

State Tretyakov Gallery

Gely Korzhev

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Modern Monsters and Bestiaries: the “Postmodern Body” of Gely Korzhev

Silvia Burini

In the mid-1980s, Gely Korzhev — a well-known representative of Socialist Realism, with an extremely recognisable style — began to work in a completely different manner: it is worth recalling his “Old Beauty” (1985, private collection, USA). Instead of Soviet people, his canvases become populated by terrible creatures — the subjects are reminiscent of Francisco Goya’s “Black Paintings”: faces are distorted; bodies are hunched, deformed and dissolved; heads turn into birds’ beaks. These strange creations, which Korzhev called *tyurliki* — hybrids, monsters, half-human/half-animal — form a rather terrifying mob.

One can endlessly set out the tradition to which Korzhev is heir: from the urtext — the Alexandrian “Physiologia” — through Hieronymus Bosch to Francisco Goya, including Albrecht Dürer’s engravings and William Blake’s drawings, and ending with the experiments of the Surrealists, from Paul Delvaux to Max Ernst, and contemporary Russian artists such as Dmitry Prigov and Grisha Bruskin.¹

In this article the intention is not only to underline the importance of this explosion in Korzhev’s oeuvre, but to show the thematic kinship of his work with the art of today. His images of hybrid creatures and the theme of the bestiary allow us to create an unexpected, but close connection between Korzhev’s work and the development of postmodern art.²

Depiction of the body has always been a concern for Korzhev. An important picture such as “Traces of War” (1963–1964, State Russian Museum) appears to anticipate his interest in the disfigured body, which would appear in his *tyurlikis* many years later. The development of this theme, as mentioned earlier, is connected to Prigov’s bestiaries and Bruskin’s monsters, but their sources are different: where Bruskin’s demonology came from the world of Jewish fantasy in the cycle of works “Alefbet” (from the mid-1980s), Prigov’s bestiary was the *leitmotif* of his work. The *tyurlikis* are clearly related to Matthew Barney’s fantastic creatures, inhabiting an intermediate world between conception and birth, and made from the heterogeneous parts of Aurel Schmidt and David Altmejd’s anthropomorphic figures.

However, that which might be considered an experiment or a reconsideration of reality in the work of those artists, for Korzhev is a rupture, or an “explosion”, in Lotman’s meaning of the word. His works can be seen as a visualisation — in an entirely new modus — of how form changes after absorbing “the Other”. The *Tyurlikis* series was probably the expression of an internal rupture, and not the systematic embodiment of a definite intention, which was not at all typical of the artist. This does not cancel out its close connection with the theme, which is extremely popular in contemporary art at the moment. In 1995, the exhibition *Identità e alterità: figure del corpo, 1895–1995 (Identity and Otherness: Forms of the Body, 1895–1995)*, curated by Jean Clair, marked the centenary of the Venice Biennale. The aim of this large and ambitious project was to research the representation of the body over the space of an entire century. That year also marked 100 years of cinema, as a result of which the image slowly but surely began to lose regularity and immutability, taking on a shakiness, unsteadiness and fleetingness of movement. Jean Clair wrote at the time: “Everything moves, develops and changes. Errors, distorted meanings, deformations, blending, thickening, approximations, anamorphosis — suddenly the entire morphology of aberrations, which is so attractive to artists, was confirmed.”³

One might recall Orlan’s “Self-Hybridisations” (1998–2005), in which the artist used computer technology to change the depiction of her own face, combining it with images from other epochs and civilisations: masks and votive statues of pre-Columbian America; photographs made by ethnographers in Africa in the 19th century; and portraits of Native Americans.⁴ “The Other” plays a key role in the reconsideration — and perhaps even the overcoming — of the rigid and normalising distinctive peculiarities of both the individual and society, and of culture as a whole. This is the theme of works such as Roberto Cuoghi’s “The Goodgriefies” (animated video, 2000), where incompatible realities meet: characters from different animated films, which represent separate and independent universes, meet and come together, giving birth to new hybrid creatures.⁵

1 Clair, J. *Hubris: la fabrique du monstre dans l’art moderne*. Paris, 2012.

2 This was discussed in Valentin Dyakonov’s conference paper “D. A. Prigov’s bestiary and Gely Korzhev’s *tyurlikis*” at the 3rd International Prigov Readings (Ca’ Foscari University, Venice, 10–11 October 2011; RGGU, Moscow, 31 October–1 December 2011). For a report of the conference see: *Skulachev, A. Prigov Readings 2011 in Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*. 115, 2012. <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2012/115/s47-pr.html>. Date of access: 05.10.2015.

