

Aesthetics of Internet and visual consumption

On the RuNet's essence and specificity

Andrej Gornyxh, Almira Ousmanova (Minsk)

Internet as a cultural form of post-modernism

Cinema, television and the Internet make up three stages of the visual turn of modern culture, and represent something more than a superficial change in the everyday experience (involving less reading or listening, more watching) but embody the transformation of the core of contemporary culture. Photography and cinema are basic cultural forms of modernity, whilst the global spread of television marks the Western society's transition to the post-modern stage with a new degree of individualization and visualization of consumption. The apparent culmination of the modernization processes, the development of Internet, contains a potential of a new cultural form.

Technologically, the Internet is characterized, foremost, by the increasing density of informational flow and broadening of the possibilities of search and transmission of information. The quantitative aspects of this technological progress are so impressive that we can now speak of a qualitative leap in everyday communications and in our whole way of life.

One can detect the quality of these ongoing changes on the aesthetical level in the first place. Aesthetically, the Internet appears to be a canvas, over which the ordinary user's eye may slide without any idea of the host of special knowledge and functions beneath it. A deeper contemplation of this surface could be instructive in understanding the local forms (national, sub-cultural) that flows of information and standard structures of our globalizing world assume.

The collapse of narrative form

One of the most basic experiences of the Internet is that of the search engine page. Rambler.ru and Yandex.ru, the main search engines for Russian-speaking users, represent the structural model for any Internet page. The most essential feature of the search engine's visual form seems to be its 'mosaic-schizophrenic' structure: dozens of links, banners, and windows to other webpages. A heterogeneous set of 'voices' that 'speak' on behalf of their subjects tends to be dominant.



Rambler.ru: A mosaic-schizophrenic world.

The Internet page seems to represent a new, perhaps final, phase of disintegration of the narrative as a realist cultural form. Fredric Jameson defines narrative as a means of combining of various dimensions and temporalities, of the elements of different levels – that of individual biography and social history, micro-rhythms of everyday life and political-economic macro-rhythms – in one single entity [Jameson 1988, 29]. Thus narrative is understood, not as sheer literary notion but as the dominant cultural Form. It blends together vari-

ous forms – phonetic, grammatical, syntactic structures, plot schemes, generic conventions, spatial, melodic, etc. – producing that general perspective which makes different elements correlative and thus meaningful. In this sense linear perspective in painting, symphonic form in music along with the novel itself as one of the most sophisticated kind of narratives can be regarded as narrative forms.

In modern times, visual form based on the montage principle becomes the dominant aesthetic Form. Modernity consistently breaks up the traditional narrative continuum, separating the elements into closed, self-sufficient entities, ‘images’ (to use a modernist literary phrase, all the way to cinematic close-up) set in memory separately or composed in collage form. Nabokov’s description of a refrigerator, in *Lolita*, “it roared at me viciously while I removed the ice from its heart”, can serve, according to Jameson, as an eloquent example of how modernist literary phrase is transformed into autonomous ‘image’ to be scrutinized and appreciated outside general narrative perspective. The Russian vanguard’s formalist experiments with melody and metre, isolated not only from narrative but also from semantics, are even more symptomatic in this context.

The aesthetics of modernism ‘programs’ the reader to grasp the episodic, the fragmentary, up to the most elementary formal units of texts without any reference to a general framework [Jameson 1990, 205]. In the broader context aesthetical experience from the end of 19th up to the middle of the 20th centuries reproduced Western society’s basic model of identity – autonomous ego or self-sufficient and closed individual. Autonomous ego comes to be the building block of the new social field undergoing the processes of reification and rationalization [Gornykh 2001]. Modernity strengthens the autonomy of the individual along with that of the art produced by individual genius.

French literary critic and theorist, Lucien Goldmann in his book, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (Pour une sociologie du roman) (1964) analyzed the evolution of the Western literary protagonist as a

form of autonomous ego: from Renaissance narrative, focused on the active characters changing the world along the lines of their selfish, roguish interests all the way to the classical genre of novel. The early capitalism, with the private activity of the first free markets, universal notions of freedom, equality, and human rights gave rise to a new literary character: ‘the problematic individual’. The problematic individual inhabits the world of the novel in a multitude of incarnations, from Don Quixote to Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov is possessed by a ‘demonic search’ for human values. He cannot determine these values for himself, as he is alienated from the society that lives by them; his alienation and self-loathing make it harder for him to find true values, which become increasingly opaque and unattainable. Psychological motives for the development of the plot are essential for plausibility (suspension of disbelief) in a realistic novel: the play of interests of individuals with the sophisticated psychology creates the smooth flow of fictional events.

The processes of modernization resulting in increased fragmentation of society and de-personalization of its fragments entail, according to Goldmann, shifts in the dominant form of the literary character. In the 20th century, the problematic individual (for whom his own motives and values become a problem) is gradually replaced by the hero, who is alien to any progressive search and alienated from the external world in general (from Kafka to Rob-Grillet and the New Novel). In the final analysis, the New Novel articulates “radical disappearance of the character and respectively considerable strengthening of the autonomy of objects” [Goldmann 1964, 288]. In other words, the autonomy of ego turns out to be the autonomy of the things themselves: in the absence of a character, things begin to ‘act’ forming absurdist relationships (here one can grasp the surprising literalism of commodity fetishism at work).

