# AMERICAN STIOB: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West

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To those of us weaned during the Cold War there are few certainties more bedrock than the antithetical character of liberalism and socialism. For some four decades, liberal–capitalist regimes and state–socialist regimes marshaled enormous pedagogical and ideological resources to educate their citizens in this singular truth that legitimated the polarized geopolitics of the second half of the 20th century. The gist of this truth was that nothing could be farther from the constitutive liberal rights and freedoms of Western democracy than the tyranny and group think of communism or, seen from the other side, that nothing could be more opposite from the internationalist communitarian values of socialism than the predatory self-interestedness and class warfare of capitalism. It is no small testament to the success of this Cold War pedagogy that the certainty of antithesis has outlived by decades the geopolitics that inspired it. Even as the Cold War geopolitics crumbled in the years 1989 to 1991, a victorious liberalism spared no opportunity to remind the world of its fundamental oppositeness from communism's "evil empire." Liberal historiography has subsequently memorialized 1989–91 as an end-of-history extinction event for socialism (Fukuyama 1992; Kornai 1992), as vindication not only of the idea that the philosophical premises of liberalism amount to human nature but also of the idea that socialism's experiments to improve human sociality have been absolutely defunct and defrauded. Twenty

years later, it is unsurprising to find socialism no longer treated as a viable political or philosophical form. Like fascism before it, socialism is normally described today as a perverse remnant of modern authoritarianism, most often invoked as a scare tactic for disciplining citizens into the conviction that there is no alternative to the contemporary late-liberal, capitalist order that would not be a thousand times worse. This is wonderful evidence of how liberal ideology polices the boundaries of the speakable and the unspeakable today. After all, even in the moment of neoliberalism's great financial crisis, is it not striking that politicians and social theorists alike are extraordinarily averse to articulating "neosocialist" alternatives to the late-liberal status quo?[1]

As anthropologists of late socialism and late liberalism, we feel there are good reasons to bring our thinking about the relationship between liberalism and socialism out from under the shadow of the Cold War. For one thing, the model of antithesis was always belied by socialism and liberalism's long coevolution and entanglement in the context of modern European social philosophy. Liberalism's valorization of autonomy and socialism's valorization of relatedness reflect the polarization of a core opposition in modern European political ontology; to put it simply, their philosophical projects mutually entitle one another. But, rather than pursuing a genealogy of the kinship of socialist and liberal ideas,[2] we are interested in demonstrating how the ethnographic study of late socialism offers unique conceptual resources and critical capacities to anthropology of the contemporary (late-liberal) world.[3] We are particularly interested in how concepts that originated under late-socialist conditions (in our case, the Russian term *stiob* [pronounced: stee-YOP]) can be mobilized as "portable analytics"[4] and put to critical use to reveal tensions and seams in the naturalizing logics of late liberalism. Our exploration and arguments build on a wealth of research on Eastern European state socialism and its disintegration into a variety of "post-socialist" institutions (e.g., Allina-Pisano 2008; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Dunn 2004; Gal and Kligman 2000; Gille 2007; Grant 1995; Hann 2001; Humphrey 1999, 2002; Lampland 1995; Oushakine 2009; Petryna 2002; Verdery 1996, 2000; Wanner 2007) and we extend an incipient turn in this literature to address how a deep analysis of socialism can provide a unique critical analytical lens for addressing the present (e.g., Glaeser 2010; Kligman and Verdery n.d.).

In this essay, we highlight and discuss a certain uncanny kinship between the modes of parody and political detachment that flourished at the margins of Soviet and Eastern European socialist public culture in the 1970s and 1980s and similar aesthetics and sentiments, which appear to be becoming increasingly mainstream in

the United States today. What we mean to illustrate is not a direct correspondence between the institutional and epistemic formations of late socialism and those of late liberalism in the contemporary West. Rather, we show how late liberalism today operates increasingly under discursive and ideological conditions similar to those of late socialism, and we argue that these conditions are contributing to the development of certain analogous political and cultural effects. Specifically, we argue that the highly monopolized and normalized conditions of discourse production that characterized the political culture of Eastern European late socialism anticipated current trends in Western media, political discourse, and public culture. We show that analogues to the ironic modalities normally associated with late socialism have recently become more intuitive and popular in places like the United States. And so, we argue that to understand contemporary late-liberal ideology and political culture in the West, deeper comparative ethnography of socialist ideology and political discourse will prove a remarkably helpful conceptual resource. Or, to paraphrase one of the former East German journalists with whom Boyer worked, knowing socialism teaches you not so much to recognize the liberties of Western civil life but, rather, to pay greater attention to the West's internal tensions, crisis points and to its own tendency toward overformalization.

