


ARTICLE

## “F\*\*\* tha police!” à la Russe: Rancière and the Metamodernist Turn in Contemporary Russian Music

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### Abstract

The nationwide prominence of Russian oppositional artists has inspired a fair number of studies analyzing the political aspects of their creative output. We argue that the new generation of Russian musicians, whose art became popular in the end of 2010s, brings political engagement to a qualitatively new level. Following Jacques Rancière, we reject the assumption that critical art can bring about political mobilization by exposing social evils. Instead, we juxtapose politics and police, distinguishing between transformative moments of discursive confrontation and the mundane activity centered on distributing places and roles. In this article, we look at three popular Russian musical collectives – IC3PEAK, Shortparis, and Monetochka – whose art disrupts the police order in a novel and subversive manner. Some of their works became even more timely with the outbreak of Russia’s large-scale aggression against Ukraine. We have performed multimodal discourse analysis of their audio and video clips, aimed at identifying the ways in which these artworks create the conditions of possibility for new politics by re-articulating the connection between the political and the universal.

**Keywords:** Russian music; metamodernism; Rancière; post-socialism; politics of art

### Introduction

The radical escalation of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 produced an intense reaction on the part of the Russian artistic community. Many artists have spoken out against the war, some have left the country, and quite a few among this latter group have performed at charity events, collecting money to help Ukrainians. Anti-war songs quickly became a natural part of the already politicized repertoire of such musicians as Maksim Pokrovsky, the veteran leader of the Nogu svelo! rock band, or the rapper Noize MC (Ivan Alekseev). Others, such as the pop-rock singer Monetochka (Elizaveta Gyrđymova) or the bands IC3PEAK and Shortparis, continued sending a more subtle message, unmistakably oppositional to the regime and the intervention, but without explicitly antagonizing the Kremlin. This generated some controversy, at least in the case of Shortparis, whose decision to go on a tour of Russia was taken by some as a refusal to take a stance.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we argue that art does not have to proclaim political goals to engage in emancipatory politics. Political action is never limited to official, semantically literal, or openly confrontational channels. It often takes other forms that may be invisible for conventional political analysis focusing on parties, social movements, street politics, etc. In authoritarian regimes, having been banished from the formal political institutions, politics often chooses music and other genres of mass art as natural habitats.

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This happens because, in the age of its mechanical reproduction, art makes a few steps closer to politics. In Walter Benjamin's (2019, 173) formulation, the art of the old ages was politically insulated by its aura, defined as "distance, however close it may be," which excluded the possibility of immediate and massive political resonance with the people. Yet, in the age of mechanically reproducible (i.e., mass) art, "the critical and receptive attitude of the public coincide" (Benjamin 2019, 186). Under certain conditions, this opens a possibility "for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art" (Benjamin 2019, 167). Crucially, when we say "politics," we follow Jacques Rancière (1999, 28) in juxtaposing *politics* and *police*, his "two logics of human being-together." While the latter refers to the mundane and virtually all-encompassing activity centered on distributing places and roles, as well as on legitimizing this distribution, the former disrupts this order by claiming to represent the unrepresented, "that of the part of those who have no part" (1999, 30).

With that in mind, we interpret contemporary Russia as a space where the implosion of the formal political sphere led to an explosion in the politics of art. Admittedly, this is not a recent phenomenon: the politics of Russian art has been productively analyzed by a number of scholars (Jonson 2015; Ewell 2017; Beumers et al. 2017; Jonson and Erofeev 2017; Engström 2018, 2021; Denisova and Herasimenka 2019; Kukulin 2020). This politics, however, largely remained embedded within the age-old dichotomy of progressive West vs. backward Russia, posing a very familiar challenge for the regime.

We argue that today one can witness a new and potentially more powerful iteration in the Russian politics of art that brings political confrontation to a qualitatively new level, where the ideological tenets imposed by the regime become hopelessly old-fashioned and at times even funny. We believe that this concerns all genres and forms of art, but our focus is on contemporary music as a multimodal phenomenon, which includes sound, lyrics, video clips and live performances. The main reason for this choice is the mass outreach of this genre and its ability to circumvent censorship. In this article, we look at some of the most popular Russian musical collectives – IC3PEAK, Shortparis, and Monetochka<sup>2</sup> – who exercise their artistic political interventions in a novel and subversive manner. We have performed multimodal discourse analysis of their audio and video clips, aimed at identifying the ways in which these artworks subvert the logic of the police and re-articulate the connection between the political and the universal. There is no way to measure the "real" political impact of this art: rather, our point is to indicate that it *might* create the conditions of possibility for a new, and more radical, emancipatory politics. It is not yet possible to confidently assess the effect of Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine, but it seems that the political charge of this art has only increased as a result.

We begin by addressing the political relevance of contemporary artistic scene in general, to highlight the predisposition in the existing scholarship in favor of critical art, with its explicit political message. In particular, we agree with Maria Engström's conceptualization of the recent trends in the Russian artistic scene as metamodernist, but aim to deepen her analysis and object to the tendency to view metamodernist art as apolitical and even escapist. To ground our critique and to delineate a political ontology capable of discerning the transformative political potential of the metamodernist turn, we draw on Rancière's political philosophy, in particular on the dichotomy of politics vs. the police. We illustrate our conceptual frame by briefly looking at the previous generations of Russian political art and contrasting it with the most recent developments. Finally, we present the results of a multimodal discourse analysis of the oeuvre created by our selected artists to demonstrate how music can still do political work in a situation where the conventional channels of political communication are severed.

### State of the Art: Perspectives on Art and Politics

Popular art can be and often is political (Street 2003, 113–30; Way 2021, 13–39). The extensive scholarship around the Eurovision song contest is just one example illustrating how the politics of

music is intertwined with state identity, (national) belonging, and nation-building (Baker 2017; Kalman, Wellings, and Jacotine 2019; Ismayilov 2012). Moreover, certain artistic genres can often serve as an entryway to a certain political community: from far-right (Miller-Idriss 2018) to liberal opposition (Schmelz 2009).

While acknowledging the indispensable political dimension of art, we follow up and expand on the arguments of those authors who claim that it should not be reduced to such straightforward oppositions as “freedom vs. oppression” or “West vs. East,” to “fighting against the regime in the same discursive register as the regime” (Borenstein 2021, 42; see also Leiderman 2017). Current scholarship tends to bring forward artworks engaging in literal ideological critique or performative confrontation. Hence the focus on actionism of, for example, the Voyna group, Piotr Pavlensky, and the Monstratsiya movement (Jonson 2015; Leiderman 2017; Platt 2017), oppositional rappers such as Noize MC, Vasya Oblomov, Oxxxymiron, and Husky (Ewell 2017; Denisova and Herasimenka 2019; Siegień 2019), or on performing poetry of, among others, Kirill Medvedev and Roman Osminkin (Bozovic 2017). The radical feminist punk group Pussy Riot serves as the model of artistic political engagement that continues the dissident traditions of Soviet nonconformism and post-Soviet actionism (Steinholt 2013; Borenstein 2021). As a work of art, the song that made the group world-famous, the “Punk Prayer” performed in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow in February 2012, was indeed rather subtle: its message cannot be reduced to the refrain asking Virgin Mary to “chase Putin away” (Leiderman 2017, 174–176). Their other texts might be more direct, as they include calls to “Do a Tahrir on the Red Square” (“Raze the Pavement,” 2011) – a reference to the Arab Spring – and vivid parallels between Stalin’s USSR and Putin’s Russia (“1937,” 2019).

The politics of Pussy Riot, and especially their trial and sentencing in 2012, had formative significance for the public debate and scholarly analysis (Rutland 2014; Sharafutdinova 2014; Jonson 2015, 179–186; Borenstein 2021, 35–48). As a result, the focus has been almost exclusively on the political message of songs and clips, at least when it comes to genres such as rap. Given the rising popularity of rap music in Russia, there have been a number of interventions exploring rappers’ response to current politics (Ewell 2017; Kukulín 2020) or their attempts to create alternative “resistant publics” (Denisova and Herasimenka 2019).

A lack of explicit political engagement, on the contrary, has been interpreted as a symptom of potential escapism. Thus, Maria Engström (2018) points out that most recent Russian music is largely defined by “metamodernist sensitivity,” which is “characterized not so much by political apathy but, instead, by an intentional detachment from making direct, engaged ideological statements and from the revolutionary attempts to explore the boundaries of what is permitted ([typical for] the Russian protest culture of the 2010s).” Metamodernism, in Engström’s view, is apprehensive of “a return of the genuine Big Utopia” and instead looks for safe solutions (2021, 72). As a result, the new generation of Russian artists makes three or even four steps backwards, abandoning the Pussy Riot moment but embracing neither the radical noir of the 1990s nor the revolutionary aesthetics of Perestroika, withdrawing instead “into the ‘internal Zen’ and Tsoi’s sentimentalism from the times of his hit song ‘The Eighth Grade Girl’ (1982)” (Engström 2018).

