# JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER… TIMUR KIBIROV. *STICHI O LJUBVI. AL'BOM-PORTRET*.

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**1 Diddley's "Don't"**

It was crystal clear for rock and roll singer Bo Diddley, back in 1962:

> You can't judge an apple by looking at the tree,
> You can't judge honey by looking at the bee,
> You can't judge a daughter by looking at the mother,

and, most importantly,

> You can't judge a book by looking at the cover.[1]

Diddley's song was an instant hit, whose lyrics – by Willie Dixon – we as Slavist scholars seem to have taken to heart. In the fourteen years that I have spent in literary Slavist circles, I don't recall any theoretical discussions on the enclosings of the works that we study so ardently: book covers. One wonders, though: why did publishing house *Nauka* pick that bright blue colour for Lev Tolstoj's collected works? Did the *Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo chudožestvennoj literatury* consider gold letters on a grey background the only possible option for their late-1950s Dostoevskij edition? And in the 1960s, would *Chudožestvennaja literatura* have considered jungle green the most Eseninish shade thinkable?

At first sight, Diddley seems right. Of course scholars of literary history focus in the first place on the *content* of poetry, prose, or drama. Or, if they don't want to limit themselves to texts, to the cultural – or social, historical, economical – climate in which a certain work arose. But surely they wouldn't want to spill costly time on the mere coats in which their research objects are enwrapped?

## 2 Twentieth-century Russian books: skimming the surface

And yet, book designs are less insignificant to our understanding of literature than a quick glance might suggest. Neither have literary theorists neglected them completely – think of Gérard Genette's definition of "paratext" as those transtextual ingredients that necessarily accompany and affect any published text:

> a title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.; marginal, infrapaginal, terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book covers, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals. (Genette 1997: 3; see also Genette 1987)

In Genette's view, these elements – even if technically not part of the literary work at stake – inevitably mediate the way in which readers consume a published text.

In certain periods of Russian literary history, the elements that Genette brands "paratextual" are consciously foregrounded. In the twentieth century this is true, first of all, in the Modernist era, and the experimental books of Futurist writers and visual artists. Among others, Kručënych, Chlebnikov, Majakovskij, Gončarova, Larionov and Tatlin, produced picture-poem-albums in which images and words blended into an inseparable unity (for examples, see for instance Petrova, Marcadé 2005: 136-152). Text was only one component of these books, whose effect relied to a large extent on a "consciously chaotic design, semi-handmade presentation, and extravagant texts and illustrations" (ibid.: 136).

Similar "symbiotic relations" (Engel 2002: 391) between word and image mark dissident art and poetry of the late 1960s. Unreadable, torn manuscripts (Dmitrij Prigov), poems on library index cards (Lev Rubinštejn), sonnets written on shirts (Genrich Sapgir): underground poets of this period had a distinct preference for handmade, deliberately amateurish-looking work. This preference did not come out of the blue. 1960s "text art" expressed the notion that all texts are staged, an observation that was particularly acute in propaganda-ridden Soviet Russia. It also turned the frail quality of *samizdat* typoscripts, which enjoyed a cult status in underground circles, into an object of

artistic reflection (Engel 2002: 391-392, Küpper 1998: hyperlink).

In both these cases – the Futurists and 1960s text art – authors either personally devised the book design or developed it in close cooperation with a visual artist. Not surprisingly, by now their experiments have found their way into the museum. Their status is close to that of a visual art work, and scholars have repeatedly discussed them as such.[2]

Scholarly attention is rarer for the spectacular book covers of the *perestrojka* years and after. These arose in the market economy of post-Soviet Russia, at a time when publishing *houses* necessarily had to turn into publishing *firms* – in other words, to adapt to market requirements (see on this Wachtel 2006). Publishers now had to "behave more like clothes manufacturers than like arbiters of taste" (ibid.: 218). The switch to a market-oriented outlook inevitably involved more meticulous planning of the first thing that catches a consumer's eye: the book's looks. It is no coincidence that around that time professional book designers – preferably with a healthy commercial instinct – become a key chain in the literary production process. By the 1990s, their colour and form experiments start crowding each other out at kiosks and book stores. Naturally, these include the predictable neons and sensational images. But contemporary Russian book design also comprises artistically challenging covers, which warrant an analysis of their own.