### STIOB, AMERICAN STYLE

To explore the analogies between late-socialist and contemporary-liberal political discourse we focus on a parodic genre that is called, in Russian, *stiob*. In his book *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More* (2006), and in earlier work, Yurchak defines *stiob* as an ironic aesthetic of a very particular kind that thrived in late-Soviet socialism. Stiob "differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor" in that it "required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two" (Yurchak 2006:250; see also 1999:84). One of the key characteristics of stiob irony was that its identification with its object was unaccompanied by metacommentary on its ironic procedure. In other words, stiob was a "straight," deep caricature that usually did not signal its own ironic purpose.[5]

Yurchak describes the emergence of a stiob sensibility in the context of a phenomenon that he calls "hypernormalization," an unplanned mutation within late-socialist authoritative discourse (2006:50). As Boyer discusses in his parallel research on East German censorship, late-socialist states typically invested

considerable energy into the negotiation of perfected languages of political communication (2003; also Wolfe 2005). The outcome of these efforts, although by no means the intent, was that state-sponsored political discourse was saturated with overcrafted, repetitive and frequently esoteric formulations that distanced the authoritative discourse of socialism from its desired intimate connection with the language and thinking of its citizen subjects. In the context of such strict control over language, new constraints on the production of discourse emerged in various venues, which were not planned for by any centralized authority. In fact, it was precisely the disappearance of the centralized editorial authority of Stalinism that set this process of discursive overformalization in motion (Yurchak 2006:44–47). The emergence of an adherence to form as the main criterion of political correctness in post-Stalinist authoritative discourse led to a "snowball effect" of the layering of the normalized structures of discourse on themselves. For example, if one read front-page articles in *Pravda* or *Neues Deutschland* or any other central party organ in the 1970s, one encountered very long sentences with complex nominal structures, an almost complete absence of action verbs, and the same phraseological formulations repeated many times over (Yurchak 2006:59–74). And, if one listened to speeches of local communist youth leaders one heard texts that sounded uncannily like quotations from texts written by their predecessors (which, as we have ethnographically discovered, is in fact how they were produced). The pressure was to adhere to the precise objective norm, minimizing subjective interpretation or voice. The highly formalized language of socialist states thus catalyzed various modes of experiential and epistemic estrangement, one of which Yurchak describes as "performative shift" (2006:24–26, 74–76)—a communicational turn away from constative (literal or semantic) meaning and toward performative meaning. In other words, in late socialism, it was often more meaningful to participate in the performative reproduction of the precise forms of authoritative discourse (as either producer or audience) than to concern oneself with what they might "mean" in a literal sense.

Under these conditions, the overidentifying character of stiob aesthetics made sense. Faced with the fact that authoritative discourse was already constantly overformalizing itself to the point of caricature, overidentification sent a more potent critical signal (one articulated in the language of form itself) than any revelatory exposé or gesture of ironic diminishment could have. Moreover, although the state easily identified and isolated any overt form of oppositional discourse as a threat, recognizing and disciplining the critical potential of overidentification was more difficult because of its formal resemblance to authoritative discourse.

Overidentification also offered an ethical refuge: unlike overt political critique, overidentifying with state rhetoric did not require one to automatically disenchant communist idealism. For this reason, stiob did not occupy or promote recognizable political positions—it existed to some extent outside the familiar axes of political tension between state and opposition, between Left and Right, aware of these axes but uninvested in them.

Our contention is that a stiob sensibility has now become increasingly familiar in Western public and political culture too. We note, for example, that political discourse in contemporary U.S. media and other public modes of circulation exhibits several tendencies that are comparable to late-socialist hypernormalization:

- First, a high degree of monopolization of media production and circulation via corporate consolidation and real-time synchronization (such that despite the ongoing proliferation of digital media platforms and content channels, some media scholars argue that news content has become significantly more homogeneous and repetitive; Baisnée and Marchetti 2006; Boczkowski and de Santos 2007; Boyer 2009; Klinenberg 2005);

- Second, the active orchestration of public political discourse by parties and governmental institutions (the RNC's "talking points,"[6] paid spokespersons performing objective assessments, Pentagon "information operations,"[7] etc.). We do not view the activity of orchestration as limited to any one party or set of political institutions but, rather, characteristic of the political environment as a whole;

- Third, the cementing of ideological (in this case, liberal-entrepreneurial) consensus in political news analysis (paralleled by huge growth in business news journalism and the rapid thinning out of investigative reporting; e.g., Guthrie 2008; Herman and Chomsky 2002);

- Four, the thematic and generic normalization of modes and styles of political performance and representation. In keeping with the general professionalization of political life and the definitive role of 24/7 news television in political communication, political performances in the United States are increasingly calculated and formalized, concerned more with the attainment of efficient and precise genres of political messaging then with exploration of the thematic substance of social issues. Put more provocatively, contemporary American political performance has come to resemble the formalist theatrics of late-socialist political culture.