Among the artists we focus on, Engström’s critique concerns only Monetochka, whose art she characterizes as having “a therapeutic function rather than a critical one [ . . . ], where the main thing is not about mobilization and transgression but, instead, about relaxation and sleep” (Engström 2018; see also Engström 2021, 80). However, we believe that the oscillation between the modern and the postmodern, which was at the core of the original definition of metamodernism by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010), is also distinctive of the aesthetics of IC3PEAK and Shortparis. An even more notable feature is that all three collectives practice what Vermeulen and van den Akker call atopic metaxis: while using distinctly Russian symbolic material, they place it in “a spacetime that is both–neither ordered and disordered” (2010). Mainstream narratives are invoked in their art only to collapse into the singularity of here and now, which at the same time is also everywhere, as it appeals to generic human experience. Consequently, metamodernism abandons the straightforward protest radicalism of the early 2010s not for the sake of relaxation,

but in order to engage in a profoundly subversive deconstructive work, potentially conducive to a much more radical politicization.

### Fuck tha Police!: Rancière's Politics of Aesthetics

In their deconstructive effort, metamodernists follow in the footsteps of the earlier generations of Russian artists, from the avant-garde and Moscow conceptualism to Pussy Riot and Pavlensky. Unlike their predecessors, however, they establish an explicitly subversive relationship with the binary oppositions that underlie the artistic discourse of the previous generations. We argue that the effect of this deconstruction is the opposite of depoliticization: in fact, these artists engage in a search for new political subjectivity by expanding the ground for solidarity.

To demonstrate how this works, we turn to Rancière's conceptual framework, in particular to his reflections on "politics of aesthetics." This latter concept is an integral part of his political philosophy, which is built around the fundamental opposition between politics and the police. A crucial element of politics proper is giving voice to the unrepresented, to "the part of no part." Rancière (1999, 87) shows that ever since the emergence of the demos in Ancient Greece, the people (as a political singularity) has been in a state of permanent difference from itself, "the difference between man and the citizen, the suffering-working people and the sovereign people." The sovereign logic interpellates the human being as a citizen, as a particularity inscribed in the finite geometrical matrix of a harmonious community. The demos, on the contrary, "attributes to itself as its proper lot the equality that belongs to all citizens" (Rancière 1999, 8). As Slavoj Žižek (1999, 188) summarizes, the concept of politics "designates the tension between the structured social body in which each part has its place, and 'the part of no part' which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality – of what Balibar calls *égaliberté*, the principled equality of all men *qua* speaking beings" (see also Laclau 2005, 244–46).

"The order of the police" relies on the "'natural' logic, a distribution of the invisible and visible, of speech and noise, [which] pins bodies to 'their' places and allocates the private and the public to distinct 'parts.'" Politics, on the contrary, "breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order" by "inventing new subjects," "new forms of collective enunciation." It necessarily produces *dissensus* – "a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'" (Rancière 2010, 139).

The resulting sensory shift subverts commonsensical determinations and reveals the contingency of the seemingly natural order established by the police. The aesthetic rupture occurs not as a form of critique, but rather as a new way of making sense of the familiar, which leads to *dissensus* as "a conflict between *sense* and *sense*" (Rancière 2010, 139). It thus helps "create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed that are characteristic of the 'aesthetics of politics'" (Rancière 2010, 142).

In his analysis of Moscow conceptualism, Daniil Leiderman connects *dissensus* with "shimmering" (*mertsatel'nost'* or *mertsanie*) – a concept introduced in the 1970s by the poet and artist Dmitry Prigov. Leiderman defines shimmering as "a broader disciplined tergiversation of alternating investment and detachment, designed to undermine the binary conflicts around art" between official and alternative discourses (Leiderman 2017, 165). He claims that this strategy was successfully deployed by a number of Russian artists at the turn of the 2010s, including Pussy Riot. This art, in his view, delivered an explicit political message by engaging in hyperbolic (mis)representation of the logic of the police, exposing its inherent hypocrisy and violence.

According to Leiderman, shimmering "dismantle[s] the violence of the authoritative in favor of an anarchic, flexible consciousness that is always undergoing liberation and, by design, never getting there" (2018, 73). The question remains, however, whether the aesthetics of Pussy Rioters goes far enough in asserting the autonomous political role of art. Rancière renounces the direct cause-effect relationship, implied in the conventional logic of critical art, between the artist's

intention and the political subjectivation that the aesthetical rupture might bring about. In his view “art does not become critical or political by ‘moving beyond itself,’ or ‘departing from itself,’ and intervening in the ‘real world.’ There is no ‘real world’ that functions as the outside of art.” Rather, art produces political effects by confronting “a life” with “its possibilities” – possibilities that are not outside of “life” but constitute yet another “fold” “in the sensory fabric of the common” (Rancière 2010, 148, 151).

Not surprisingly, metamodernists also distance themselves from critical art. Thus, IC3PEAK’s Nastia Kreslina rejects the title of an activist and defends artistic autonomy: “If suddenly we have a desire [to engage in politics], we will express ourselves in an artistic form” (Taezhnaia 2019). No doubt, the depiction in their videos of violence, police uniforms, young pioneer scarves, and the FSB headquarters in Lubyanka unequivocally point to a political context. However, as we argue below, those symbols are there not to represent an antagonism but to subvert it by appealing to generic humanity. While shimmering implies a critique from the point of view of an alternative discourse, metamodernist metaxis requires identification with the object of its critique as a prerequisite of painful dis-identification. Thus, the presence of military veterans wearing St. George’s ribbons in Shortparis’ “Apple Orchard” (2022) strengthens the anti-war message of the video by reminding everyone of their shared responsibility and the possibility of wider solidarity.

Metamodernist artists are far from being apolitical as citizens. On the contrary, all those included in our sample declared their firm opposition to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> Still, what matters for our study is not the politics of the artists but the politics of their art. The autonomy of the artistic message is exemplified by the fact that the songs by Monetochka (“Burn, Burn ... ” 2019) and Shortparis (“Apple Orchard”) recorded *prior* to, but released as new clips immediately after Russia’s major invasion of Ukraine were interpreted as unambiguous anti-war statements (Carr 2022; Chuliukina 2022). This observation relates to a broader philosophical and sociological debate about the social significance of “inner” motivation. As Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2006, 24) notes, referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein, the idea of private motives is as indefensible as the one of private language. A work of art is defined by its meaning in a particular historical and discursive context, and not by the author’s intention. Nevertheless, it is still the artist who speaks through her work: even though we cannot assume full transparency of the author’s intentions, we must not deny her agency by discussing art as a de-personified reflection of societal discourses.

The same point can also be illustrated historically – and by an even more radical example, where artists themselves often could not voice their political position publicly, but the politics of their art, despite the lack of straightforward political opposition and ideological binaries, still carried profound political consequences.

### Politics of Art: a Few Examples

While in some late socialist societies the artistic challenge to the regime was constructed in rather binary and antagonistic terms – for example, dictatorship vs. democracy (Ginkel 2002) or ethnic identity vs. Soviet imperialism (Brokaw and Brokaw 2001) – in other late socialist contexts (e.g., Bulgaria and Russia) it did not convey any overtly anti-communist message (Ganev 2014; Yurchak 2003, 2005). Rather, as Sergei Prozorov described it, the artistic protest translated into an “exodus of the society from the space of value-based political antagonism” (2009, 54).

Yet politics was not cancelled – it was simply displaced, and “the modes of human existence proper [left] the formally political domains of the state and organized civil society, which have been evacuated of all meaning and all passionate attachment” (Prozorov 2009, 85). The late Soviet underground scene, which the Soviet and Russian singer-songwriter, Boris Grebenshchikov, aptly dubbed “the Janitor Generation,”<sup>4</sup> created their own parallel cultural space and enticed away all the

audience that had already been decoupled from the communist ideology ridden by “constant internal reinterpretation of ideological meanings” (Yurchak 2003, 504).