Cinema represents the new stage of crisis of the autonomous ego. The cinematic mode of storytelling (montage) can be said to be an anti-narrative device if compared to the classical liter-

ary form. The syntax of cinema doesn't 'psychologically' connect elements of a story but rather produces visual clashes of signs, providing the viewer with an attractive spectacle. The principle of montage, to begin with Sergej Ejzenshtejn, as Jameson puts it,

requires the reduction of each shot to its greatest tonal intensity in order to heighten the language of contrast and the shock of its conflict with the following one. [...] That gap or tension between two shots which hitherto constituted montage now opens up and takes on the status of an image in its own right, a third entity which comes into being to bridge the other two. [Jameson 1990, 212]

This "third entity" – the very aestheticized space of isolation and shocking encounters – becomes the proper place for the transformation of realistic psychology into 'dehumanized', alienated, modernist subjectivity. Montage cinematic form subverts the work of the narrative apparatus. However, from the early experiments in film narration to classic Hollywood cinema, the main modernist art form is essentially based on the literary plot schemes. Even television, in the first decades of its existence, had considerable narrative impulse (as evidenced in the genre of theatrical spectacles produced for television). Later, narrative is repressed by the heterogeneity of the TV format: telecasts are incessantly interrupted by commercials, dissociating into sub-stories and scenes. But there was still room for the fundamental rule of classical representation, that of the unity of place, time, and action in the framework of every scene or shot. The invention of remote control devices and the practice of using them to 'channel hop' resulted in a new stage of de-narrativization of the contemporary culture, which thus became an essentially visual culture. The individual television viewer constantly edits and re-edits the images, producing, by device rather than design, a series of montage cuts. He or she cannot stick to one narrative, drifting among heterogeneous narrative fragments. However, even this innovation, finally turning television into a post-modern phenom-

enon, did not abolish the basic realist unity and homogeneity of the shot. The frame of the shot still functioned as the semiotic border preventing the intrusion of 'alien' elements in the main visual text of a shot.

The problem of outside frame space

Narrative, compositional, stylistic unity of space inside the frame of a work of art was one of the basic principles of realistic representation. The relationship between the spaces inside and outside of the frame was one of the central issues for the aesthetic of realism. The frame, as a particular case of semiotic border, was one of the key problems for the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school. Thus, for example, Lev Zhegin put forward the idea of evolution of the frame's status in the history of Western painting: from traditional icon (the whole universe is placed within the frame) via Renaissance painting (the frame as a window to the world, extending outside) up to modern painting (the frame ceases to act as a boundary essentially separating the represented space and the outer one):

Medieval painting appears to restrict itself, exhausts itself, nothing remains outside it [...] The first signs of the possible extension of the picture outside – flowing of the space outside the frame – can be grasped as early as the Renaissance, especially in the 16th century. Later on, along with the deepening of the spatiality of the picture, this characteristic becomes more and more evident. Finally, in the second half of the 19th century the aesthetic of impressionism arises with a totally new principle – the picture is no more than a fragment of nature [...] Here the spatiality of the painting is not contained by anything; it passively spreads in all directions – infinite air ocean, endless spatiality extends outside of the frame. [Zhegin 1970, 66]

Let us comment on this evolutionary scheme from the point of view of the shift in the frame's status on the Internet. The frame in the medieval tradition of the icon functions as an absolute border of the world, which is very similar to the ancient mythological world picture. The whole world is contained within these limits to the degree that

the very question of outside space is unthinkable: there is neither existence nor non-existence beyond this world. In contemporary thinking the border is the continuum of the two substances or bodies that contact each other, or in semiotic terms mutually translate each other. In contemporary thinking the ancient mythological world would seem very strange while traditional thinking would judge the contemporary world, deprived of an absolute limit of space and meaning, as shapeless and ugly.

The icon is the arrangement and composition of figures, combined by means of a number of formal techniques and symbolic meanings in an immanently whole microcosm. The core of this microcosm is the representation of the Sacred, which acts as a centre of gravitation, arranging all other things around itself. The World's ultimate border is something radically different to space – it is represented as absolute time of eternity (golden background) or relative time in its various cycles (circles of months, moons, etc.) as it is often depicted in the traditional cartographic *imago mundi*.



Eternity imagined: *Icon by Andrej Rublev.*



Imago Mundi: *World Map by Giovanni Leardo.*

This form of the visual representation of the world is based on the universal Holy Narrative (be it Myth or The Bible as the Book of Being). For traditional human beings all that happens in the world is interpreted as an organic part of a general History, with a cast of characters that encompasses every person. This collective History has its Beginning and End, which bring meaning into every action of each 'character'. And it is the change of relationship between the individual/the collective that manifests itself on the surface of aesthetic form – particularly in the change of the status of the frame as a semiotic boundary – as an articulation of the overall effect of gradual capitalist transformations of everyday life and the public sphere during 15th to 17th centuries.

The world of linear, progressive, endless history, where individuals encounter each other as market actors, increasingly neglecting the possibility of any collective Project (in the sense of medieval salvation, for instance) is no longer represented as microcosm, but as a view from the window. Renaissance painting, as a 'window', can be seized upon as the embodiment of a narrow,

private perspective on the social world, which extends beyond the frame as an external, objective reality. As possibilities of the representation of society as totality decline, the latter turns out to be a 'space' (a concept that was not understood in ancient times, when the world was considered in the local-microcosmical terms of *χώρα*, place-country).

As a result of modernization and broadening of the market relationship, the sphere of freedom of the independent private entrepreneur (starting with small shop-keepers, retailers, etc.) acting within the town community of 16th-18th centuries dissolves and the entrepreneur gets caught in the web of dependencies of the expanding system of demand and supply that evade his consciousness. The phenomenon of outside frame space articulates another space, that of the human relationships that are delocalized and alienated in the form of commodity fetishism. In relation to the framework of modern individual's life-world this new space of everyday life becomes, if not more visible, then more tangible and extensive, causing specific modern anxiety.