The comedian and media analyst Jon Stewart frequently draws attention to the recursive, imitative, citational tendencies in U.S. political discourse through montages of political speeches and commentaries that are nearly textually identical. Indeed, as we discuss below, the very opening of a ludic space for meticulous "meta-news" ironists like Stewart or the even more stiobesque Stephen Colbert already suggests that a "performative shift" of the kind that took place in the late Soviet Union is arising in U.S. political discourse. Here, too, literal criticism becomes strangely predictable and ineffective next to the parodic possibilities of inhabiting the norm. The stiob aesthetics and sentiments of political withdrawal of late socialism are likewise uncannily similar in certain respects to the positionless and even "necrorealist" satirical sensibility of the American so-called "*South Park* generation,"[8] in which, as in the cable television series *South Park* itself, all political doctrines and sentiments (multiculturalism as well as conservatism, liberalism as well as socialism, fundamentalism as well as atheism) are represented as equally corrupt, deformed and hypocritical. In Yurchak's terms, the public that is depicted in *South Park,* and presumably recognized by its viewers, is very much a *svoi* public (2006:103ff.)—that is, a public that is "deterritorialized" in relation to mainstream political discourse in its ambition to create a new home in the moral sensibility of a selfhood that is neither for nor against (2006:116–118).[9] This sensibility finds many alliances in the neopragmatism of U.S. public culture (think, e.g., of the deterritorialized "criticism" practiced by the likes of Stanley Fish).

In what follows, we first explore stiob aesthetics and performances in greater detail, turning to several cases of stiob in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and in the United States in recent years. In the final sections of this essay, we discuss more substantively how and why the institutional and ideological formations of contemporary U.S. media and political communication have come to resemble those of late socialism.

Our socialist examples come from the late 1980s to the early 1990s—the period of reforms known as *perestroika*. Although this period was substantially different from the pre-perestroika years, we choose to focus on it intentionally. It is true that the stiob treatment of political symbols developed before perestroika (e.g., it was already present in some works of the Moscow Sots–Art movement in the 1970s; Yurchak 1999). However, it was in the late 1980s that stiob began utilizing the mass media and political propaganda of the socialist state for its purposes. Stiob came out of the shadows, so to speak, and moved into mass circulation with the unwitting support of late-socialist states. This use of mass media and authoritative

political discourse for stiob purposes provides a particularly striking parallel with the cases we discuss later in the U.S. context.

### HYPERNORMALIZED PARODY IN LATE SOCIALISM

As noted above, a parodic genre based on overidentification usually involves such precise mimicry of the object of one's irony that it is often impossible to tell whether this is a form of sincere support or subtle ridicule, or both. Our first example comes from the Soviet Union. On April 5, 1987, an article appeared in the daily *Leningradskaia pravda,* Leningrad's main newspaper and the central organ of the Communist Party Committee of Leningrad (see Figure 1).

In formulaic party language, the article attacks the informal subculture of rock musicians and bands, accusing them of being ideological enemies who advocate bourgeois morality and cultural degradation. These so-called musicians, states the article, display "complete lack of talent and very little skill in playing musical instruments. . . . [The] deafening noise [of their music] reveals overall helplessness, the silliness of their texts reveals banality, . . . their false pathos reveals social inadequacy." Typical examples of this deprived bourgeois product are such bands as *Alisa* and *Akvarium!*[10] "It is time," concludes the article, "that the Communist Youth League [the Komsomol] takes a very serious look at this problem."

The article was authored by Sergei Kuryokhin, himself an active persona in the informal music subculture, who regularly played with *Akvarium* and *Alisa,* the very bands singled out for criticism. It took a couple days for the party officials, as well as for members of the informal music scene, to realize who had authored the article. The revelation caused confusion and embarrassment among party officials. They were at a loss: Should they accuse Kuryokhin of ridiculing the party and its



FIGURE 1. Kuryokhin's article in the *Leningradskaia pravda.*

rhetoric or should they continue treating his text as a perfectly sound ideological statement? Many members of the informal musical milieu reacted to the revelation with laughter. But others did not see the article as a joke and attacked Kuryokhin for "conformism" and for overestimating his audience—"doesn't he understand that many readers of a party newspaper may take his criticism at face value?" one critic argued.[11]

That the article elicited such confused, uncertain, or conflicting reactions from both party officials and the artistic subculture is crucial for understanding the meaning of this event. The article's mimicry of the *form* of the hypernormalized language of the party introduced a curious paradox into the sphere of the dominant political language: It became evident to many readers that a text written in that language, and published in a central party newspaper, could be simultaneously an exemplary ideological statement and a public ridicule of that statement. By introducing this uncertainty the author exposed an unspoken truth about late-socialist ideology: that the most important aspect of that ideology was to reproduce fixed discursive forms and phraseology, and that by quoting enough formulaic structures anyone could produce a perfectly appropriate and approved ideological statement without having to engage in a reasoned argument. Moreover, Kuryokhin's article also revealed the extent to which the Soviet artistic subculture also acknowledged the power of form in the party's authoritative discourse. Identification with the party-state's hegemony of form could trump, in their eyes, intended parodic meanings.