Thus, the lifestyles and values of “the Janitor Generation” dictated a withdrawal from politics in the conventional sense. Tsoi insisted that “Changes!” was about internal spiritual transformation, and a careful analysis of the lyrics indeed reveals “melancholy and demobilizing reflexivity” permeating the text (Magun 2010). This, however, did not prevent the song from becoming an anthem of anti-authoritarian movements not once but at least three times – first in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and then in Russia in 2011 and in Belarus in 2020 (Engström 2021, 76; Sillito 2020). It would seem that the song’s popularity made it a handy device for enunciating the demand for political change, while it also invoked shared memories and emotional experiences that facilitated situational political subjectivation.<sup>5</sup>

The protest art of the early 2010s, on the contrary, was meant to be divisive and confrontational vis-à-vis both the public and the state (Goscilo 2017a, 183; Borenstein 2021). It inadvertently reproduced the police order by antagonizing the conservative state in the name of progress. Instead of proposing a new way of experiencing commonality, the aesthetics of Pussy Rioters followed the mimetic logic of signifying the injustice as such, in the misplaced hope that it would produce direct political effects (cf. Rancière 2010, 134–137). Its position was explicitly grounded in the cosmopolitan context of civic activism, which promoted human rights, freedom of expression, feminism, and LGBT rights as categories that belonged to the police order, both globally and domestically. This dragged the group into the debates about “Western feminism” and “cultural sovereignty,” waged both within and outside Russia (Yusupova 2014; Biasioli 2021) – perhaps even against their intention.

While the ample meta-text produced by and around Pussy Riot (their letters, interviews, books, and so on) makes clear that their politics is anti-capitalist rather than liberal, this was largely lost on their multiple audiences (Žižek, among others, points this out in his letter to Nadezhda Tolokonnikova [2013]). In the Russian context, Pussy Riot were deemed as one side of the centuries-old opposition between backward Russia and progressive Europe. With the conservative turn ushered in by Putin’s 2012 re-election campaign, against the backdrop of the urban protests demanding fair elections, the Russian state inverted this dichotomy by relying on another familiar opposition – the one between “true” and “false” Europes (Morozov 2015, 119–128; Neumann 2016). The challenge of protest art was thus easily neutralized by invoking the familiar tropes of Russia as standing the ground of civilization against the decadent West. As Eliot Borenstein (2021, 105–107) correctly points out, Pussy Rioter actionism became impossible in the post-Crimea Russia.

We believe that the political charge of metamodernist art is enhanced rather than weakened by their distinct aesthetics. The deconstruction of the binaries via atopic metaxis enables it to break away from the pro-European oppositional discourse, with its elitist bias, and to experiment with representing the previously excluded subaltern groups, such as labor migrants, as partaking in “sensory common life” that is so important for Rancière’s analysis (2010, 137). The emancipatory effect of the deconstructive aesthetics, however, goes beyond the inclusion of additional groups. After all, such a move would not even be particularly radical, because any enumeration still follows the police logic. In order to reveal the contingency of the police order, an artistic text must take a decisive break with the identitarian view of the social and to directly address the generic experience of being human. While doing that, it cannot stay at the level of abstract declarations: what befits a political philosopher is off limits for an artist, whose message must appeal to a concrete audience, which experiences global history in a particular place and within a limited time period. Metamodernist oscillation is a perfect tool for achieving the desired effect.

An example of exactly how this oscillation can be performed is provided by Monetochka in “Post-Post” (2018b). This is the very song whose refrain (“I am so post-post, I am so meta-meta”), along with the claim that modernism is dead, prompted Engström (2018) to classify Monetochka’s

album as “a manifesto of metamodernism.” It starts with the heroine telling her mother that she has quit college and is heading on a long-distance train towards the unknown. This liberates her not just from the daily routines but also from other forms of social control, including digital ones:

The unaccounted girl is roaming the city streets  
 She has no Facebook account, no passport and no degree  
 Apprehensive be, nationhood! Grieve, the authorities!  
 Forgive me, my parents ...  
 The unaccounted girl radiates joy and light  
 She’s a superfluous link and a terminal line

Admittedly, the intimate tone of the song might sound like a manifestation of sentimental escapism, although the feeling of the joy of life that it conveys, as well as the concluding phrase (“As for the ending, I don’t have it yet”), suggesting openness towards the future, speak against such an interpretation. What is even more important is the acute awareness of the social pressures that are part of *everyone’s* life: one is supposed to get an education, make a career, have her papers in order. A young woman, in particular, is expected to think about marriage and children or risk being reprimanded as “a terminal line.” Monetochka distances herself from existentialist individualism not only by refusing to take Sartre seriously (“Sartre is beside the point”) but by acknowledging her responsibility to the family (“Forgive me, my parents ...”). In sum, the ethic this song postulates is indeed a metamodernist one: it accepts the generic burden of human existence while refusing to be “a slave of the system,” to be registered, classified, prescribed and proscribed – in short, to be policed.

## Method

Our takeaway from Rancière is twofold. On the one hand, an analysis of any particular political constellation would be incomplete without paying attention to the political dimension of art. On the other hand, the political significance of art reveals itself not in direct political messaging typical of critical art, but rather in the subversion of the “natural” order of the police via a sensory shift that appeals to the common while at the same time making it unfamiliar.

This conceptual discussion suggests several ways in which art can engage in politics by breaking up the workings of the police. All of them involve re-articulating the link between the universal and the political by exposing the constitutive void of the sovereign order. As the example above demonstrates, this can be done by foregrounding living experiences that defy the rigid classifications and prescriptions of the police. A related but distinct method is tackling the ossified categories directly by exposing their contingent and sometimes even mythological nature. Both of these techniques follow the logic of “both–neither”: they are primarily deconstructive but also affirmative, in as much as they avow the generic truth of human being-in-the-world and throw it in the face of sovereign power. By doing that, they hint at the possibility of a truly universal community without exclusion.

The third way is more direct but also necessary. It involves a direct representation of the plebs, or the subaltern, not as an Other that might be feared or pitied but as an integral part of the new totality. To put it differently, this strategy exposes the oppressive nature of “the *populus* as the given” and imagines a new and truly universal community by giving a voice to those who used to be completely silenced.

In what follows, we scrutinize the work of three Russian cultural actors – IC3PEAK, Shortparis, and Monetochka – in order to demonstrate how metamodernist art can do political work even in a situation where political activism as such is all but banned by the police. We do this by performing a multimodal discourse analysis (Kress 2011; Way 2021, 135–158) of both the audio-visual and textual dimensions of their work. We have worked through all their video clips and audio

recordings, while also taking into account the meta-text (the artists' public comments in various media formats). For space reasons, only a few most important works are analyzed below. The purpose of discourse analysis is to identify how artists deconstruct the sovereign order by three methods outlined above: 1) undercutting the police-imposed categorizations (most effectively practiced by IC3PEAK); 2) directly representing the subaltern (especially evident in Shortparis); and 3) foregrounding universal living experiences (often utilized by Monetochka).

We focus on these three musical collectives notwithstanding the differences in the aesthetics and genres: horror rap featuring the symbolism of death and gloom (IC3PEAK), experimental art-punk aestheticizing rough post-Soviet suburbs (Shortparis), and indie-pop featuring the aesthetics of cuteness, as well as acutely reflexive nostalgia (Monetochka). Grouping these artists together is not an exercise in classification: indeed, as the authors of the concept of metamodernism point out, rather than pigeonholing, the notion of metamodernism implies “a structure of feeling (or a cultural dominant)” of “a certain period” (*Notes on Metamodernism* 2010). We only include in our analysis the artworks produced prior to February 2022, since the major war is likely to generate more explicit politicization. The use of political symbols in those works could have been more or less explicit (IC3PEAK and Monetochka would be the opposites here), but what unites them is the typically metamodernist oscillation between sincerity and irony. Such a mode of artistic production is, in our understanding, deeply and consciously political. What is more, their politics and modes of expression acquire a revolutionary and solidarizing potential without adopting the tools of conventional political argumentation and antagonism, practices that had long been hollowed out in Putin's Russia.

All three enjoy marked success with the Russian (and – in case of IC3PEAK and Shortparis – international) audience. Their music videos and interviews have millions or even tens of millions views on YouTube, and they used to get invited to prime time TV shows aired on federal television. It is important to highlight, however, that the popularity of their art is for us but a criterion for source selection. We do, very briefly, look at the reception of the artistic works via the media and users' comments, but mostly with the purpose of demonstrating that our interpretations are not purely academic and that the political content of the artists' message is not lost on at least part of the audience. A systematic examination of the public reaction to metamodernist art would require a significantly different research design, which can hardly be accommodated in the same article-long study. Moreover, the exact political impact of any particular artistic project, taken in isolation, cannot be measured in principle, due to a large number of factors behind any political outcome. In any case, the potential for politicization needs to be established first, via the analysis of the artistic form and discourse, before the reaction of the audience can be explored. It is this former task that this article concentrates on.