By today, in an average Slavonic library it is easy to pick out the post-1980s literary works: their covers tend to be shinier, with a more varied and brighter colour scheme, including more pictures and drawings than book covers from any earlier period. In this contributor's bookcase, it is the usual suspects who vie for attention: three short prose anthologies edited by Viktor Erofeev, with spines in forest and lime green, indigo and azure blue, and jade and fuchsia, respectively (Erofeev 2001); and the collection of Vladimir Sorokin's work in three volumes, whose broad spines form an *en face* portrait of the author's face in red, yellow and green (Sorokin 2002). The front and back covers of these books treat the viewer on Pop Art portraits of Brežnev, El'cin and Gorbačëv (Erofeev), and images of the burning Twin Towers (Sorokin), among other objects.

If it is possible to argue that Soviet publishers picked blue, grey or green covers for random reasons, then there is no doubt that these recent book jackets were composed with care. What is more, their salient looks cannot but affect the way in which we interpret their content: it is the Twin Towers or a neon El'cin which impose themselves on us each time that we turn to the texts inside. Unless we deliberately look away, it is these pictures with which each reading experience starts and ends. And – if we happen to be literary historians – it is these pictures which stare at us from our desks ad nauseam, for weeks or months on end, while we research the works. Taking that into account, it is only natural that we should stop and wonder how, by whom and why they were given this particular shape.

### 3 Kibirov's *Stichi o ljubvi*

"Skimming the surface" is not all that absurd, then, as part of a literary analysis. It is inescapable, I think, in the case of the book on which I will focus in this article. This is *Stichi o ljubvi* (*Poems on Love*), a 1993 selection of poems by the popular Moscow poet Timur Kibirov.

Significantly subtitled "al'bom-portret", *Stichi o ljubvi* is reminiscent of the Futurist book: with its 26,5 x 22-cm size, it is a genuine "album", in which words and images occupy equal portions. In a design by graphic designer Igor' Gurevič, poems alternate with photographs, pictures and drawings from private collections and "the author's private archive" (Kibirov 1993: frontispiece). Together, the visual ingredients patently obviously recreate Soviet material culture. Hammers and sickles, a party ticket, a package of *Belomorkanal* cigarettes, Vera Muchina's Worker and Kolkhoz Woman statue, images of Lenin, a picture of Kibirov as young pioneer, a portrait of Gagarin: the book re-enacts a sheer endless list of campy Soviet-era images.[3]

More prominent than all these official Soviet realia, however, is a series of seven large pictures – a full spread each – of what seems an intimate dinner party. The feast involves Kibirov himself, plus the poets Lev Rubinštejn, Sergej Gandlevskij and artist-cum-critic Semen Fajbisovič. Informally dressed, the foursome is shown drinking vodka, smoking cigarettes, and conversing, against

alternating backgrounds of a private apartment, historical settings, and a rocky landscape. The picture of the last spread is out of focus and traversed with images of yet some more everyday Soviet objects.

The literary component of the album consists of poems selected from different collections, which reconstruct the Soviet with no less love for detail than the visual material. The average poem in this book deals with memories – the memories of a middle-aged everyman who looks back on his Soviet-era youth "through farewell tears", as one of the poems is titled (Kibirov 1993: 15). "This book", summarizes critic and editor Alena Solnceva in the introduction, "is a nostalgic view of our recent, but irretrievable past" (Solnceva in ibid.: 2).

## 4 *Stichi o ljubvi*: back to the surface

Solnceva's explanation of Kibirov's book sounds univocally clear: we are dealing here with a product of nostalgia, of a longing for a past that no longer exists. That clarity disappears once one actually starts reading and examining the images and texts. Longing, is that the feeling that they exude? Is Kibirov indeed looking back with "near-sentimental tenderness", as Solnceva argues (Solnceva in Kibirov 1993: 2)? Or is this album subverting the power of Soviet imagery – e.g., by juxtaposing a severe-looking Lenin with images of himself and his shabbily clothed underground-art colleagues, drinking and smoking (Kibirov 1993: 41)? Isn't socialist realism zealously sabotaged here – when Kibirov remembers "Lenin in Razliv,[4] Gagarin in his rocket", and underground poet Michail Ajzenberg "queueing for wine!" in one breath, for instance (ibid.: 11)?

The answer is of course: a bit of both. A "bard of Soviet life", Kibirov "waver[s] between satire and seriousness, hatred and nostalgia", to speak with the person to whom this Festschrift is dedicated (Weststeijn 1998: 279). This bonds him with Sots Art authors like Viktor Pelevin, whose literary reworkings of socialist-realist culture also walk the tightrope between affective nostalgia and critical irony. At the same time, *Stichi o ljubvi* differs both from their work and Kibirov's own earlier and later publications. The latter are books whose cover may be cautiously designed, but whose content is strictly literary. By

contrast, this is a product whose effect lies as much in the visual as in the literary sphere – and whose final outlines are the brain child of the designer no less than the author. In an interview about the book, Kibirov ensured me that he had practically no hand in the design: "Gurevič and I talked some things over, but my participation in the design process was minimal. The perfectly conscious Soviet stylization of the book stems from his hand" (Kibirov 2008).