Our second example from the late-socialist context comes from communist Yugoslavia. Also in 1987, a group of artists known as Novi Kolektivizem (New Collectivism), part of the Slovenian art movement NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), participated in a large national poster competition to commemorate May 25th—The Day of the Communist Yugoslav Youth and the birthday of President Tito. The NSK poster won the competition and was distributed for display throughout Yugoslavia. It was also printed in the central Yugoslav daily *Politika* (see Figure 2).

A few days later, however, an engineer from Belgrade informed the newspaper that an identical poster was included in an album of Nazi propaganda art. The newspaper found the original and printed it side by side with the winning poster. The exposure caused a national crisis. Copies of the NSK posters were promptly taken down, a different winner was announced, and a criminal investigation began. The NSK poster indeed turned out to be a replica of the 1937 poster by Hitler's favorite propaganda artist Richard Klein called "The Third Reich" (see Figure 3).
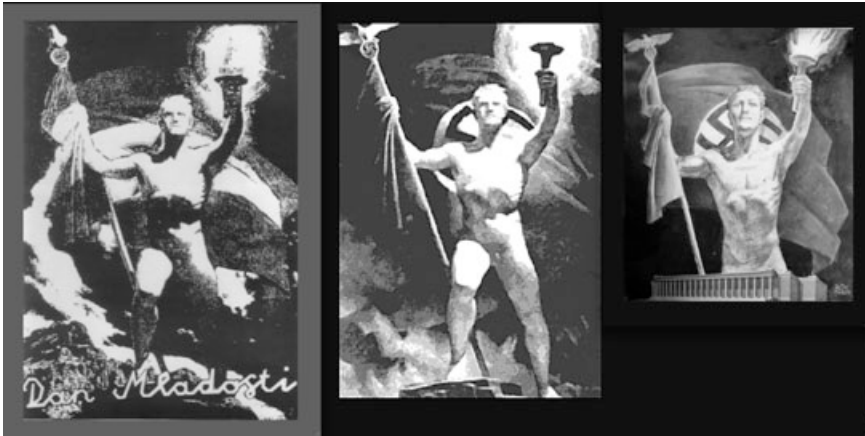
**FIGURE 2.  The prize-winning Novi Kolektivizem poster.**

**FIGURE 3.  The Nazi images upon which the Novi Kolektivizem poster was based.**

The NSK artists had changed only a few symbols: the original swastika in the center of the flag was replaced by the Yugoslav red star; the Nazi eagle on the flagpole was replaced by a dove; and a mountain in the German Alps was replaced by Mount Triglav in the Slovene Alps.

The NSK artists admitted that they had seen the original poster, but claimed that they were unaware of its fascist roots; they were simply inspired by the heroic appeal of its imagery. The general prosecutor of Slovenia eventually concluded that there was not enough evidence to suggest criminal wrongdoing, and the case was dropped. In fact, many Slovenians speculated that state officials were trying to avoid attracting more attention to the fact that the party appointed jury could not distinguish a fascist poster from a communist one.[12]

It would be possible to infer from this provocation that the artists' message was that communism is equivalent to fascism. But, in fact, members of the NSK movement never claimed that—not only during the provocation but also in subsequent years. This event, we argue, sought instead to expose something else about late-socialist political discourse, and something rather more subversive to it. By constituting a link between the visual forms of socialist heroism and fascist heroism, NSK precipitated a disruption in the formal schemata of state discourse: what was a moment earlier a good communist symbol, suddenly became a dangerous image that could not be publicly displayed. The poster crisis revealed the otherwise unspoken fact that for the late-socialist state it was most important that the formal properties of its ideological messaging remained intact. As long as these properties were clear and easily repeatable, the literal meanings inscribed within

them were allowed to drift into secondary importance, usually reduced to some generic referent (like the "abstract heroism" represented here).[13] And yet, again as in the previous example, there was also a critical response to NSK from some intellectuals and artists who warned of the danger of playing with fascist symbols and of overestimating their audience's interpretive abilities.[14]