Does not M. Merleau-Ponty refer to this experience, in his reflections on the end of the 'naïve belief' in the world, as a picture? It means, firstly, refusal to perceive the world in wholly visible fragments, without blind spots and surrounded by an invisible zone of darkness and, secondly, to take into consideration, outside frame space, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, cannot be easily described – it is neither dark, nor grey: there you deal with an indeterminate vision, a vision of something you cannot identify and even the space behind you is not without some visual presence [Merleau-Ponty 1999, 28]. Isn't this the aesthetic on which horror films and thrillers are based? An effect caused by the presence, around the periphery of the frame, of something intangible, threatening by its peripheral presence immediately behind the viewer, who is deprived of his privileged position of all-seeing Renaissance observer.

Hypertext windows

If realistic narrative was the space for autonomous ego, and cinema space came to problematize this autonomy, then the Internet appears to be the site of the collapse of the latter. In the Internet modernist anxiety vanishes in the practices of endless visual consumption. Further development of the deep social transformations of the relationship between the individual and the collective, which used to generate this anxiety, results in the disappearance of the autonomy itself. In the context of the end of modernist autonomy – both in the register of the individual psyche (ego) and that of the aesthetic production (work of art) – one should speak of post-art of design, rather than of the aesthetics of the Internet.

Design provides practical functions with 'humanity', comfort and pleasure in use. The Internet, being finally shaped by designers, is subject to the parameters of format and not the rules of beauty. The 'format' in the contemporary thesaurus is an optimal way for the concrete product (informative and creative material) to be introduced to the widest possible circle of its consumers (or target groups) with the help of logotype, rubricator, etc.

The change in the functions of frame could be read as one of the symptoms of this shift. The basic formal feature of the Internet is not the rivalry – however problematic it could be – between the space inside and outside of the frame, but deconstruction of the latter. Hypertext Internet 'windows' being something like remote but direct descendants of the Renaissance, picturesque 'windows', make up a new kind of totality leaving no room for something external to themselves.

The Internet window is packed with a set of smaller windows, keyholes to the other windows, which in their turn have the same mosaic structure. In the infinite, mutual opening of the windows, one out of another the crisis of classic representation finds its concluding form. Looking back to the Baroque era, the aesthetics of mirror

deployment may be interpreted as a first symptom of this crisis. In the Baroque aesthetics of mirror deployment, as Jurij Lotman argues,

specific architectural space for the creation of illusive infinity (reflections of reflections), for redoubling the imaginary space by reflecting the paintings on the walls or by undermining of the border between the inside and outside [is achieved] by means of reflections of the views outside the windows. [Lotman 1992, 116]

On the Internet, the frame is no longer the stable, semiotic border that regulates meaning, generating internal-external osmosis. As a cell containing an information frame encloses a fragment of world and builds it into the endless number of the similar cells, the frames, inserted one into another in the process of using of the Internet, constantly interchange their positions: that which was inserted as a frame of information in one window, being opened as a new window might also contain the first window, which shrinks to join other links in the frame.

Thus, outside space as such tends to evaporate in the Internet. For the Internet window frame, there is nothing external. 'Virtual reality' designates the overall effect of the Internet on users: every window potentially includes all other windows so that 'reality' becomes a marginal effect of the opening and reopening of different spaces. Similarly, the Internet does not know anything internal. The space in the Internet window consists of monads that conceal worlds inside. Radically undermining the inside/outside dichotomy, the Internet is like a house with many windows, from which one cannot look out and see the general landscape combining all particular views. It is as if the subject is trapped in the room, as in a post-modern platonian cave and is bound to observe, from a distance, the drifting fragments of the outside world, framed in the hypertext windows. It resembles the Hollywood representation of the different characters of cyberpunks and hackers: they stare at flickering computer screens, being wholly isolated from the external world in their cave-like rooms.

So, all the content of the world can be found by infinite opening of the Internet windows without the possibility of distinguishing between the outside and the inside, beyond any world picture or History. Paul Virilio describes this Internet-generated experience in terms of the fundamental loss of orientation:

Together with the build-up of information superhighways we are facing a new phenomenon: loss of orientation. A fundamental loss of orientation complimenting and concluding the societal liberalization and the deregulation of financial markets whose nefarious effects are well-known. [Virilio 2001, 24].

In the late virtual-financial capitalism the very impossibility for individuals to map their positions in social space becomes an aesthetic factor. In his → *Postmodernism* (1991) Fredric Jameson demonstrates that this loss of the ability of cognitive mapping on the aesthetic level leads to the subverting of relationships, not only between the outside and inside, but also between the part and the whole, the verbal and the visual. It is these principles that constitute the foundation of the post-modern aesthetic form; they are embodied in a wide range of phenomena, from schizoid literature to literal spatial embarrassment in deconstructivist architectural spaces.

The rise in density and heteronomization of the information flow on the television takes on forms that are close to the World Wide Web. This, in the first instance, is related to the co-presence in the shot of several 'voices', opened channels of information. Even on Belarusian television, which is notorious for its outmoded, obscurantist content, the television frame has been recently modified in this direction: in news programmes two 'creeping lines' have appeared at the bottom of the screen – the first presents information about the weather, petrol prices, currencies exchange rates, etc., and below that, at a faster pace, another one offers parallel news about curious and non-official events.

Post-modern television uses different methods of deconstruction of opposition 'inside / outside'

of the frame: from creeping lines and captions to various shot in shot compositions. However, as a rule, all this television 'windows' are employed as additional elements for the main 'window' to add commentary or emphasize a detail. Here, different framed details, angles, words or figures, in one way or another, work for the main event, narrative that determines the space of the shot. They are neither noticeably heterogeneous fragments in relation to the main frame, nor the windows to the different events and narratives.



Namedni: Leonid Parfenof's history of the USSR.

