of Leo Tolstoy in literature.

²⁵ **'The Master and Margarita'** - the most famous novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, the main subject of studying of the secondary school.

²⁶ **Aibolit** - a fictional character from the children's poems.

²⁷ **Oxxxymiron** - one of the most famous Russian hip-hop freestyle performer.

²⁸ **Sergei Dovlatov** - (1941-1990) a Russian journalist and writer. Internationally, he is one of the most popular Russian writers of the late 20th century. 'The Zone. A Prison Camp Guard's Story' has been published September 12th 1985 by Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.



'Versus' Battle, Oxxxymiron vs. ST, Russia

It is not functional, in fact is designed least of all for practical use. Camp life, which is nauseating in essence, endows language with a preference for particular expressiveness. It is a goal in itself and not a means.

Very little of camp speech is wasted on communication. 'Duty officer wants to see you.' 'Was looking for him myself'. You get the feeling that the zeks economize on everyday verbal material. In its essence, camp speech is a creative phenomenon, aesthetic through and through, and artfully purposeless. It is fanciful, picturesque and ornamented. It is close to euphonic orchestration of the Remizov school.

A camp monologue is an absorbing verbal adventure. It's a kind of drama with an intriguing beginning, a fascinating climax and a stormy finale - or else an oratorio with deeply significant pauses, unexpected accelerations of tempo, rich tonal shading and heart-rending vocal fioriture. It is an accomplished theatrical spectacle, buffoonery, an exuberant, daring and free creative expression. Speech for an experienced inmate takes the place of every usual civil adornment - specifically: haircuts, imported suits, shoes, ties and glasses and, beyond these, money, position in society, awards and regalia.

Well-turned speech is often the only weapon of a camp old-timer, his only lever of social influence, the unshakable and steadfast foundation of his reputation. Tot-notes speech evokes the respect a master gets. Work skills in camp do not count for much; usually, it's the opposite. In camp, scrupulously chosen speech means having an advantage on the same order of physical strength. A good storyteller in logging sector means much more than a good writer in Moscow'.

I was always very impressed by the fact that a lot of people from the Post-Soviet States understand the criminal jargon without having any criminal background and placing themselves into a higher social class. Reading the books from writers of the 20th century like Sergey Dovlatov or Eduard Limonov, who were appropriating the culture of illegality, we can often see a lot of unclassical, but very powerful sentences: literary language subtly intertwining with criminal slang and foul language. Those writers significantly changed the language, and the general attitude towards swear words.

As Sergey Dovlatov wrote in his book 'The Zone. A Prison Camp Guard's Story': *'It is possible to imitate Babel, Platonov, Zoshchenko and Hemingway. Dozens of young writers do so, not without success. Camp speech is impossible to fake, inasmuch as its main condition is to be organic. Allow me to reproduce here a not entirely proper entry from my army book. They sent us sergeant from Moscow. A highly intelligent young man, the son of a writer. Desiring to pass himself off a veteran guard, he made constant use of obscenities. Once he yelled at one zek, 'What are you, fucked off?' The zek responded with the solidly grounded objections. 'Citizen Sergeant, you are wrong. You can say that someone's "fucking off", "fucked up" or "getting fucked". But "fucked off" - that doesn't exist, pardon me, in the Russian language'. The sergeant got a lesson on how to speak Russian'*.

We can see there is very little desire to interact between different social groups, and this has been caused by political/historical events in the Post-Soviet states; creating segregation, dividing people into proletarians and the bourgeoisie. However, the interaction between those social groups, has nevertheless, appeared as being the same cause of political/historical events, with the intelligentsia of the 20th century, the great purge and the recent anti-government demonstrations. This interaction of these two confronting classes has played a very big role in the development of modern popular culture. This of which can be seen, in the 'Versus' Battle. With the appearance of modern media, it is for this reason that the interaction of artistic people with totally different backgrounds, has been the main reasons of 'Versus' Battle popularity.

In coming back to Sergey Dovlatov, in his book 'The Zone. A Prison Camp Guard's Story' he also discusses the love to primitiveness and brightness of images in criminal environment:

'...In this sense, camp art is extremely significant. Here, without any pressure or contains, the method of socialist realism triumphs.

Has it ever occurred to you, too, that socialist art aspires to be something like magic? That it is reminiscent of the ritual and cult painting of our ancient ancestors? You draw a bison on a rock face, and then evening you get something hot to eat. Bureaucrats of official art reason the same way. If you portray something that's positive, then everyone will be alright.