## Analysis

### IC3PEAK

Two artifacts from IC3PEAK's oeuvre – “Death No More” (2018) and “Marching” (2020) – are perhaps the most obvious political interventions that address the socio-political climate of contemporary Russia. Yet, unlike more straightforward critiques that permeate hip-hop culture and rap music (especially in their underground versions),<sup>6</sup> IC3PEAK refuse to adopt the position of underdogs harassed by the people in power. This choice dissociates IC3PEAK (as well as the other two collectives) from the famed musical rebels of the past, such as N.W.A., whom we allude to in this article's title (N.W.A. 1988). While IC3PEAK's music videos convey unequivocal signs of political challenge and disruption (e.g., pouring kerosine and lighting a match in front of the Russian government headquarters, performed in “Death No More,” is unmistakably radical), it always remains impossible, in the conventional sense of antagonistic politics, to distinguish which alternative discourse or position they represent. They neither explicitly decry social injustice, nor



tell their audience how to rebuff violence and abuse. Instead, they indulge in that violence, pushing it to the limit. Musically, Kreslina’s vocals, with her breathy singing and high-pitched notes, often imitate a soft-spoken Russian fairy-tale heroine (e.g., Nasten’ka from *Morozko*). The contrast between Kreslina’s feminine voice and physique and the military aesthetic is especially striking.

In “Death No More,” the duo impersonates ominous people in power who dine on raw meat, play patty-cake while sitting on the shoulders of riot policemen, and drink blood from crystal glasses – all against the background of iconic Moscow locations representing power, such as the Kremlin, Lenin’s Mausoleum, and the headquarters of the Russian Federal Security Service (figure 1). This gruesome imagery is spiced up with poetry filled with pronounced destructiveness (“I pour kerosene over my eyes / Let it all burn, let it all burn!”), complete political indifference and hedonism (“You and the others will get rolled up at tomorrow’s protest / And I will roll [a joint] in my brand new apartment”), and the general fleur of decadence aesthetics (“I’m sinking in this swamp wrapped up in golden chains / My blood is purer than the purest narcotic drugs”).

In “Marching,” IC3PEAK stage a performance staffed with eerily looking characters from the Soviet past, such as pioneers (figure 2) and soldiers of WWII, as well as dispossessed civilians – presumably, homefront workers. In doing so, they may allude to the social groups that are venerated by the Russian regime as model patriots enduring all hardships and keeping their motherland-loving zeal. The lyrics convey the feeling of pressing conformity (“Your face is just the same / And every town has that same building”) and extreme deprivation (“There are no fairy string lights – only barbed wire / There is no horizon behind the fence”), but also reveal some cracks in the once all-powerful mythology of sacrificial heroism in the name of one’s country (“The tank parked outside the gate / Is broken, it can’t shoot – it’s there for show” and “The air around is becoming stuffer every year / I don’t want to kill people”).

The doom and gloom of the duo’s art led Wojciech Siegień (2019, 114) to conclude that there “will be no singing revolution in Russia,” since no ideologically consistent alternative to the existing

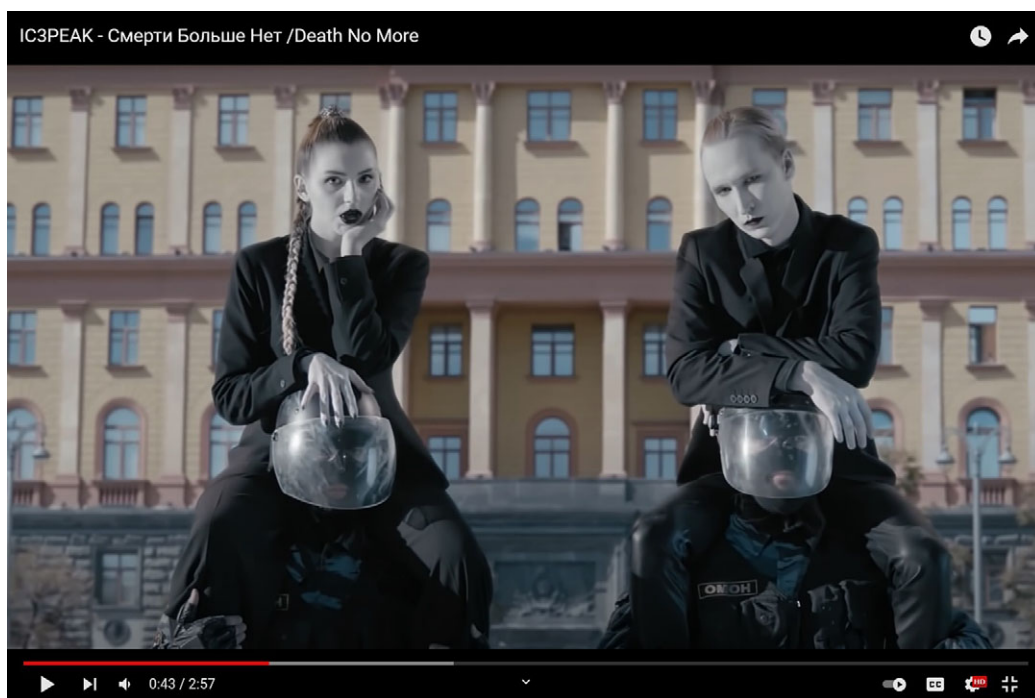


Figure 1. Screenshot from IC3PEAK’s “Death No More” (2018).  
Source: YouTube.



Figure 2. Screenshot from IC3PEAK's "Marching" (2020)  
Source: YouTube.

regime is presented in their artistic oeuvre. We, however, argue that IC3PEAK (but also Shortparis and Monetochka) pose a different kind of challenge, which is genuinely political, in the Rancièrian terms, and more so than the ideologically situated (and by now virtually impracticable) challenges posed by the previous wave of Russia's politicized art and music, in both performative (e.g. Voïna, Pussy Riot, Pavlensky) and audio-visual (e.g. Pussy Riot, Noize MC, Husky) genres.

A closer look at "Marching" illuminates IC3PEAK's political messages and its dynamic relationship to the regime. One of the most important symbolic binaries frequently invoked in "Marching" is the opposition between real, extreme brutality on the one hand (explosions, bullets, war, cold, automatic weapons) and the theatricality of the whole setting on the other (theatre stage, audience, makeup, exaggerated acting, guns replaced by pointed fingers). The theatricality is also supported poetically through invoking some aspects of showing off (e.g., the broken tank). By emphasizing this binary, IC3PEAK conduct a curious political maneuver. Without directly antagonizing the sovereign (represented in the video by the audience consisting of puffed white people in military uniforms) the duo appropriates and eventually kidnaps the agency of those exemplary Soviet citizens that are currently being turned into patriotic myths.

Their creepy unison, mindless at first sight, conveys a sense of conscious political agency and may serve as the basis for broader solidarity based on common historical experience extending into the present (note modern military uniforms in the song's finale). Put differently, IC3PEAK refuse to adopt and promote a pre-constructed set of political values that could be easily placed on the axes "autocracy vs. democracy," "collectivism vs. individualism," and "East vs. West" (and, as such, could also be easily neutralized by the Russian regime). Instead, they appeal to the lived experience of almost every Russian, who either used to be a pioneer in the Soviet time (40+) or can still relate to the image discursively, even though to different degrees. Importantly, IC3PEAK also dislocate the pioneers' agency by portraying them as possessed shapeshifters, the quintessential "both-neither" figures.



Figure 3. Screenshot from IC3PEAK's "Marching" (2020)  
Source: YouTube.

At the same time, IC3PEAK desacralize power by revealing its reliance on fake performances and denuding its empty core. A boy (read: new generation, [figure 3](#)) who steps down from the stage and reduces the audience to ashes with his pointed finger is particularly illustrative: the duo attacks the attempts to re-sacralize the Soviet past not by presenting a straightforward ideological critique, but through appropriating and imploding its symbolic language – in other words, through deconstruction.

In "Death No More," IC3PEAK change the target of their appropriation. Instead of kidnapping the agency of the oppressed political subjects, they try on the mask of political elites ([figure 4](#)). Yet, they do this not because they embrace the neoliberal hierarchies where opulence equals power (the kind of message routinely promoted by mainstream hip-hop),<sup>7</sup> but because they perform another deconstruction. Impersonating the sovereign, IC3PEAK utilize the sovereign's mythology and symbolism that create the magic of power, but also invert and implode the sovereign's message by exposing its real emptiness and self-centered nature. And even though their subversive message becomes obvious to both their audience and, arguably, the regime, it still does not qualify as an instant trigger for a full-blown police-type response, exactly because its aesthetics escape straightforward categorization.