3 Clair, J. “L’anatomia impossibile 1895–1995: note sull’iconografia del mondo delle tecniche” in *Identità e alterità: figure del corpo, 1895–1995*. La Biennale di Venezia, 46. Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte: catalogo della mostra. Venice, 1995, p. 31.

4 See the exhibition catalogue: *Hegyí, L.; Viola, E. Orlan. Le récit — The Narrative*. Milan, 2007, pp. 44–46.

5 See the exhibition catalogue: Roberto Cuoghi. Milan: Castello di Rivoli, 2008.



The *tyurlikis*—especially “Mutants (*Tyurlikis*)” (1980–1992, private collection), “Feast” (1984), and even “The Glutton” (1996) and “Corn” (1991; all three from a private collection, USA)—reflect an idea of the body as not recognising itself, as if the connection between corporeal, physical and spiritual life has disappeared. Simultaneously, they demonstrate a complex dynamic between that which can be recognised and depicted as identity, and that which is recognised as otherness. Simultaneously, these creatures reflect the artist’s fears. In showing us the lost integrity of the body, encroached upon by grotesque features—because, as Otto Dix said, reality has the bad habit of displacing utopia—Korzhev understands that the return to the old order of things is impossible, that deformation captures the distorted, deviating beauty of the body, as in Victor Brauner’s “morphologies”, Hans Bellmer’s dolls, Diane Arbus’s portraits and Francis Bacon’s anamorphosis. His taking this to the edge of the evident is a demonstration of the fact that an incursion into an alien source gives impetus to the transformation and complete reconsideration of a closed and fixed identity. The clash of disparate essences, and the necessity of finding a common language and point of confluence—which allows for communication and understanding—lead to a merging of the borders which have been constructed on both sides and, more exactly, to the structural renewal of the idea of borders between the closed worlds of signs.⁶

⁶ Lotman, Yu. M. Semiosfera. Kul'tura i vzryv. Vnutri myslyashchikh mirov: Stat'i. Issledovaniya. zametki (1968–1992) (Semiosphere. Culture and Explosion. Inside Thinking Worlds: Articles, Research, Notes (1968–1992)). St. Petersburg, 2000, pp. 12–148.

In the last few decades, all types of art have been filled with hybrid creatures, born out of the bringing together of virtual and real worlds, the past and the future. The embodiment of “the Other” can take various forms: a sick person, a mutant, an invalid, a monster, someone who differs from the rest. Contemporary art creates hybrids from the most dissimilar substances, from culture and from non-culture: inanimate, inorganic, organic, monstrous. Orlan and Stelarc use prosthetics, mechanical objects and bionics. Rona Pondick constructs sculptures in which her own body is joined with the bodies of animals and plants. Daniel Lee and Patricia Piccinini make

creatures which appear to blur the boundaries between animal and human. Humans, as a part of culture, require that which does not relate to them as a contrast. Today, the border between these spheres has become porous; in order to determine whether a particular phenomenon belongs to the sphere of culture or not is possible only in very conditional terms. In contemporary art the requirement for “difference” as the definition of otherness is obvious, as is the merging of boundaries between that which is outside the sphere of culture and, accordingly, humanity.

Korzhev, in a rough fashion, brings us into collision with that which differs in essence from the “normal” body, which brings with it the blurring of boundaries and the reconsideration of the very concept of identity. For this reason the *tyurlikis*, despite the fact that they exist as a result of the artist’s inability to understand and accept the new, post-Soviet reality, introduce to his work a dynamic confrontation of identity and otherness, that places him at the centre of postmodern art.

For Korzhev, post-Soviet means post-humanistic. Post-humanistic bodies, forming something like a typology of hybrids, represent a median between grotesque creatures and human freaks, of which there were many in Soviet cinema of the period—from the work of Alexander Sokurov to that of Alexei Balabanov. They appear

At the Hairdresser.