Thus, in order to understand this literary-visual crossbreed properly, we need to include an analysis of that same surface that we so often overlook: to the design, or indeed the very texture, within which Gurevič incorporates Kibirov's poems.

When you hold the *Stichi o ljubvi* in your hands and leaf through it, you easily forget that this book was published as recent as 1993, in the aftermath of the *perestrojka*. Or that it is a book that may be hard to find (except in the occasional library or private collection of Russian-literature professors), but which nevertheless appeared in an edition of 10,000 copies, according to the publishing details (Kibirov 1993: 116). If we must believe Kibirov, "in reality the book may have appeared in a much smaller edition" (Kibirov 2008).[5] Even if that were true and the actual edition would not exceed half of the promised 10,000, that would still substantially outbid, say, the 3,000 copies of Kibirov's much classier-eyeing 2001 collected edition (Kibirov 2001: 512).

The book in no way reflects these publication circumstances. With its "deliberately clumsy design imitating socialist-realist kitsch" (Skoropanova 2004: 357), *Stichi o ljubvi* is akin to the consciously shoddy-looking Futurist book. The album is printed on what looks like speckled recycled paper. Page numbers seem stamped dowdily onto the pages, on varying heights. Blurry photos, images of used stamps and pictures of presumably irrelevant quotidian objects appear to have been glued next to the texts at random.

Enclosed within flower-patterned opening and concluding spreads, these amateurish-looking pages are held together by a cardboard cover. More than any other part of the book, that cover takes Kibirov's play with Soviet kitsch to a haptic level. Instead of the smooth and often hard surface of the average 1990s Russian book jacket, Gurevič has chosen for an extremely vulnerable

wrapping. The plain brown cardboard back is soft, granular and sensitive to damage or stains. On the front, a thin piece of paper has been glued, displaying a wrinkled flower-printed piece of textile, a handwritten textile label, a retro Soviet postcard, and two white banners with the author's name and book title in capital letters. The spine which binds these fragile front and back covers has been consolidated with adhesive tape.

**5 Exporting the Soviet experience**

Cardboard, wrinkles, adhesive tape: designwise, *Stichi o ljubvi* tries to be anything but a professionally printed book. Why does it do that?

In order to answer this question, it may prove insightful to briefly compare the production process of Kibirov's album with another intentionally flimsily edited album, created in the same period. This is *V glub' Rossii* (*Deep Into Russia*, 1994), an album with pastoral-cum-zoophilic photographs featuring photographer Oleg Kulik and accompanying prose fragments by Vladimir Sorokin (Kulik 1994). Kulik and Sorokin carefully shaped the presentation of this project as a chaotic friends-among-themselves undertaking. Appearing in a limited 500-copies edition, the book was badly bound, "as if glued by old ladies" (Tiškov 1998: hyperlink), and the invitation to its presentation contained handwritten corrections of mistakes in the address.[6]

Just like in Kibirov's case, looks deceive here. The makers of the album decided – in their own words – "to stick to the aesthetics of *samizdat*, of the 'village book', to the very end" (Kulik quoted in Bavil'skij 2002: hyperlink). They did so in the 1990s however, at a time when the official repression which inspired *samizdat* no longer existed. Neither did material shortcomings dictate the dowdy outcome: *V glub' Rossii* is the work of artists who were well at home in the international literary and art world by the time of its making. Rather is the form a cunningly planned parody: like Prigov's, Rubinštejn's and Sapgir's 1960 experiments, *V glub' Rossii* artificially mimics the chaotic *samizdat* look that has become a trade mark for dissident literature's intellectual independence.

This wish to travesty was not only motivated by Sorokin's and Kulik's status as postmodernists-to-the-bone. In addition to art-intrinsic factors, the *V glub'*

*Rossii* project is likely to have been affected by more pragmatic considerations. Elsewhere I have shown that these may have included the wish to reach a broader audience and a striving for (inter)national recognition – prerequisites without which it is hard to survive economically as a post-Soviet artist (Rutten 2008). Programmatic is Sorokin's assertion in 1993 – the very year in which he embarked on the photo album with Kulik – that "[l]iterature has stopped being everyday speech", and that "only visual genres offer any perspectives at this moment" (Sorokin quoted in Burkhardt 1999: 213).