Thus, far from promoting a purely negative agenda, IC3PEAK create a basis for solidarity that proves appealing. Symptomatically, the 160-thousand-strong comment section of "Death No More" (2018) on YouTube received a huge influx of fresh comments in January 2021, during the country-wide anti-Putin protests. Most comments emphasized the strong resonance that the song had with the unfolding events. Dozens of commentators related the track directly to the arrest of Aleksei Navalny and lauded IC3PEAK's predictive power (e.g., "Artyom ka": "Who would have thought that it would turn out exactly this way ..."). Some insisted that the song could become "the anthem of Russia," but also of "Putin's Russia," "year 2021," "January 23" (the date of the first protest after Navalny's arrest), "protest" as such, but also, and most interestingly, "the anthem of freedom" and of "revolution"; some admitted they played the song through a loudspeaker while



Figure 4. Screenshot from IC3PEAK's "Death No More" (2018).

Source: YouTube.

attending the protest and attested that many other people did the same. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, more commentators suggested the song should "become the soundtrack of our current reality."

### Shortparis

In fact, this mode of tweaked appropriation is characteristic for all of our chosen artists. When it comes to Shortparis, while they experiment with electronic music, their vocal tracks often play on very traditional Russian melodic tropes, for instance lamentation in Russian "*romans*" songs, reminiscent of Rachmaninoff's "To My Sorrow I Have Grown to Love" or "Yaroslavna's Lament" by Borodin.

Visually and semantically, in such works as "KoKoKo" (2020) and "Twenty" (2021), Shortparis refer to workers' lifestyle and the simple folk. Yet invoking the so-called "deep nation," conventionally pictured as supportive of the regime but also apolitical, is combined with a clear reference to the iconic moments of political reawakening. The second title of "KoKoKo," "Structures Don't Take to the Streets," or "Les structures ne descendent pas dans la rue," is a famous slogan of the 1968 protests in Paris. Jacques Lacan did not like the slogan precisely because it appeared in that very rare time and place when/where structures actually acquired agency and descended on the streets, producing a previously unseen level of solidarity among French leftists (Sédat 2009, 222).

Shortparis, who are open about their attempts to mirror the political zeitgeist in their music, claim that they merely "wrap their emotion into the forms they are surrounded by" (3voor12 extra 2020). However, this illusion of political sequaciousness is as deceitful as the seeming rejection of structuralism in the 1968 slogan. What they are doing in "KoKoKo" is creating linkages and bonds at the supra-individual level – the level where the subaltern's voice still cannot be clearly heard, but their gaze becomes withering (figure 5). Here, Shortparis radically diverge from the eponymous film

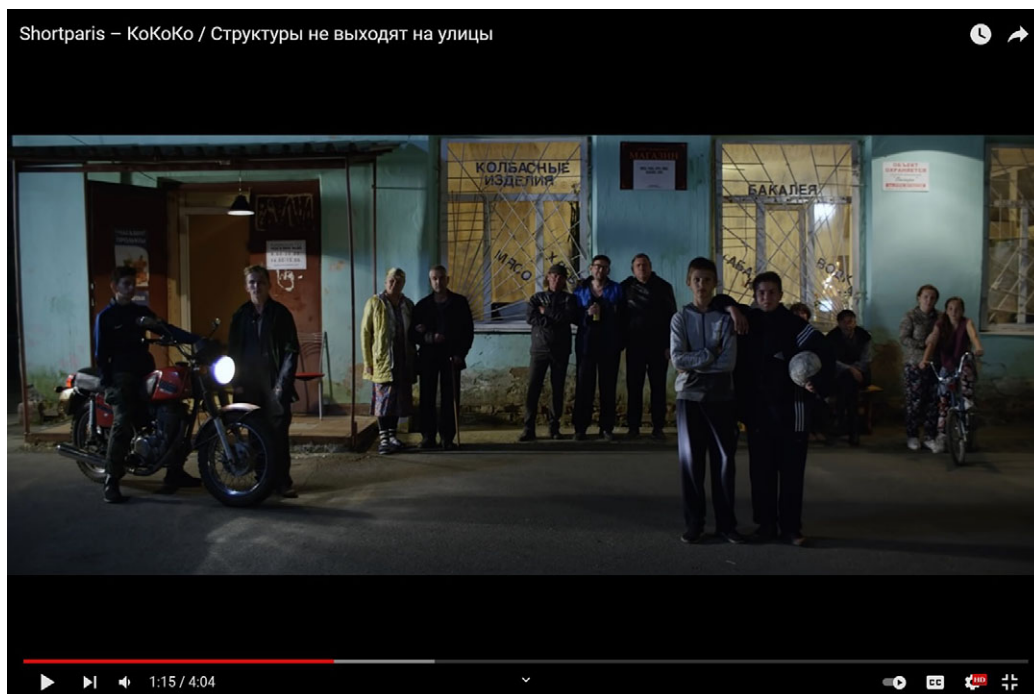


Figure 5. Screenshot from Shortparis' "KoKoKo" (2020).  
Source: YouTube.

by Avdotya Smirnova, which commented on class from the binary perspective of “civil or uncivil society” (Goscilo 2017b). The video creates a daunting feeling that the “deep nation” has woken up, acquired its political subjectivity, and is now looking directly into the sovereign’s eye. As Rancière (1999, 25) would put this, the people wrote “a name in the sky,” and now the sovereign has to either crush the symbolic rebellion or to recognize them as equals and account for their political existence.

At the end of the clip, the people, led by the members of Shortparis acting like roosters, break the gates of the poultry farm where the action takes place, and run into the night (figures 6, 7). They leave behind a lone young man who holds two real roosters and resembles a model capitalist subject in his attire. The choice of a poultry factory as a site of this political reawakening is not random. In his 1990 novella *Hermit and Six-Toes*, Viktor Pelevin, the most important voice of Russian postmodernist literature, tells the story of two broiler chickens, both marginalized in the rigid hierarchy of the poultry factory where they live. Together, they master the mysterious art of “flight” and manage to get away, meanwhile becoming aware of the factory’s sinister mission. Pelevin turned this story into a model metaphor for gradual acquisition of political consciousness and subjectivity. However, he remained individualist and escapist in his philosophy: the two chickens break away from the factory, leaving everyone else behind and clueless. Shortparis recycled this metaphor in “KoKoKo” by conceiving a possibility of popular liberation. In their rendering, the situations when “the hide [becomes] its own skinner” or “the grass [becomes] its own mower” are the products of larger structural forces (“structure is a fool”), which disproportionately benefit those who wear that leather and chill on that grass, while deeming the plebs disposable.

“Twenty,” with its uncompromising portrayal of workers’ rebellion ending in silent submission, is significantly more pessimistic, as befits a video made in Russia in 2021. However, by featuring the soloist as one of the defeated workers silently getting their meagre cash (fifteen thousand rubles, or USD 210, and not twenty thousand as the workers demanded), it makes an important statement



Figure 6. Screenshot from Shortparis' "KoKoKo" (2020).  
Source: YouTube.

about everyone's responsibility and against social racism, represented by the contemptuous gaze of female white-collar accountants. Rebutting those who interpret Shortparis' art as too aestheticized and mannered for triggering broad solidarity, their invitation to unite in forming a common political subject with the workers, in fact, gets accepted. In the comment section, "Vino Puh," who works as a watchman on a factory, admits that they see "this picture every day" and that "the amount of similarities gives [them] shudders" (this comment received almost a thousand likes and over 40 replies).

In both videos, Shortparis appeal to and associate themselves with the structurally marginalized and silenced political subjects, i.e., with the subaltern. Yet they also create new linkages and alliances, broadening the emerging political collective. Most diverse social strata – from artists and intellectuals to hipsters and hooligans – are invited to join the subaltern's cause, to unite and amplify their silenced voices. The new totality is also called upon to speak in one voice, the voice of the previously non-existent collective subject that has now emerged to challenge the structural injustices of the existing political order. Metaphorically speaking, Shortparis are confronting the sovereign by showing that different kinds of underfoot forage became "the grass" that is no longer willing to be "its own mower."