By overidentifying with the ossified forms of (now, visual) political discourse NSK so muddied any claim to a "true," literal message that neither the party officials nor some members of the counterculture were sure what to make of them. What made this particular disruption possible was precisely the artists' performance of the hypernormalized imagery and rhetoric of the state—not the more common dissident strategy of reacting to, and opposing, the literal meaning of state discourse. And, in this respect, the poster crisis did more than disrupt state discourse. It rather laid bare a certain discursive codependency between authoritative discourse and authorized criticism that had become endemic to late socialism. In a recent review of their album, "Volk," Jacob Lillemose perceptively writes that *Laibach,* also part of the NSK movement,

> depict fascism in all its totalitarian rhetoric and ritual, as part of a strategy that confronts us with fascism—where its power of fascination and spectacular self-direction is at its most brutal, cynical, and potent. It is also here that fascism's mendacity, hypocrisy, and inconsistency are most apparent. Only in this exposed and alienating position is it possible to see through the illusion and develop a real awareness about and resistance to fascism in all its aspects. That is what Laibach mean when they say: "We are shepherds disguised as wolves" (Lillemose 2007).

Our third example comes from the Soviet Union, this time from 1990–91, the two last years before that state ceased to exist. A key feature of that final stage of Soviet history was that the party-led discourse of perestroika, which, while still maintaining that its goal was to improve Soviet socialism, now began questioning the very foundations of the Soviet system. A striking aspect of this process was a surge of public attention to Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, in the context of perestroika reform. The state's oft-publicized goal of fixing socialism's problems was increasingly enmeshed with a claim that vital secrets about Lenin's life and character remained unknown. In 1990 and 1991, the Soviet media were filled with a seemingly ceaseless series of revelations about Lenin, going so far as to expose new biographical details about his ethnicity, health, and the final months of his life. The implication seemed to be that revealing the hidden secrets of Lenin's

nature would also help to correct the flaws of Soviet history (Yurchak 2007, 2010, n.d.).

Not surprisingly, this shift in the party-led authoritative discourse on reform did not fail to provoke stiob of its own or, rather, a kind of "inverted stiob" (Yurchak 1999:90–92) directed not at Soviet communist ideological symbols per se, but at the now-dominant questioning of these symbols. On May 17, 1991, the host of an extremely popular TV program about culture and history, "The Fifth Wheel" *(Piatoe koleso),* that had a national audience of several million viewers,[15] introduced his guest as a famous political figure, historian and movie actor. The guest was Sergei Kuryokhin, whom we encountered in our first example above but who was then still unknown to most viewers in the Soviet Union. After the introduction, Kuryokhin conducted a brilliant 1.5-hour lecture in front of the TV cameras about some previously unknown secrets of Lenin's nature and their role in the Bolshevik revolution. Kuryokhin turned to his favorite style: he spoke in an earnest and serious tone, using the method of overidentification with the dominant discourse, while pushing the meaning of what he was saying to its most extraordinary limits. By that time, Kuryokhin had honed his skills in this genre to such perfection that uninitiated viewers could not discern any signs of a provocation.[16]

Kuryokhin started by saying that he had just returned from Mexico where he studied the influence of hallucinogenic substances on social revolutions. Quoting from published memoirs, scholarly books, and other literary sources (as he pulled books from an impressive library behind him), Kuryokhin explained that Lenin and his revolutionary comrades were great lovers of the wild mushrooms that grow in Russian forests. After that, showing excerpts of previously recorded inter-views with mycologists and botanists about mushrooms, Kuryokhin explained that many Russian mushrooms, such as the fly agaric mushroom affect consciousness as strongly as the famous Mexican hallucinogenic cactus, *Lophophora Williamsii.* He added his own "research finding": if an individual regularly consumes these mush-rooms for many years, that individual's personality becomes gradually displaced by the personality of a mushroom. Kuryokhin then made his famous claim: "I have absolutely irrefutable evidence that the October Revolution was carried out by people who for many years had been consuming certain mushrooms. And in the process of being consumed by these people, the mushrooms displaced their personality. These people were turning into mushrooms. In other words, I simply want to say that Lenin was a mushroom."

Despite the outrageousness of this claim a surprising number of viewers failed to recognize the program as a provocation and some started calling the studio for an

explanation.[17] Not only the so-called "uneducated" audience were confused by the hoax but also many intellectuals. When Kuryokhin later admitted that the program was a hoax, the famous comedian and actor Konstantin Raikin, who himself worked in the genre of irony and presumably was well versed in pranks admitted that he was fooled by the broadcast, "like a typical Soviet person, who is used to the idea that serious conversations in the media can be trusted."[18] This reaction illustrates not the supposed naivety of Soviet viewers but, rather, how commonplace it had become by that time to hear revelations about Lenin's hidden nature and their affects on the course of Soviet history.