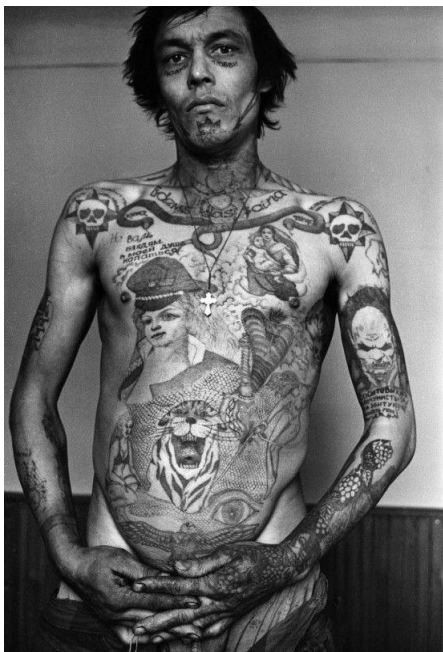


Painting 'The Happiness of Youth' by artist Fyodor Antonov, 1952



Mosaic in the Russian metro, Moscow, 1958

But if it's something negative, the opposite result will occur. If you depict a Stakhanovite feat of labour²⁹, it follows that everyone will work hard. And so on. Think of underground mo-



Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia from the extraordinary archives of Danzig Baldaev and Sergei Vasiliev, published by FUEL Publishing; Limited edition, (2010)

saics of our capital. Vegetables, fruit, domesticated birds... Georgians, Lithuanians, Armenians... Large- and small-horned cattle... They are all the same bison. In camp it's the same story. Take camp painting. If it's a landscape, it will be done in incredible, tropical, Andalusian colors. If it's a still life, it will be full of calories. Camp portraits are complementary to an extreme. Out of prison, only powerful Party chiefs can get painted that way.

And there is no modernism whatsoever. The closer resemblance to the photograph, the better. Modigliani and Gauguin would have little success here.'

The criminal notion of beauty has not changed. In the dysfunctional areas men often make pretentious tattoos, trying to look more brutal, and thereby, it shows the role of men in the patriarchal system. Women often please men's notion of beauty, trying to look as good as possible, dressing in all the most fancy outfits. We can see it very well in the new music video 'Tatarin' written by a Tatar poetess Aigel:

²⁹ **Stakhanovite** - in Soviet history and iconography, was a diligent and enthusiastic worker who followed the example of Aleksei Grigorievich Stakhanov, employing hard work or Taylorist efficiencies to overachieve at work. Such a worker exhibited socialist emulation of model workers and was, or aspired to be, a shock worker.

*About the fact that I am
 Naked under my clothes
 Everybody knows by hearsay only.
 I did not take anyone's pants off,
 I did not let anyone smile to me, except for you,
 Because I thought that you will suddenly appear.
 My boy is not a simple one -
 He's been to prison for 6 years.
 He has a bullet in the gun
 A bullet for your little skull.
 My boyfriend is from Tatarstan,
 In love he is authoritarian
 He has a bullet in the gun
 You are on his gun rifle.*

By describing men, with whom she has not had any love contacts because of the fear of her criminal boyfriend, she makes this song sound very sarcastic. We can clearly hear, how she is playing with her voice, depending on who she addresses her speech.



Search of 'Gopnik' in Google Images

For instance, talking to her boyfriend, she positions herself as a woman, who needs the patronage and a total dependency on her man. This reflects the ideas of hierarchy in the family, that can often be seen in the East.

However, I found very interesting how her voice becomes more brutal and dominant, when she addresses her speech to the listeners. By using a diminutively caressing form of the words, it makes the

word sound cute, but in relation to specific words like for instance, a 'little skull', this form can sound odd and terrifying, but it is often used by Gopniks or criminals.

This song and music video precisely reflects Dovlatov's description of the notions aesthetic, like those of the beauty by the Gopniks, or people with a criminal past. This also coincides with current aesthetics that are representing the modern mainstream. We can see the appropriation of this culture of illegality in High-Fashion, like the catwalk of Dior or those of Gosha Rubchinsky, but often in the very exaggerated and ironic way.

One of the main distinctive features of this mainstream is, on the one hand, the preservation of some kind of habitual way of life and a social circle, and on the other hand, the desire to be more open to all the other kinds of cultural manifestations. Obviously, many people get attracted to this mainstream, seeing it as an opportunity to show their individuality. But I can

also see in this mainstream a new form of a protest against the consumer society and the social stratification. However, this protest does not include 'fighting on the barricades' as it was before, but mostly ridicule the modern norms of society in a sarcastic manner.

Taking into account the history and political situation of the Eastern European countries mentioned above, it becomes clear where this attitude to criminal aesthetic has originally come from, and how propaganda could have its own impact on the development of the popular culture of illegality.

What is also very important is the cause of the active interest in criminal culture, it is a possible mainstream effect on the decline of segregation in society in many developing countries all over the world, and in particular in Eastern Europe.

By mixing literary language and slang, or in combining classic styles of clothes with a criminal style, people try to erase the boundary between different social classes with its characterized stereotypes. In this case, propaganda and politics, has influenced the development of this mainstream, for the most part this is the subconscious desire to erase the boundary between different segments of the population, and it comes from the people themselves.

Now in the developed countries, the boasting of wealth has become vulgar, then it gradually becomes vulgar to boasts as well in regards of education; automatically putting yourself above the others, not taking as seriously another culture.

This mainstream of the unknown criminal culture, may very well be the attempt of peoples' subconscious to become more open in general, in doing so, to officially accept that creation as art. This in turn, influences the culture, it is no longer an explicit role of a particular part of the population; with its own special education, or having a certain social background as it was before.



The fashion shot of Gosha Rubchinsky's collection

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