The metamodernism of Shortparis' music and videos does not lead to de-politicization, but, instead, is an example of politics as thought. Shortparis' music video "Dreadful" (2018) starts out in a desolate residential area, a landscape familiar to any Russian, with standardized panel architecture, a school building, and kids dressed in school uniforms. The musicians dressed in sportswear, their heads shaven clean – which might connote neo-Nazi background – enter the school's gymnasium, filled with people who would be racialized in Russia as non-white. The Arabic script on the screen (in fact, mere subtitles for the lyrics) intensifies the tension, as does the unmistakable and terrifying allusion to the Beslan school hostage crisis of 2004 (Meduza 2018, figure 8). As one of the 8+ million viewers mentioned in the comment section to the video on YouTube, "[this video]

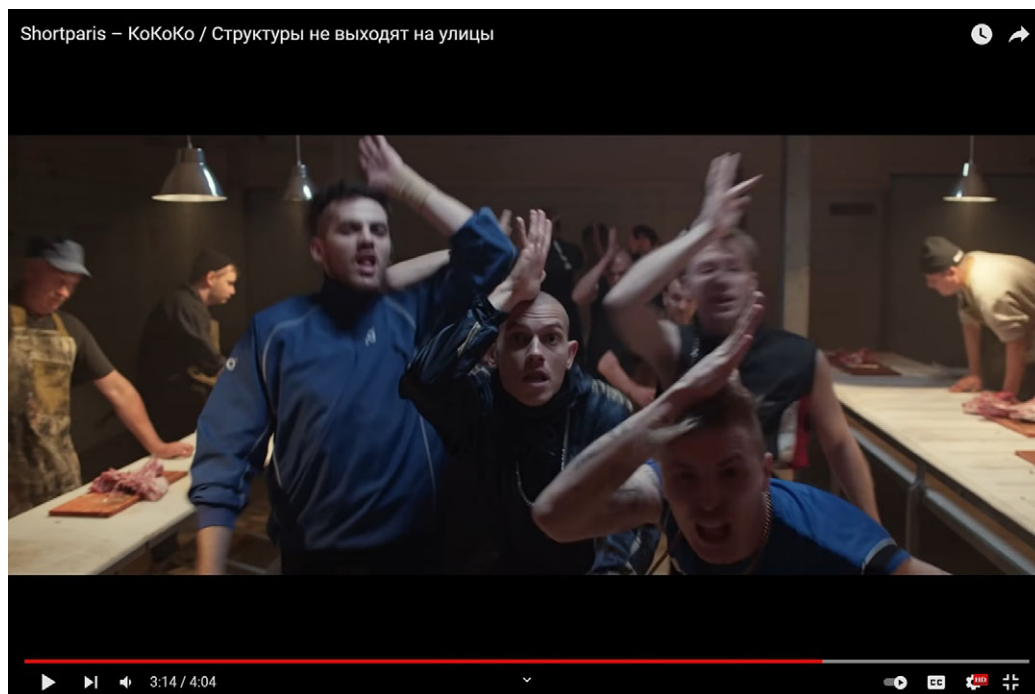


Figure 7. Screenshot from Shortparis' "KoKoKo" (2020).

Source: YouTube.

makes me feel as though some kind of fucking catastrophe is about to happen." However, the tension is never discharged, as the band and the purported migrants dance together to an unnerving, restless tune.

The stereotypical perception of certain people as labor migrants from Central Asia is satirized and problematized by many artists, notably by Manizha in, for example, "Nedoslavnyanka" (2019). Shortparis, much like Manizha, include racialized minorities in the video and specifically focus on their withering gaze. By making them equal participants in the visual, the artists flatten the racial and class hierarchies and suggest that anyone can be both a source of fear and a fearful subject.

The lyrics contain direct allusions to the song "Lyod" (1987) by the punk band Grazhdanskaya Oborona, which described Soviet people as mere "ice under the Major's feet." The ice, however, turns "angry," making the Major slip and fall. Shortparis pick up on the metaphor but warn that the people's victorious agency is by no means guaranteed: just as the grass mows itself, the ice will not be an obstacle. This is probably the most jarring message of the song, the feeling of helplessness and inability to change anything:

You won't handle this  
 And they won't handle this  
 The ice won't save  
 The Major is walking on

The lyrics keep repeating the words dreadful (*strashno*), honest (*chestnaia*), and eternal (*vechnaia*); only in the second half do they explicitly mention "nation" (*natsiia*). The song could be re-interpreted as a summary of Russian history where nothing really changes, and whatever dreadful event happens, women continue to put on make-up, children continue to hide in fear, and people continue to dance in a roundelay. The school becomes a site of the re-invention of structures



Figure 8. Screenshot from Shortparis' "Dreadful" (2018).

Source: YouTube.

(marginalized groups are no longer marginalized in case of "labor migrants"), aesthetics, thoughts, and emotions. As Mark Simon (2020) notes, while the aesthetics of the video put it in a roughly identifiable period, the lyrics are in many ways timeless as they can be attributed to many periods in Russian history. This very tension between the stasis and dynamism produces the sensory shift which, according to Rancière, makes politics thinkable.

The visual aesthetics of "Dreadful" might not be entirely unfamiliar to the Western eye – and way too familiar to a Russian one. Gosha Rubchinskiy, a Russian-born designer who set out to challenge the way Russia and Russians are viewed abroad, has introduced the "gopnik" aesthetics to fashion runways: with buzz cuts, sportswear (prominent in the 1990s Russia as the gopnik uniform), and "Soviet-looking" teenage boys as models (Petarca 2016; Roberts 2017). While the Russian state-sponsored discourse has consistently defined the 1990s in terms of violence and destitution (Sharafutdinova 2020), there is a tendency among the younger generation to aestheticize this historical period and reject the official narrative (Raspopina 2016). Shortparis' "Moscow Speaking" (2021), in turn, would be even more familiar to the Western audience in terms of both choreography and aesthetics. Echoing in many ways Childish Gambino's "This is America," "Moscow Speaking" serves as a commentary on the role of security forces in Russian society, literally impersonating and reflecting on the police order (figure 9).<sup>8</sup> At the end of the music video, the word *govori* [speak!] is plastered all over the screen several times, imploring the subaltern to raise her voice in defiance of the state (Moscow). At the same time, the backbone of the state, different types of undistinguishable security professionals, are shown as being trained and sacrificed on the state altar: "lads at half-price" (*patsany v poltseny*). As many other catchphrases, this later one has acquired a new meaning in the context of the news about the military losses in Ukraine and the bodies of Russian soldiers abandoned on the battlefield.



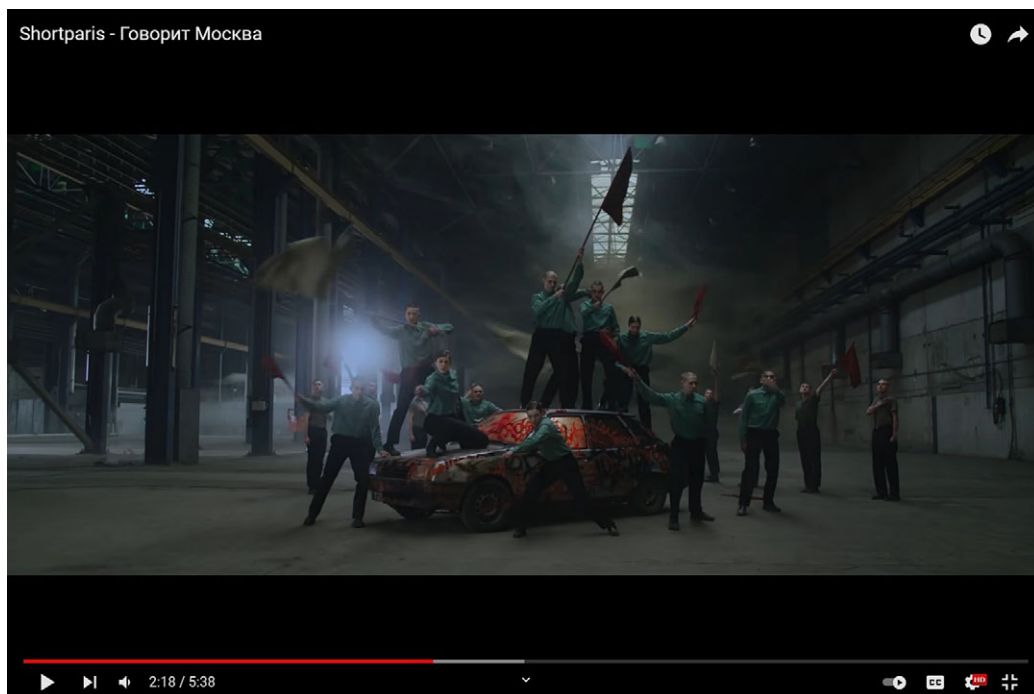


Figure 9. Screenshot from Shortparis' "Moscow Speaking" (2021).

Source: YouTube.

"Moscow Speaking" is probably the most poststructuralist piece produced by Shortparis, with the invocation of Agamben's *homo sacer* and Foucauldian discipline ("Fear of revolver is like our faith, a measure of our eternal love, discipline is the reason"). While the musical collective quote Breton and mention their French poststructuralist inspiration in interviews, they are not perceived as a Western import like Pussy Riot, probably, in part also due to their vocal often alluding to more conventional Russian music, even to folk and symphonic. This is what makes Shortparis' art so subversive, because even without the metatext it generates a sensory shift in the "natural" order imposed by the police.