The mushroom hoax shares much with the previous two examples: Instead of directly ridiculing an ideological symbol (Lenin), it exposed the mechanism by which the dominant party discourse operated. In other words, Kuryokhin demonstrated that the hegemony of fixed form in the party rhetoric could allow for literal content to mutate in the most remarkable directions and even to become nonsensical.

We should stress, finally, that none of the three examples above should be dismissed as marginal activity of underground and isolated intellectual groups. On the contrary, in all these cases, as in many others of the period, the stiob procedure worked precisely because it was explicitly public, widely circulated, and because it utilized the state-authorized mass media as its vehicle. What made stiob a representative aesthetics of parody in late socialism was not how many different types of people practiced it but, rather, how many people had experienced overformalized authoritative discourse to the extent that they became part of stiob's target audiences (that the audience for whom stiob was a meaningful intervention far exceeded the actual number of practitioners is nicely illustrated by the NSK and the second Kuryokhin examples).[19] In the late-1980s—early 1990s, such stiob acts became increasingly widespread in various state-socialist contexts and in diverse genres of popular culture and state-run media, perhaps most prominently in the Soviet and Yugoslav cases; for example, concert performances of the music band *AVIA* in the Soviet Union and *Laibach* in Yugoslavia (Yurchak 2006:253–254); the Orange Alternative *(Pomarańczowa Alternatywa)* movement in Poland (Kenney 2002); the literary and music performances of Dmitri Prigov, the uncannily naturalistic "necrorealist" films of Evgenii Yufit, the highly ritualized daily life of the artistic group Mit'ki (Yurchak 2008b, 2006), the performances of "man-dog" Oleg Kulik (Salecl 2000), and the elaborate poststructuralist lifestyle of East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg artists (Boyer 2001), among others.

### THE RISE OF HYPERNORMALIZED PARODY IN LATE LIBERALISM

As noted above, we believe that since the mid-1990s instances of parodic overidentification have become increasingly commonplace in late-liberal political and public culture as well, especially in the United States, from political activism, to comic art, to corporate mass media. We call this emerging parodic genre, "American stiob." Notable examples, from U.S. and other "Western"-English language contexts, include Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert's *Colbert Report* on the TV channel Comedy Central; parody news organizations like *The Onion* in the United States and *CNNN* in Australia;[20] a duo of political activists, The Yes Men; Sasha Baron Cohen's characters Ali G, Borat, and Brüno; the cartoon series *South Park*; faux verité TV shows like *The Office* (U.K. and U.S. versions), and many others.[21] As in the late-socialist case, American stiob is typified by a parodic overidentification with the predictable and repeatable forms of authoritative discourse (incl. phraseology, rhetorical structure, visual images, performative style) in which political and social issues are represented in media and political culture. What follows is a more in-depth analysis of several permutations of American stiob.

#### The Daily Show

*The Daily Show* (broadcast in the United States on the cable channel Comedy Central) has become a primary source of political news and opinion for a whole generation of Americans in the decade since Jon Stewart took over as host in 1999. The popularity of the critical informational potential of the show seems to perplex even Stewart himself, who consistently maintains that he is a satirist and not a political commentator let alone a news reporter. Contrary to widespread opinion the average age of Stewart's audience is not 20 but 35 and peaks during important political events.[22] For example, during the 2004 U.S. presidential election, *The Daily Show* received more viewers between ages 18 and 34 than *Nightline, Meet the Press, Hannity and Colmes*, and all of the evening news broadcasts (Baym 2005). During the heated 2008 presidential campaign, *The Daily Show*'s viewership rose further, attracting approximately 1.9 million viewers nightly,[23] with more than a million tuning in to the program's subsequent repeats.[24] Although conservative and progressive critics alike often attempt to dismiss *The Daily Show* as either a marginal leftist outlet for a small self-absorbed group or, alternatively, as a tool of corporate media that reproduces what it criticizes,[25] these characterizations miss something of how *The Daily Show*'s parodic practice draws attention to discursive and performative overformalization of U.S. politics in unusual and unusually resonant ways.[26]

Even the casual viewer can see that *The Daily Show* is not only a parody of "real" political news on CNN, Fox, NBC, and other "serious" channels but that it also provides a complex commentary on how mainstream news media organize their coverage of politics.[27] Although Stewart is himself not a practitioner of the overidentifying caricature style of late-socialist stiob, he relentlessly highlights precisely those conditions in U.S. political culture that have allowed stiob sensibilities to function so effectively as political satire elsewhere, not least in the 2005 spin-off of *The Daily Show, The Colbert Report*.[28] According to Stewart, a central function in much of U.S. news media has shifted from informing the public to performing what he calls, scripted "political theater."[29] By this, he means that addressing important social and political issues news media tends to use the language dominated by predictable, fixed, and repeated scripts and rhetoric, paying less attention to the discussion of substantive political issues and their meanings.