The reaction to this TV-aesthetics in A. Smirnov's article, *Internet on TV* challenging Leonid Parfenof's style at Russian TV is a typical one to this phenomenon. Conforming to classical judgment, with its assertion of the unity of the aesthetic space inside of the frame, Smirnov reproaches Leonid Parfenov (and post-modern Russian television, as such) for being an unsuccessful and ungainly copy of Internet. We believe that the argument is not about the controversy between two systems of aesthetics but about the logic of late capitalism with its increasing fragmentation, interactivity and non linear composition transforming our ideas of the beautiful. Television will inevitably become more 'like Internet' in the same manner as post-modern blockbuster can increasingly be likened to one extended pop clip.

However, the mosaic-schizophrenic structure of the post-modern visual form comes into being on the Internet at its purest. Internet surfing is a new level of 'TV zapping'. If we transferred the actions in the Internet frame (say, within a page of a news site or Internet shop) to a television shot this might produce a bizarre picture, such as this one: into the setting of one serial, rushes a character from another soap opera (not in the intermission, as some sort of promotion device, but in the same narrative space and time) and shouts: "At this very moment in my story my mother has finally managed to find my brother, who was lost fifty years ago." He stays among the characters of the main story for some time while the latter ignore him. Let us also imagine that we are able to use the remote control to make random jumps between different parts of the story. Finally, let us try to imagine that, for every story told, there is no culmination or ending, the stories last longer than the longest soap opera (circling continuously in one position), and the set of characters is open and unstable. In this case, it is the Internet that appears to be such a super-television shot.

Even the relative unity of the place, time, and action is no longer viable inside the Internet 'shot'. The surface of the Internet window is broken down into self-sufficient frames of options, banners, links, etc. Movement from one frame to another occurs, not by means of montage cut, as in the cinema or television, but by activating new options and paths in the same space. This space is deprived both of an external dimension and depth. It may serve as an allegory of the post-modern social space where the individual does not exist of his or her own volition, but rather is being positioned.

The Internet as a form of visual consumption

Consumption here refers, not to the goal oriented search for information on the professional

sites (electronic scientific journals, special databases) where aggressiveness of visual hypertext is contained by the logical structure of the site and reflexive selection of information by the user. Visual consumption has more to do with the typical situation of mass user experience of the Internet, which is moulded as essentially pornographic. The loose search for useful, everyday information (such as booking tickets or searching for the latest model of mobile phone or other device), reading the news or viewing erotic and pornographic sites – all of these ways of using Internet are based on a specific type of absent-minded, dispersed excitement. The aesthetic surface of the Internet programmes this post-modern affect.

The aesthetics of blinking banners, half-opened pictures-stories, creeping lines moving in different directions at a different pace is an elementary stimulus and a concomitant, direct reflection of the new post-narrative activity of the information consumer. For the latter, the value of an open Internet page consists, not in reading it throughout till the end, but the value somehow subconsciously arises at the moments when the user, attracted by a link, opens a new window, to be attracted again by another link, and this process continues. In fact no single Internet picture or text is interesting in itself but only as a reference or pathway to other pictures and texts. What is valuable here is the virtual exchangeability of a window for the host of other windows, just as no-one in the consumerist world seems to be interested in use value but rather, in pure exchange value, the very movement of capital. This inertia of incessantly flitting from one Internet page to another without prolonged concentration, produces new schizophrenic enjoyment of the perpetual novelty beyond any narrative temporality, binding the past and the future in the point of the present. The aesthetics of preview and thumbnails has its source in this voyeuristic, dispersed excitement from passing glances at the Internet windows.



Erotic gallery: *From climax to climax.*

The ideology of mass virtual pornography is inclusive of the fact that this kind of excitement has no objective; that random selection of unlimited structural variations (say, erotic poses) is closed-loop and self-reproducing. Mass virtual pornography uses this to catch users in pornographic nets. The most effective and banal device here is to

establish the links, not between thumbnails and their full-sized copies, but between thumbnails themselves. The act of clicking on a thumbnail in a preview gallery opens another preview gallery and so on. Thus, the pornographic gaze cannot be defined exclusively in terms of sexual excitement from viewing ‘dirty pics’, but also by the fact that every act of viewing stimulates that pleasure, essentially as a pre-viewing. The pornographic principle is also present in the news sites (main Russian news sites are Gazeta.ru, Lenta.ru, Dni.ru, etc.) although rather less blatant, as it were.



Dni.ru: Using the pornographic principle.

The composition of the news site is that of a preview gallery with small textual introductions to the news thumbnails. Quite often, a news link in Russian sites will lead, not to a more detailed report of the news itself but to another news thumbnail (of course, you are much more likely to get to the expected place if you click on a link in the news line than on a banner that opens a new page where the necessary information is still to be found). The small textual introductions or captions to the news are a kind of taster for the main event, which functions like a trigger for the Internet consumer to open the news item or to shift to another. For, in most cases, the news in the caption tends to be over-dramatized to raise and suspend the expectations of the user.

For example, if the image is of an angry woman and the caption states that “rock-star A. in-

sulted pop-star B.”, this could mean that pop-star B. just attended rock-star A.’s concert and was unpleasantly surprised by the manner of her performance, but had no personal contact with rock-star A. In this case, not satisfied with the low degree of salaciousness of the event the news consumer clicks at once on another thumbnail in the hope of seeing something much more exciting.

This visual aesthetic can be called → **event logotypization** and is very characteristic of post-modernism. The events as a rule have their ‘logotype’ – the icons – visual signs, like trademarks that provide immediate recognition of the event. Normally, the logotype is a photograph of a person around whom the event is centred or another easily recognizable image – a national flag, building or other widely known object. Icon-logotype functions as a mimetic copy of event: as if you see not just a close up of a minister but the minister at the very moment of the action being reported in news caption, for example, a pop-star who is breaking up with (or marrying) his girl-friend, or a hurricane tearing across parts of America.