The folklore motives are particularly poignant in "Apple Orchard," especially in the 2022 video version, where a choir of military veterans sings together with the band about the "bloody bloom of apple orchard" (figure 10). At the end of the video, all performers throw ripe red apples into a grave dug in a snow-covered field. A nation that sowed violence and war finally stands united to reap the harvest of death. The officious "patriotic" symbolism of St. George's ribbons worn by the veterans is cancelled out by joint mourning. The symbolism of WWII is thus reclaimed by restoring the original (late Soviet) emphasis on the sacrifice, but with no optimistic ending in sight. The logic through which this video appeals to a much wider audience than any "conventional" anti-war message is captured in a YouTube comment by "Zolotoye Khobbi," which received three thousand likes and more than 60 replies: "What a pain! ... to both the old folk, who have been robbed of their past, and to the young, who have been yet again robbed of their future."

### Monetochka

Among the three performers whose work we analyze here, Monetochka is least inclined to deal with openly political themes. She does criticize the regime, but prior to February 2022 did this in an ironic



Figure 10. Screenshot from Shortparis' "Apple Orchard" (2022).  
Source: YouTube.

rather than antagonistic manner. Her work with political oppositions amounts mostly to deconstruction, the result being the replacement of othering with painful identification.

This is particularly evident in "Russian Ark" (2018c), which takes up the main theme of Alexander Sokurov's eponymous film (2002). Apart from the title, it is invoked in a paraphrased quote from the film's closing line: "And we will live forever, and we will sail forever." Monetochka's ark, however, is broken, so eternal life is promised not amidst the baroque interiors of the Winter Palace, but in the chthonic depths of Russia, "where even the icons of scary five-story apartment blocks cry." The broken ark is "rising to the surface," but the reference to Russia "rising from its knees," a quintessential Putinist ideologeme, is locked in a cyclical movement:

Slops and dirt around here, for a long time, we'll soon sink right to the bottom

but:

... from the slops and the dirt

With faceless cursive Cyrillic, the great word is neatly silhouetted:

Russia!

While some would see elements of shimmering here, we would rather interpret this movement as collapsing the national sublime into its own ugly underside and owning up to both, making it impossible to identify only with the brighter side of Russianness. Then it is easy to brush aside sarcastically the opposition between Russian spirituality and Western indecency ("They have unisex, we have kvass"). More telling is how, with just a few strokes, Monetochka makes centuries of cultural symbolism implode into an aching political singularity:

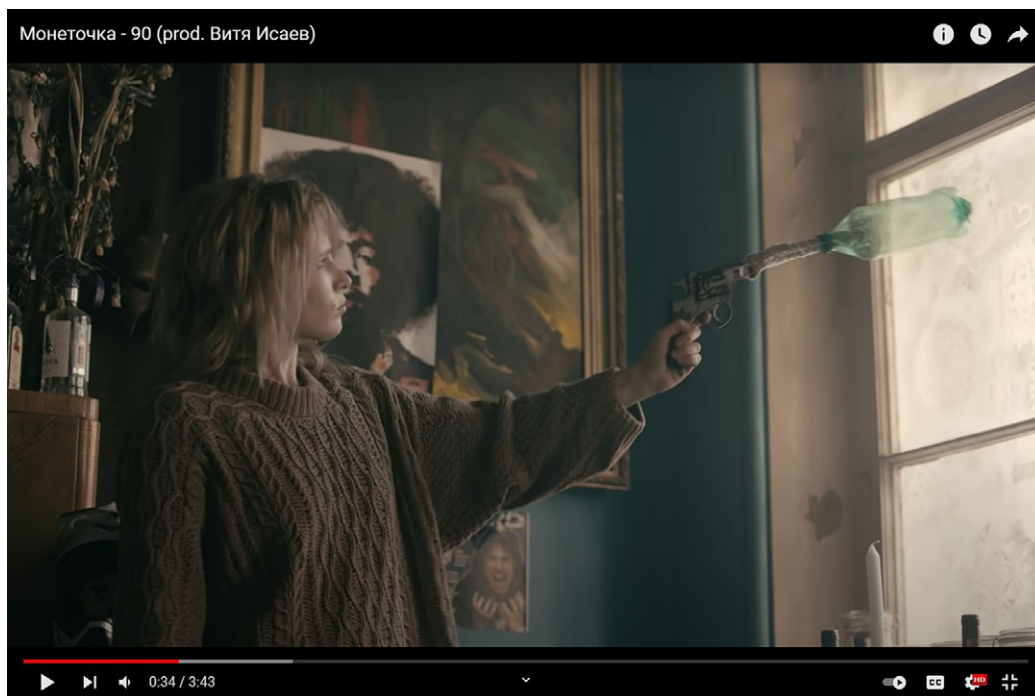
My heart doesn't demand changes,

Tired Tsoi is napping in the cabin.  
 The hum of sirens is like nanny's songs,  
 Bullet holes are like her face.  
 Pussy Riot have drearily taken  
 Their colorful masks off their faces,  
 They look so good without them,  
 They are very beautiful.

It is a journey from Pushkin (nanny's motive) through Tsoi to contemporary rap: among other things, the "five-stories" in the refrain refer to simple panel housing typically depicted in rappers' videos (Husky 2017; Saprykin 2018). "Sirens" and "bullet holes" trigger acute anxiety – of an obviously political nature – but there is no one to soothe it or to provide guidance. The Perestroika generation is napping, while Pussy Riot have lost their illusions and became simply "beautiful" (probably a reference to their commercial success in the West).

Deconstruction of foundational myths via (dis)identification is perhaps the most important among Monetochka's pursuits. In "The 90s" (2018a, figure 11), she offers a clearly ironic take on the official narrative about the hardships of the 1990s, which has established a key negative historical Other for Putin's Russia (Sharafutdinova 2020, 105–132):

In the 90s people were killed  
 And everybody were running naked  
 There was no electricity  
 Only fistfights for jeans and coke  
 [ ... ]  
 And I live not so bad, drink tea with sugar  
 Typing texts on my new MacBook<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 11.** Screenshot from Monetochka's "The 90s" (2018).  
 Source: YouTube.

Both the hyperbolized presentation of the official myth and the seemingly naïve satisfaction with the bourgeois comfort of the present indicate that the author distances herself from the story, told from a metamodernist position, which, as in the previous example, escapes full identification but invites sympathy and solidarity.

While “The 90s” mocked the myth about the time of troubles, in her most recent album *Applied Art* Monetochka deconstructs the myth about the West, in all its versions – liberal or nationalist. The myth is not rejected but rather recycled, in a psychotherapeutic fashion. Its importance even for the younger generation of Russians is impossible to deny: indeed, as Kreslina testifies, IC3PEAK switched from English to Russian *after* their trip to the US, which taught them to appreciate the intricacy of both cultures and leave behind “the complex of people from ‘a Third World country’” (Taezhnaia 2019). Monetochka’s “America” (2020a) hooks up to a long tradition of utopian imagination in Russian popular and alternative culture. Thus, “Farewell Letter” (1985) by the rock band Nautilus Pompilius conveys the nostalgia for a dream beyond reach, typical of the pre-Perestroika USSR:

When all those songs that I don’t know  
 Are all but faded down  
 In the sharp tasting air  
 you’ll hear a scream of my last paper boat  
 Goodbye America, oh  
 Where I have never ever been<sup>10</sup>

The 1990s saw the creation of a nationalist myth about America – a land of the prosperous but spiritually weak and insincere, as in Aleksei Balabanov’s film *Brat 2* (2000) (see Lipovetsky 2008). In alternative music, perhaps the most powerful recent rendition of this myth was “I am Dropping the West” (*Ia roniatu Zapad*) by the rapper Face. Ilya Kukulin (2020, 88) concludes that “Face exaggerates the popular propagandist narratives of anti-American hysteria for humorous effect but without changing their meanings.”

Monetochka, on the contrary, starts off by presenting America as a land that never was. One might be tempted to infer that it is a myth created on purpose:

So we know, “America is somewhere out there”  
 Out there exists democracy  
 Out there all parks are washed with soap  
 Out there the life is wonderful  
 Like an SUV through hostile terrain  
 Its economy is skyrocketing  
 And children don’t believe in God  
 And girls don’t wear bodices

This invention, however, cannot be attributed to Putin’s propaganda: the image of America as a land of secularism and sexual revolution could only come from the generation of Perestroika, from those who pushed for market reforms in the hope that Russia will one day resemble the America of their dreams, a land “where I have never ever been” and which had never existed. Yet even as she pokes at the liberal nostalgia, she describes the invention of the myth as a religious ritual:

They say someone saw it, someone heard of it  
 A fortune teller read it in her cards  
 They caught two signals through cell towers  
 And three wanderers have apparently been there

So they sketched it coyly, schematically,  
 Enigmatically, also lusciously  
 Printed out on a 3D-printer  
 And stitched in the atlas as a coordinate

Such a solemn and complex performance implies that America is an indispensable element of the reality here and now, regardless of whether it exists “out there.” There is no tergiversation here, but rather a sober acknowledgement that reality is critically dependent on the myth. This view also dispenses with the othering that was so central to both nationalist and Westernizing myths. In fact, Monetochka has a cozier, more personal relationship with “her” America than any of her predecessors:

Sleep peacefully, my America  
 If you actually exist

In Elizaveta’s own words, her intention was to “sing about the country, which our television routinely throws mud at, with tenderness and love, like in a mother’s lullaby for her child” (Gyrdymova and Isaev 2020).