To expose this tendency Stewart regularly assembles montage-like sequences that focus on recent media newscasts, observers, and pundits. In his 2008 election year broadcasts, for example, Stewart assembled multiple clips from different TV channels to demonstrate that instead of scrutinizing the complex meanings of social and political issues at stake in the elections, media channels focused all their efforts and ingenuity on representing the elections in hypernormalized form—in endless figures, numbers, charts, soundbites, talking points—which are repeated from network to network and from one context to the next.

On February 6, 2008, for example, Stewart provided commentary of the television coverage of Super Tuesday. Having suggested that the day failed to produce any breaking news, Stewart remarked: "It all seems very simple to me and understandable, but that's because you're not overthinking it." The news channels, he suggested, had to make their continuous coverage of the day sound like it was much more exciting and meaningful that it really was. Stewart then showed a short video clip compiled from statements made by anchors and pundits on different channels endlessly quoting statistical figures of the Super Tuesday votes in front of screens with dramatic graphics and figures. Here is the transcript of the voice-over:

> Clinton won 57 per cent of the female vote (Fox). Barack Obama got 44 per cent of the Latino vote (CNN). In Massachusetts, Clinton won big with the ladies (Fox). Female democrats over 65 are continuing to support Senator Clinton at 58 per cent (ABC). 46 per cent of GOP voters there in Arizona think illegals ought to be deported. Of those, 49 per cent voted for Mitt

Romney (Fox). In California, where about 29 per cent of the democrats are Latino voters Clinton is carrying two thirds (CNN). Of Jewish voters who make up 16 per cent of Democrats in New York, Clinton won 73 per cent (Fox). But the white votes are going 51 to 44. I mean, he's getting 44 per cent of the vote and as you say, 61 to 38—that's not 2 to 1 for Hillary now, it's more like, you know, 6 to 4 (MSNBC). In a nutshell, that's why it's so close (CNN).

The implication of his commentary is that the networks' obsessive focus on formal devices of representation like demographics obscures understanding what actually goes on in the political process. Stewart continued with another example: "You know, statistics can gunk up the analysis of anything. You can use the numbers to prove or disprove whatever point you want. But colors! You cannot argue with colors!" In the next clip assembled from the coverage of the same day, anchors and pundits on different TV channels standing in front of color charts and touch screens try to dissect the election results into more and more minute visual gradations, without saying almost anything of substance:

The dark blue is Barack Obama. The light blue is for Hillary Clinton (CNN). We see Hillary Clinton in yellow, Barack Obama in purple (CBS). The dark is Romney, the bright red is McCain (CNN). John McCain is in yellow, Mitt Romney in purple, Mike Huckabee in turquoise (CBS). The lighter blue . . . Can I call it Carolina blue? (ABC) Brownish is Mitt Romney. More peach color would be Mike Huckabee. And sort of burgundy, if you will, Ron Paul (CNN).

Following the clip Stewart comments: "And what is so weird about last night's results? Earlier in the day I'd wanted to paint my bedroom McCain. But I already have Romney drapes. And they clash!"

Although Stewart reedits his clips, his intention seems not an effort to change the structure of the discourse shared by the news networks but, rather, to emphasize this shared structure. His montage method operates to expose hypernormalization in the networks' discourse—that the sheer repetition of statistical figures, charts, graphs, color maps has become meaningful in itself, irrespective of whether substantive analysis is absent or present. Furthermore, by simultaneously quoting different channels Stewart's commentary also makes clear that a barrage of quickly narrated, endlessly multiplied formal devices actually prevents one from contemplating the meaning of the events that these news bites supposedly represent. In

other words, Stewart's commentary shows how dominant media discourse on politics has undergone its own variety of "performative shift"—where the mobilization and reproduction of discursive forms has become an important end in itself, more meaningful certainly than adherence to the literal content these forms allegedly signify.