1990
Museum of Russian Art,
Minneapolis, USA.
Inv. 2002.12.4



Modern Monsters
and Bestiaries:
the “Postmodern Body”
of Gely Korzhev



to originate from the same “cursed” model as Tod Browning’s “Freaks” (1932). The image of the freak is extremely popular in contemporary art, as shown by Jake and Dinos Chapman’s “Tragic Anatomies” (1996), made in the same year as the *tyurlikis*.

Freaks are reminiscent of the transience, finiteness and chance nature of our existence: Korzhev’s *tyurlikis* are the embodiment of the transition from *homo sovieticus* to the post-Soviet, post-humanistic person.

In his book about François Rabelais and folk culture, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that the grotesque body is never given and predetermined: being in a process of uninterrupted appearance and construction, it detours the world and is devoured by it.⁷ Thus the *tyurlikis*, no strangers to Bakhtinian carnival, revitalise the “fluid body” of the Middle Ages: the artist creates a world inhabited by freely combined creatures, like sculptures by Paul McCarthy or Annette Messager.

The grotesque body is disharmonious, contradictory and obscene. The grotesque is interested in everything which crosses boundaries. We no longer see clean, healthy, young and “proper” bodies: the pull of the monstrous is a key tendency in contemporary art, giving it an apocalyptic nuance.

The *tyurlikis* have hubris in the Greek sense (the derivation of the word “hybrid” itself): hybrids are prone to waste, excess and the crossing of boundaries. For the ancient Greeks, hubris was the deadly sin, an intolerable violation of the cosmic order: hubris was embodied by centaurs, chimeras and satyrs, who insolently squeezed out from under the power of a cast-iron requirement for a world which was orderly and divided into categories.⁸ Roland Barthes wrote that monsters are those which cross the boundaries of the kingdoms, mixing plant and animal: this changes the character of things to which God gave a particular name.⁹

The still-life is the main art of nomination, and it is no accident that Korzhev’s best still-lives were made at the same time as the *tyurlikis*: these are the two different, but connected, paths which the artist trod. Even in Paul Cézanne’s work, the still-life embodied an attempt to contrast the changeable nature of the world with the order of the world of things. This can also be seen in Korzhev’s work, which allows us to feel the attractiveness of the world of things, which seem to provoke something close to envy in the artist. Here one might recall lines from Joseph Brodsky’s “Course of Action” (1965):

Mutants (*Tyurlikis*).

1992
Study for the painting
of the same title (1980–1992,
private collection, USA)
Collection of the artist’s
family, Moscow

Debate 2. 1991
Collection of the artist’s
family, Moscow

⁷ Bakhtin, M. M. *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaya kul'tura Srednevekov'ya i Rennsansa* (The Work of François Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance). Moscow, 1965, p. 351.

⁸ Fischer, N. R. E. *Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece*. Oxford, 1992.

⁹ Barthes, R. “Arcimboldo: Monsters and Miracles” in *Metaphysical Research: Art: Almanac*, 13. St. Petersburg, 2000, pp. 332–343.



Resurrection. 1988
Collection of the artist's
family, Moscow
Mutants Flying
the Flag. 1989
Collection of the artist's
family, Moscow

¹⁰ Eco, U. "Il nostro mostro quotidiano" in *Apocalittici e integrati*. Milan, 1982, p. 384.

¹¹ Horace. *The Satires*, 1, pp. 106–107.

"And I love lifeless things / for their lacy contours. / The animated world is not my hero." This poem predates the poet's better-known work "*Nature Morte*" (1971): "Things are more pleasant. They contain / no evil, no good. And if you go / inside them, you find their inner being."

In still-lives things become the bearers of order and beauty. The freak and the grotesque body, on the contrary, contain a multitude of negative connotations (distorted, bad, malicious, formless). They are synonyms for delusion, disorder, chaos, the crossing of boundaries between the human and the animal, doubts about what is normal and what is abnormal, male and female, "I" and "the Other".

Umberto Eco reminds us that the monster "embodies violence against the laws of nature, a menacing danger, an irrational principle which we cannot control".¹⁰

The new, post-Soviet reality forced the artist to choose between two directions: to work towards order in still-life — *est modus in rebus* (there is a proper measure in things, *lat.*)¹¹ — or to demonstrate the irrational disorder which deforms the post-Soviet person. I believe that Korzhev's final decision is hidden in the series of works he made at that time about a person who lived in a utopia and in the name of utopia — Don Quixote.

Behind a Tree. 1994
Collection of the artist's
family, Moscow