Sorokin and Kulik are far from alone in this longing for new "perspectives", for an audience: in Boris Grojs' words, from the 1970s onwards Russian unofficial art explicitly "wanted to export itself into [the rest of the world]" (Groys 2003: 60). In order to do that, the nonconformist Soviet artist turned to "aesthetic self-stylization": he or she sought to "see his or her own land and its history with the eyes of an international tourist" (ibid.).

Grojs refers primarily to the artistic sphere here, and to Sots Art reworkings of socialist-realist paintings. At first sight it may seem to stretch far to link Kibirov's album with such strictly visual, gallery-oriented art. Yet it is worth taking pragmatic dimensions into account here too.

Kibirov shares with Sots Art artists a near-touristy stereotypical take on Soviet culture; but as a poet, he naturally had more trouble in reaching an international audience for his (language-oriented) work than they. This is also true for *Stichi o ljubvi* – which is, in the end, a collection of poems. On the other hand, it is precisely the poet's traditional confinement to the textual sphere with which this album breaks. The abundant imagery and conspicuous design do shift its status: rather than a strictly literary creation, it becomes a part textual, part visual artwork. A work, by implication, that can also appeal to someone who doesn't speak Russian. A work that is able to "sell itself", to vary on Grojs' term, more than any of Kibirov's other books.

And that is exactly how *Stichi o ljubvi* was set up. The album arose within one of those short-term post-*perestrojka* enterprises that did not succeed: the Moscow publisher Cikady. Basically a one-woman project, Cikady was founded in the early 1990s with the intention to launch a broad range of literary works.

Kibirov himself was employed there to edit an anthology of classical Russian poetry for children. But, he explains, "in the end, Cikady published only one book: mine". After that, the project crashed (Kibirov 2008). Kibirov does not remember any professional PR campaign for this one-and-only Cikady book, but he does claim that it sold well precisely because of its immediate visual appeal:

> The book was sold out quickly, since apart from literary it also had artistic merits. Later that became a common device, but at the time it was unusual. This was an object to scrutinize [объект разглядывания]. It disappeared rapidly: I didn't even manage in keeping a copy for myself. (Kibirov 2008)

**6 Disobeying Diddley**

Like *V glub' Rossii*, then, *Stichi o ljubvi* marks a Soviet author's switch from the literary to the visual sphere. In both cases, there is a direct link between this switch and the need to find new economic survival strategies in post-*perestrojka* Russia.

However, if the Kulik album forms the offset of a series of visually oriented projects for Sorokin, then within Kibirov's oeuvre the "portret-al'bom" is unique. Where his other books toy with official Soviet aesthetics on a purely literary level, only *Stichi o ljubvi* makes that play visible, tangible even.

Ultimately, rather than sticking to the mild "nostalgic" view of the recent past that Solnceva ascribes to it, *Stichi o ljubvi* undermines that past. It invalidates it through ironic juxtapositions within the text and the composition of the images – but most of all, parody is inscribed in the very texture of the wrapping which enfolds text and image: the album jacket. That granular-fragile, gawky jacket is living proof of what I hope to have shown in this essay. Of course, as literary historians, we must keep analysing words, metaphors, plots, in short, texts; and of course, our key object of research will always be the writer. But it is all too easy to overlook the complementary work of the book designer, and the effect that a pronounced design can have on that writer's work. Rather than sticking to our literary last, every now and then we should disobey Diddley, and give that design a closer glance and thought. *Stichi o ljubvi* is a case in point: sometimes,

we *misjudge* a book if we forget to look at its cover.

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**Notes**

1 For the full song lyrics, see http://www.lyricstime.com/bo-diddley-you-can-t-judge-a-book-by-it-s-cover-lyrics.html.

2 Among many others, see the analyses mentioned (Petrova & Marcadé, Engel, Küpper), and S. Compton, *The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books 1912-1916* and *Russian Avant-Garde Books 1917-1934*, London, 1993. A comparative perspective is offered in Ch. Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject'. Image-Text Relations in the Early Russian Avant-garde and Contemporary Visual Poetry*. Amsterdam, 2004. As the title states, Greve's monograph also deals on a theoretical level with the relationship between text and image. If pivotal to a more extended analysis of Kibirov's book, then a discussion of this relationship necessarily remains outside this essay's (limited) confines.

3 See Kibirov (1993: 1, 11, 12, 39, 52, 77, 101, 103, and 104).

4 Razliv was a Petrograd suburb in which Lenin spent his last days underground in the summer of 1917.

5 Kibirov estimates the actual edition as low as one thousand copies or less (Kibirov 2008). Since he also stresses that he was hardly involved in the production process and doesn't remember this episode of his career very clearly (ibid.), additional proof would be needed to verify his claim. I haven't found any so far.

6 Scan of an invitation available upon request from contact@ellenrutten.nl.

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