The structure of the news logotype is identical to the business one. In the logotype, a recognizable icon visually expressing qualities of a firm (or event) or just marking it as something singular, is situated on the left hand side. On the right one can find the title of a firm (or a subheading of the news), and below – the designation of firm’s main business (a brief synopsis or the first few lines, in the case of news). In general the concentration of events-logotypes in the RuNet is higher than that found in Western analogues. For instance, the BBC or CNN use fewer images and provide information in a more analytical style. So the general tendency of event logotypization is expressed on the RuNet more clearly.



Before & After: Logo of the company Test-Zhaso.

The logotype icon holds us in a visual chain of similar icons preventing us from digging deeper into one particular story. Logotypization replaces the uniqueness of an event by its typical character. It radically obscures the logic of relationships between events making it no more 'narrative' than the allocation of dozens of sneakers (not so much things but brand logos) on a shop's wall. In consumer spaces and in Internet space, the individual deals with the recognizable logotypes that form infinite consumerist series without forming any history.

Icons of events in news logotypes are very standardized. There is only one format of representation of news in the same bloc of information: thumbnails have the same size and visual style (colourful, expressive 'full face' of event). The meanings and values of events do not correspond to the narrative order of reading – from the left to the right and from the top to the bottom. News items are organized in mosaic pattern, either chronologically by event or at random: economic news is juxtaposed with gossip, show business news with religion, etc. Information about disaster and consequent human suffering in an African state can be situated between celebrity gossip and scandals and represented in the same format. The totality of news is made up of one huge mosaic of 'curiosities' in post-modern infotainment. They require nothing of the news consumer. Day after day, scandals and disasters occur, new products are invented and politicians are elected and all this has no history, no origin and no end, only a perpetual, isolated now. It is this temporal structure that dominates on the Internet.

The Internet trains us to be able to grasp the 'essence' of an event (information) quickly, visually as a logotype and to forget it, likewise, without reflection, to pass to other events. In the RuNet sites the news line provides a chronological flow of different events that do not compose any linear plot. These events become part of the site's archives, where they are concreted in grey background of past time for the 'figures' of

fresh events rather than previous chapters of the same text. Indeed, the reading of Internet news archives is very helpful for understanding to what extent the absolute majority of past news is insignificant and even irrelevant for the present. These news items do not have any consequences for the present: politicians predicted catastrophes and victories and they would never take place, other triumphs and disasters took place, only to be supplanted in memory by similar, novel ones, celebrities announced their new mega projects, which were just as quickly forgotten.

In addition, it is impossible to read history from an Internet archive without constant intrusions by the latest news and banners. They are inserted in different areas of archival space and this temporal mixture presents the actual events – though they were not at all new but twins of the past ones – due to their recognizable mass media image. The event is grasped visually and there is nothing to comprehend or interpret in it. As in a real-time telecast of different accidents (popular in Russia, "You are eyewitness") or in TV news, where the event in the shot is encircled with a white ring and the commentator emotionally exclaims, "Look! Look! A man is falling from the open window!" The viewer, holding his breath, scrutinizes on the pixelated texture of the zoomed in shot, the pure surface of the event in all its openness and opacity. In his article, *The Third Sense* Roland Barthes describes such a visualization of event, of history, in terms of a "third sense" (in addition to informative and symbolic ones):

History (narrative) ceases to be powerful system (millenary narrative system) and becomes – on the contrary – a simple surface, a field of invariants and permutations; it becomes the surface and the scene, false boundaries of which multiply the permutational play of sign [...] history is the senseless order that allows the sheer series to develop aleatory combination [...] We have to invert the aphorism, "the more auxiliary sense is, the more parasitic it is in relation to the narrated story". On the contrary, it is the history that comes to be a variable in relation to [visual] signifiers where it is no more than a field of displacement, a constitutive negativity or, in other words, a fellow traveller. [Barthes 2002, 502-503]

Curiously enough, is how Barthes' description, initially sympathetic to the visual "third sense" as a substance of the truly "filmic" or cinema-textual begins to carry out critical functions within the Internet (in particular, the logotypization of events in news sites). From this description, it follows that the Internet neither tells stories nor some universal History uniting all human beings on the way to a qualitatively new future. Visual signs are seen to be, not illustrations, "parasites" with regard to history, but an agency absorbing history, a "senseless order", "the sheer series", an "aleatory combination" subverting the narrative structure as such. (Not by accident, do Robert Burnett and David Marshall argue that it is impossible to define web aesthetics because any content inevitably dissolves in its own form [Burnett, Marshall 2003]).

In this, "senseless order" one can grasp rationality of Internet as a form – not so much as a specific realization, but as a generative model – of visual consumption. Indeed, is it not this habit that dominates in our everyday consumption practices when we make our consumer choices with dispersed excitement, from 'surfing' over the shop windows and an endless series of commodities? Here every choice, every purchase is not a completed act but rather an incentive for more visual panning of a series of structural variations. Because our post-modern consumption choices are nothing like things or use value, but a structural position in 'aleatory combination' of sheer series – those fashionable or actual minor differences in shade and colour or shape in retail 'collections' of garments, for example. Indeed, when we enter a shop we deal with a kind of preview gallery of items set out in a way that allows us to see the whole series ('collection') of formal differences and to decide on the basis of structural and substantial choice.

We 'click' on a commodity (take it from the shelf or show case), 'zoom in' on it in the fitting-room and purchase it, repeating this activity in a loop: one more t-shirt or gadget, one more structural variation that has more to do with other com-

modities in a series than with our body. This is the consumerist version of the perpetual return visit: we obsessively return to the 'thumbnail galleries' of show windows and the 'main page' of shopping centre hallways, where various consumer goods, installations and slogans test our resolve like banners in Internet. The consumer enthusiastically rushes from one commodity to another, choosing his or her imaginary identity which falls away from the symbolic structuring of History. Shopping is the anti-narrative activity par excellence, the burying in oblivion, not only of History but of 'Things' as well.