To recap: the Russian reality as it emerges in Monetochka’s poetry is a patchwork of myths, sometimes poorly stitched together. There is, however, nothing beyond those myths: they define how real lives are lived in her country, how History is experienced collectively as well as at the deeply personal level. While rejecting both the Westernizing and the nationalist myths, what she offers is indeed a “meta-meta” position, a critical distance which defies any categorizations imposed by the police.



**Figure 12.** Screenshot from Monetochka’s “Net Monet” (2018).  
 Source: YouTube.

This, however, does not imply a withdrawal. On the one hand, as pointed out above, Monetochka has made straightforward political statements. On the other hand, and even more importantly, her irony and the “meta-meta” positioning open a way towards a much more intimate bond with History than any of the Pussy Rioters were able to establish.

This is achieved through a contrast between the consciously cultivated girlish image (see figure 12), deliberately high-pitched voice, and curly hair on the one hand, and, on the other, the acute sensation of both personal and historical time. Their interconnectedness is one of the overarching themes of *Applied Art*, best illustrated by “I will Outlast” (2020b). The song draws on Psoi Korolenko’s “An Island which Has Everything” (2009), a dense postmodernist play of cultural references, from “bay leaf” and “places to powder” to “the Foucault pendulum, and Foucault himself, and the other Foucault . . .” Here, the sensory shift is produced by naming those entities in a flattened list of “everything.” Monetochka’s text uses the same technique of enumeration for the opposite purpose. It creates a counterpoint of anxieties: fears befitting a three-year old girl (“More than once I was bitten by sharks . . . I will outlast the elderly, house ghosts, and water sprites”) are mixed with “adult,” realistic concerns (“More than once I was bitten by dogs . . . I outlasted . . . a blister from a shoe, and the taxman”), leading up to a seesaw between banality and tragedy:

And even the well-wishes  
On a Hallmark card  
The death of loved ones  
And the fouled shot  
The throwing of rice  
At the groom and the bride.<sup>11</sup>

In a few lines, the mention of the coronavirus opens the door to History:

And the low blows  
And the fall of the USSR  
And the hermetically sealed  
Zinc coffins

The references to past and future wars, which sound prophetic in 2022, are repeated in several rollercoaster movements, swinging between the girlish and the Historic:

And the hungry, hungry wolf won’t bite,  
And the special, special forces won’t fight,  
Only throw a handful of earth onto me,  
As my lips move whispering

Both parts end with an inspiring refrain:

I will outlast: you and us  
The laughter and the shame  
Everyone and everything  
I will outlast!

Monetochka’s art certainly generates the sensory shift which, according to Rancière, makes aesthetics political, yet this effect is achieved with little or no political messaging. Rather, it is about the way in which she combines vulnerability and strength, nostalgia and irony in a mixture that is at the same time unsettling and curative.

## Conclusion

Despite the pressure from the increasingly authoritarian state, the Russian alternative music scene remains amazingly diverse and politically engaged. Alongside the established tradition of protest art, dating back to the Soviet era, there is a growing field of artistic experimentation in a deconstructive, rather than critical, mode – a method aptly categorized by Engström as metamodernist. Drawing on Rancière’s concept of “the politics of aesthetics,” we have argued that art can perform profoundly political work without directly challenging the existing order, but rather by subverting the underlying oppositions and appealing directly to the generic. Artists such as IC3PEAK, Shortparis, and Monetochka still confront the sovereign directly by appropriating the sovereign’s language and deconstructing the political mythologies imposed on them as political subjects. In doing so, some of them also address the problems of racism and subalternity, without providing clear-cut solutions, but still trying to reimagine the body politic in more inclusive ways.

As a key difference from the previous generation, the metamodernist aesthetic is not limited to a shimmering movement in-between binary oppositions. Potentially, it lays the ground for a much wider solidaristic platform that would unite all people through their shared experience of joy and suffering. The artworks from our sample demonstrate that political art is not defined by the focus on issues of public interest, because History can at any moment intrude on anyone’s private life and make it a public matter. It is there as both an abstract force and a concrete national narrative, woven together by multiple symbolic references, from pioneer scarves to zinc coffins. This art is distinctly Russian, but it resists any attempts to interpellate it into any of the subject positions readily offered by the police, be it “cultural sovereignty” or “Western modernity” (Biasioli 2021; Wiedlack 2016).

We make no claim as to the “real” political impact of such metamodernist deconstruction: we believe that it does contribute to the anti-war and anti-regime mobilization, but there is no way of isolating the impact of these works from other factors which have the same effect. Instead, we follow Rancière in rejecting the claim of critical art that political mobilization can only be brought about by exposing social evils. Moreover, as the example of Tsoi’s “Changes!” shows, songs can have mobilization effect regardless of the author’s intentions, and even in spite of an easily readable apolitical message.

Hence, this article is both a warning against the tendency to downplay the political charge of metamodernist art and a detailed analysis of the discursive mechanisms that generate that charge. We argue that metamodernist music does political work in three ways: by undercutting police-imposed generalizations (IC3PEAK); foregrounding the generic experience of living through History (Monetochka); and directly representing the subaltern (Shortparis). All three performers we analyze question the commonsensical binaries putting Russia against the West, the “progressive” opposition against the “reactionary” government, the elites against the masses, and so on. The clips by IC3PEAK and Shortparis tell contextually potent stories that, however, could happen anywhere, often using references common to rap music across the globe (depressed residential districts, police brutality, etc.). Monetochka is a more distinctly Russian poet, but she is also most explicit in her ironic deconstruction of national myths. In a typically metamodernist fashion, this art creates an image of a timespace that is both ordered by shared oppositions and narratives and disordered due to their obvious moral insolvency.

The aesthetic of IC3PEAK and Shortparis is predominantly about pain and humiliation suffered by those confronting the faceless machine of what Rancière would call the police. Most of Monetochka’s songs convey a much brighter tone, but also a sense of acute anxiety and fragility, amplified by her deliberately girlish image. What all the three performers share is perhaps their most important mission: to bring to light the deep ontological bond between childhood phobias, everyday anxieties, and historical catastrophes, thus highlighting our shared vulnerability and resilience. By telling us we are not alone in life nor in death, and all facing the overwhelming power

of History, which is above us and yet of our own making, this art creates ground for solidarity that is deeper than any particular ideology.

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## Notes

- 1 See the comments under Shortparis' post on their FB homepage, March 22, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/sh0rtparis>. Screenshots saved in the authors' archive on July 24, 2022.
- 2 Even as Monetchka is the single author and performer of her songs, the arrangements by her producer and husband Viktor Isaev have become a major part of their success.
- 3 According to their Facebook page, IC3PEAK are donating part of their streaming and concert revenue to help Ukraine. Shortparis's frontman Nikolay Komyagin was detained at an anti-war action and fined (Bumaga 2022). Monetchka joined Noize MC on an anti-war tour of Europe (*The Village* 2022).
- 4 Grebenshchikov picked this label because, in a society that criminalized loafing, artists belonging to the late Soviet underground chose to take up the least time-consuming jobs and devoted all their free time to art.
- 5 Not surprisingly, Tsoi's legacy has also been recycled in conservative, depoliticizing discourses (Engström 2021) and even used in a pro-war rally in Moscow in March 2022.
- 6 For a good illustration of such straightforward critique related to the post-Soviet context see Capital's *Kein Krieg in Ukraine!* (2014). For a scholarly discussion of the phenomenon, see Glušac (2016, 76–79).
- 7 E.g., Lil Pump (2017) and The LOX (2008). Within the Russian context, see Morgenstern (2021).
- 8 It is probably also a reference to Yuli Daniel's dystopian short story where the Decree of the Supreme Soviet establishes the Day of Open Murders. The Day gains unanimous approval by the working masses, but some people struggle with the monstrous "holiday."
- 9 Translation from <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/90-90th.html>.
- 10 Translation from <http://russmus.net/song/1586>.
- 11 Translation from <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/perezhivu-outlast.html>, with minor modifications.

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