The oblivion of the Thing in the fundamental Marxist-Heideggerian sense of alienation takes place when the thing is no more 'work' or coming-into-being out of the origin. Alienation effaces all the traces of the origin from which the thing springs or is artistically created.

The origin here means, firstly, the concrete productive labour evaporating from the object under the pressure of exchange value and division of labour, as described by Marx in *Capital*. With the help of this labour, as Jean Baudrillard argues, man used to adjust thing to his imaginary identity; now spatiality freely plays between man and things: "The space acts as a system of allocation and man maintains the relationship with things by means of control of the space" [Baudrillard 1995, 21]. Modern man does not consume or possesses things: he puts them in order, finding his identity in "manipulating the system, maintaining it in tactical balance" [Baudrillard 1995, 22]. The Internet is the appropriate aesthetic place for this kind of manipulative, simulative possession.

Secondly, origin is about the thingness (Dingheit) of the thing. From the plastic bottle of still water the local-mythological "dark doze of earth" vanishes, as Heidegger would have said. The water is the 'work' of earth in as much as the latter freely gives it away after having received it as a gift from the sky. For Heidegger the coming epoch of the global market of telecommunications is characterized by:

Collapsing of all temporal and spatial distances. [...] The ultimate elimination of any trace of the distance is achieved by television apparatus, which will soon penetrate and consolidate the huge edifice of communication. [Heidegger 1993, 316]

The obsessive longing for the elimination of any distance is symptomatic of the impossibility of intimacy with the thing. Or, putting it another way, the thing turns out to be a superficial image and the system of such images makes up hypertext inhabited by pornographic gaze: you can see 'all', everything you want without postponement or psychology, ideally visible (as in an advertisement). But you can only view on the condition that you do not focus on every image, but keep opening new ones or, on the level of consumerism, you will 'own' only by buying, by neurotically repeating the same choices.

Indiscreet charm of the RuNet

According to Scott Lash [1990, 20], the core of the post-modernist aesthetic audience is the "post-industrial middle class". The post-industrial middle → **class** is made up of people working in media, higher education, finances, advertising, marketing, and international relationships. This young class (both in terms of age and history) is characterized by different educational backgrounds, including, but not exclusive to the élitist universities, and considerable business mobility.

For the 'New Russian' yuppies (young and upwardly mobile), concentrated mostly in Moscow, these characteristics are even more sharp. During Soviet times, the tradition of the stable family business (like *Ivanov and sons*) was eradicated and the most successful and active social groups were subject to the selection of the party-nomenclature system. The latter formed a relatively homogeneous core of the fuzzy mass of Soviet proletariat through specific means: education in the best, specialized universities and institutes, post-university ideological training (in particular, the system of Higher Party Schools), the prom-

ise of lifetime work in their chosen professional field, participation in public life by means of appointment to 'elected' institutions (starting with the local Soviets), etc.

The contemporary Russian leading class is constituted from the very different mobile fragments of the old system: academic researchers with business acumen, the so-called 'former komsomol members' (a young fraction of the communist establishment whose principal quality was their scepticism about the system and their consequent move into the area of private initiative), legitimized representatives of the Soviet 'shadow economy', criminals deeply involved in the processes of primary accumulation of capital, children of the upper-level state bureaucracy, and the new post-Soviet generation of talented young people who have succeeded in finding their place in contemporary Russian economics.

The educational background of this emerging class is very diverse: from secondary schools and the dubious diplomas of numerous post-Perestrojka private institutes, to scientific degrees from the leading Western universities. The majority of them have experience with the volatile business arena and have been involved in a number of specialized projects.

It is for this highly heterogeneous group that RuNet is becoming a privileged common ground, where a sort of unity of lifestyle begins to form. The RuNet generates this unifying effect, if not on the level of the content, then at least on the level of the representation of information, the very architectonics of hyperspace. Internet space is homologous for that social space and social mobility which is so characteristic for the life-world of the post-industrial middle class.

R. Howells compares the 'architecture' and aesthetics of the Internet with a transit lounge:

Entering a website is like entering a lobby from which we choose paths that may lead to a written text, a graphic, a photograph, a piece of audio, or a film or a video clip, or a live camera scene. This may be stylishly and indeed innovatively accomplished, but at the same time the website is acting only as a perpetual transit lounge. [Howells 2003, 233]

The lounge, as a special half-public space is the place of relaxation and meetings of people who have chosen to leave their private zones (rooms in the house or hotel) but have not moved further out into completely public spaces where one can encounter strangers in terms of class and life-style. The lounge is a “perpetual transit” zone, a space for ‘hanging around’, where people meet each other in the drift of loose bohemian network of relationships. Lounge-style communication is a domestic ‘Internet’ where the pleasure from ‘surfing’ at random, through the intersections of the information flows is able to bring profit from involvement in a business project or ‘scheme’. The latter is of great importance for the Russian yuppies, dealing with finances, show-business or trading.

Of course, the Internet is used by different social groups of Russian society besides yuppies. But the latter seem to determine the essential parameters of the RuNet. While permanent access to the high-speed Internet is a luxury for the majority of the Russian population, the Russian post-industrial middle class has almost entirely moved into the Internet. There is a general tendency for the most active and liberal part of contemporary Russian society (especially since the scandal over the reorganization of the NTV channel) to drift away from the state TV channels and read newspapers and magazines, preferring RuNet news and analytical resources. The Russian post-industrial middle class saves time and money by not just searching on the RuNet for information about cultural events and markets, but also uses the medium to arrange dates, make travel plans, buy tickets, book hotels and make other online purchases, such as books and DVDs.

The RuNet in its basic features can be understood as a form of the rising Russian social class’ “vision of the world”. The concept of the “vision of the world” was elaborated by Lucien Goldmann and designates vision, not as perception but as social optics through which every individual sees reality. These optics are produced by the class (its ideas, interests, habits, and hopes) to which the individual belongs and

which opposes him/her to other social groups [Goldmann 1964].

The Russian post-industrial middle class vision of the world, on the one hand is opposite to the aesthetics of any State ideology (which in contemporary Russia more and more systematically opts for the social-realist aesthetics) and on the other hand, it opposes itself to the obscurantism and bad taste of the petty bourgeoisie.



Ad: *The Russian post-industrial middle class’ aesthetic.*

The Russian post-industrial middle class’ aesthetic arises at the intersection of different tastes, needs, and fantasies. The first feature of this aesthetic is its visual redundancy, which is an effect of different factors. Firstly, advertisements take up more space in the RuNet than in Western Internet: this includes both the quantity and size of advertisement banners. The quantitative characteristic is reinforced by the intensity of the RuNet’s visual images and its systematic use of gif- and flash-animation, often several at a time on the screen, which creates the impression of visual aggressiveness. Secondly, the advertisement can be placed in a different structural position of the Internet page: at the margins, but also it may intrude between different blocs of content, impudently moving them apart both horizontally and vertically (much less the case in ‘serious’ Western Internet sites).

The visual aggressiveness of the RuNet offers a zone of visibility for Russian yuppies in public space. The cult of ‘wild-and-predatory’ new look,

exemplified in the city advertisements for BMWs, is one of its most evident embodiments. When the hotel Moscow – a potent symbol of the old Soviet system – was being demolished, one of its walls was used as a huge advertisement board for the new model BMW, as it were, an empty new skin for a new social body. Let alone cult new Russian film *Boomer* (slang name for BMW) or pop mega-hit of recent years *Black Boomer*. The Boomer-aesthetic lies at the intersection of the tastes of rich and sporty young people, dynamic businessmen, and criminal elements.



Moscow City: Business should visually ‘hue and cry’.

Thus in the absence of the élitist tradition of class-formation (for instance, the British model of élitist clubs uniting individuals of similar social status, education, beliefs, or origin) the new Russian bourgeoisie meet in night clubs where the side of visual consumption that could be called image investments comes to be of paramount importance. Beyond his profession, education or social status the individual is marked as a part of new Russian bourgeoisie or its yuppie faction by clothes, cars and girls. The RuNet’s visual redundancy and aggressiveness serves to replicate the night club atmosphere.

This is one of the most feasible but, of course, not the only possible explanation of the RuNet’s visual style. Those who do their shopping at the big Russian markets situated far from the city centre (specialized in food or construction equipment and materials) cannot but notice the great number

of flashy signboards designating the name or specialization of the shop, which may be comically irrelevant in size and style to the designated shop: thus, the large print word, ‘Cement’ is written in bold italics, coloured pink and displayed on a signboard of nearly the same size as the small shop whose product it is advertising. Business should visually ‘hue and cry’ about itself in the circumstances of young and mobile Russian post-Soviet economy when the physical places and structural positions in the market are insecure and floating. This neo-bourgeois milieu of the Russian city affects the RuNet’s aesthetics as well.

The RuNet: poetics of imitation

When one considers the Internet in post-Soviet countries, one immediately notices the rapidity with which the RuNet has made up for the time lost through Soviet hypocrisy and its rejection of the Western way of life. Thus, the RuNet has adopted Western Internet standards to such an extent that it is becoming an exaggerated copy of what makes up its specifics. The first generation of Russian web designers consisted mostly of programmers who systematically transferred ‘ready-made’, Western → **web designs** to the RuNet for ‘wrapping’ their own products. A RuNet web-shop was often the twin of its Californian analogue. One of the ‘old hands’ of the RuNet, Sergej Kuznecov, recalled the popular slogan, “Let’s see how it is done in America and make a Russian copy with Russian characteristics,” in 1996 during the RuNet’s boom. “One can say,” he wrote, “that all that was technically possible was copied and sometimes even improved” [Kuznecov 2004, 28].

However, many RuNet projects were not based on the relevant infrastructure or experience, which leads to discrepancies between the form (or ‘skin’) and the real content of a site. Various dysfunctions or ‘empty’ buttons (options designed in the West but for one reason or another, of no use in Russia) were wide-spread phenomena in the RuNet.

The literal use of the Western models by the RuNet lead to the hieroglyphic visualization of the meaning or transformation of verbal meanings into unintelligible graphic elements. The well-known RuNet designer, → **Artemij Lebedev** describes the results of such RuNet cloning of Western models, as follows:

All these synthetic products are not for the oral use. Sentences here function as graphical blocs, which one 'simply must have'. Why? What for? For whom? – It doesn't matter. If the 'headquarters' makes a decision to use a particular slogan written in italics beneath the logotype, then one should do the same in Russia– there are plenty of stupid things like that. [Lebedev 2005]

The RuNet's classifiers of search systems intensify the general Internet picture of a mosaic-schizophrenic, post-modern world. There is no hierarchy or system as in its previous, archaic classifications. In the RuNet's classifiers "culture" is separated from "society", "banks" from "business". Common Russian words (house, work, learning) and colloquialisms ("zhelezo" = "iron" as in hardware), transliterated into Russian English words (market, provider) and genuine, new English word formations (hi-tech) or abbreviation (MP3, SMI – mass media) – are all lumped together in an attempt to compose a system. But this system is more like the Chinese medieval encyclopaedia, which is referred to by Michel Foucault in his *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*: it is rather an illogical mixture of different classifications, some of which do not fit into any of the categories, and are therefore categorized as, "and others".

The logic of such classification here is determined, not by a myth-narrative, but by statistics of searches and average demand for the item. RuNet provides the user with the seductive opportunity to learn as much as they can possibly absorb at the expense of loss of ability to 'map', classify and to know the world itself. The possibility of universal interconnections and far-reaching and free associations is an integral part of the Internet as a form involving infinite choices of

fragmentary information and individual-passive, 'pornographic' possession of it.



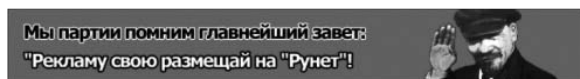
Yandex.ru: Classification determined by demand.

The RuNet's design displays the signs of social differentiation of contemporary Russian society. On the one hand, there are many webpages designed in the aesthetic style of home photograph albums, using the amateurish web-design of enthusiasts, self-educated in the elementary skills of graphics editing. This branch of home-made RuNet reflects the tastes of aged and/or lower social groups (living away from big cities and/or with small income), from traditional Russian folk motifs to the tawdry elements of pop-culture. In the West, this kind of activity is being aesthetically channelled by means of free and professionally designed weblogs, personal galleries from providers of Internet mail services, etc. (in a similar fashion Western youngsters have long since been displaced from the streets and backyards to the public spaces of cheap clubs and fast-food restaurants, unlike the vast majority of Russian youth).

On the other hand, advanced RuNet web designers trying to compensate for the hitherto absence of Russian Internet design – and articulating the desire of the Russian *nouveau riches* to have it all and at once – tend to overload Russian sites with sophisticated compositions and a multitude of stylish elements, flash-animation and 3-D models. One could call it a nascent Moscow high-tech style assimilating various aesthetic elements from

art-deco to Soviet constructivism. The widespread opinion that “a more sophisticated design is a more professional one” engenders a whole host of problems: the drop in user-friendliness of the RuNet’s sites and the more considerable gap between advanced users and beginners in the number of steps they need to take in order to gain access to the required information in a new site.

In distinction with the visual style of self-irony and democratization of Western Internet (Yahoo’s icon “finance” connotes the concept of funky business) the RuNet is more inclined towards representations of the seriousness of the new capitalism or semi-sacrosanct primacy of State Authorities. One may discern other peculiarities of the RuNet but in general it epitomizes post-modernist aesthetics. The latter is based on global standards, starting with the standard button size 88 x 31, a limited number of basic icon formats and two or three scrolling columns per page in the case of the Internet (compare, for example, a news site with a diversity of formats in the modernist aesthetics of newspapers), which are supposed to be covered with a host of easily removable, picturesque surfaces with the local content in accordance with the consumerist paradigm of the customization of commodities. All these RuNet aesthetic elements that may seem to be very local and ‘specific’ – from the visual motifs of Russian spirituality to the Soviet symbols – are just a product of the transformation of everything from the popular brands and trademarks to the matrix of Internet.



Lenin goes Internet: “We commemorate the party’s most important motto: ‘Publish your advertising on the RuNet’.”

Conclusion

Our critical vision of the Internet is not intended to be perceived as its total negation. Rather, it

aims at the balancing our understanding of this extremely complex global phenomenon which is so often uncritically celebrated in its particular technical capacities or communicative possibilities. We believe that critical analysis of the Internet as a cultural form in the broad historical perspective and in the context of late capitalist society is necessary as a guard against unlimited belief in scientific and technological progress.

Today, one hardly can expect to embrace and forecast all potential Internet developments. The Internet can be described as a nascent cultural form that contains numerous points of resistance to itself as a System, as a Global Matrix of visual consumption. Let us just mention some of them:

1. Elements of the post-classic → **public sphere** where people of different social status, unacquainted with each other, can communicate freely, with crystallization of de-territorialized groups with different interests and expert and professional communities independent from codes of political correctness and corporative ethics.
2. Forums, chats, blogs as ‘sites’ of productions of symbolic identity in the Lacanian sense of the word: identity constituted by the exchange of words in some social contour, by the verbal core of metaphors, idioms, etc. Here the individual styles of writing can resist to imaginary identity (narcissistic ego, fetishist appearance as the main substance of human qualities) in which the consumer is trapped.
3. The possibility of free access to the databases to enhance professionalism and open up opportunities for more responsible and reflexive decision-making.
4. New forms of production and mass distribution of cultural products from outside of the mainstream – from individual texts to video-art and new forms of documentary made with the

help of → **semi-professional** digital technologies and equipment and subverting the hegemony of media corporations in the field of visual representations.

Our critical analysis of the Internet as a global phenomenon serves, first, to problematize the aesthetics of the RuNet. The problem of the RuNet seems to us twofold: on the one hand, the RuNet's specific features are related to the formation of the Russian post-industrial middle class and articulate its world vision. On the other hand, the RuNet, as part and parcel of a global Internet, par excellence is much more cosmopolitan than previous national cultural forms, such as Great Russian → **literature**.

The RuNet is specific with regard to the topic of literature: the myth of 'literature-centrism' of Russian culture (almost dead, as it seems) has been resurrected on the RuNet's literary sites, which have no analogues in the other (national) segments of the Internet. [Natalja Konradova]

Yes, maybe, here, the myth of literature-centrism that has helped to stabilize and magnify Russian identity for more than a hundred years is drawing its last breath. In continuation of a sentence by Grishkovec – "in Moscow you always find hundreds of dilettantes of something", including literature. Literature is becoming more specialized and marginalized, drifting from a highly important factor of public life into a sphere of sectant circles and communities (the fans of Tolkien, Akunin, Marinina). [Andrej Gornyx / Almira Ousmanova]

The paradoxical specificity of the RuNet, perhaps, may be grasped in the system of repetitions of basic Internet schemes that produces the effect of "exposing the device" (Viktor Shklovskij), exposing the logic of post-modernist visual consumption.