Another example of this shift is *The Daily Show*'s engagement of MSNBC coverage of the primaries on April 20, 2008. During a speech in Raleigh, North Carolina, Barack Obama momentarily scratched his cheek with two fingers. This innocuous unconscious gesture, unnoticed by most viewers, was focused on and discussed at length by an anchor and two pundits in the MSNBC studio. Could it be, they mused, that Obama clandestinely made an indecent gesture of "flip-off" directed, clearly, at his rival Hillary Clinton? Introducing the MSNBC clip, Stewart remarked: "Both candidates criticized each other in these last days. And when what they said was not harsh enough MSNBC found visual cues to be scandalized by."[30] In the clip a forthright sounding MSNBC anchor shouts with excitement as she shows footage of Obama's speech: "I've got to bring this piece of video that we have. On campaign trail in Raleigh, North Carolina, yesterday Barack Obama made a . . . he made an unfortunate gesture, as he complained about the ABC debate and his rival Hillary Clinton. Some think it looks like a flip-off. You can judge." The screen cuts back to Stewart, who looks excited: "Barack Obama gave Hillary the finger? She thinks!? But she is going to let us judge!" Stewart claps his hands enthusiastically. The screen goes back to MSNBC's clip: "Now, there it is, right there," continues the anchor when Obama on the TV screen scratches his cheek. Now, we see Stewart looking astonished and annoyed. After a few seconds staring at the camera in disbelief he finally says: "Are you ***ing kidding me?" adding: "Oh, you know, this was really difficult to see without my glasses. Let me see if she did that." He reaches into the inner pocket of his blazer, as if to take out his glasses, and then flips his hand out with his middle finger up, shouting: "This is a flip-off! This!!"

Stewart's own obscene act humorously draws attention to the apparently desperate attempt on the part of MSNBC to relocate viewer attention away from the exchange of political ideas and substantive political debate so celebrated in liberal discourse on U.S. democracy and toward the performative dimension of political life. U.S. news media and political culture, in Stewart's rendition, are far more absorbed with the critique of performative style and generic form than with political ideation and meaning, a condition that Stewart capitalizes on to great effect in his political satire.

### The Colbert Report

Also on Comedy Central, *The Colbert Report,* extends *The Daily Show*'s satire of hypernormalization into the terrain of stiob.[31] Whereas Stewart's strategy is to highlight formulaic political rhetoric, Colbert actually inhabits that formulaic rhetoric, performing it through the character of an exaggerated cable news populist. David Remnick nicely captured the distinction: "If 'The Daily Show' is faux evening news, 'The Colbert Report' [is] faux Bill O'Reilly."[32] Like Stewart's *The Daily Show, The Colbert Report* has attracted a large and enthusiastic audience base. In 2008, it was watched nightly by an average 1.4 million, reaching 1.5 million nightly viewers in the month before the presidential elections.[33]

The parodic strategy of the show operates through overidentification with the visual imagery, language, and performative style of populist news commentary. When Colbert conducts interviews, he makes no effort to allow ideas to be developed and discussed; instead, topics are announced and dropped, and subjects constantly switched. Colbert's presentation of news and interviews is structured as an extended performance of populist megalomania, with every sign and gesture contributing to a generic image (brand) called "Colbert." Colbert explains this strategy in a rare out-of-character interview: "Everything on the show has my name on it, every bit of the set. . . . [I]f you look at the design, . . . it all points at my head. . . . I am the sun. It all comes from me. I'm not channeling anything. I *am* the source."[34] (See Figure 4.)

Colbert's cultivation of an image of "unchanneled" authentic populism means that, as in late-socialist stiob, he performatively almost never steps out of character. As a result, other media pundits whom he parodies are often uncertain how to engage him, which further exposes news media's inability to transcend its dominant forms. An apt example is Colbert's appearance on *The O'Reilly Factor* (January 19, 2007), a popular conservative news program on Fox TV. Colbert's meticulous overidentification with "O'Reilly"'s own style leaves the actual O'Reilly appear pompous, lost, and comic. Here is a partial transcript of the interview:[35]

> O'REILLY *(before the interview with Colbert)*: In the "Culture Wars" segment tonight *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central. It's a very successful program that owes everything to me *(points at himself)*. Each night the host Stephen Colbert tries to convince Americans that he is me.
>
> . . .
>
> COLBERT *(having just been introduced by O'Reilly)*: Bill, thank you for having me on. This is an amazing honor. I want you to know that I spend so much time

**FIGURE 4.  A studio shot from *The Colbert Report*.**

in the world that is spinning all the time, that to be in the "No Spin Zone" *(referring to O'Reilly's slogan for his program)* actually gives me vertigo.

. . .

O'REILLY: Col-BEHR, that's a French name, is it not?

COLBERT: It's a French name, just to get the cultural elites on my side, Bill. I'm as Irish as you. . . . Bill, you know you've got to play the game that the media elites want you to do. OK? Some places you can draw the line, some places you can't. You and I have taken a lot of positions against the powers that be, and we've paid a heavy price. We have TV shows, product lines and books.

. . .

O'REILLY: It is tough being me. Is it tough being you?

COLBERT: It's hard for me to be you. I'll tell you that much.

O'REILLY: It is? It is? Don't you owe me an enormous amount of money?

COLBERT: Well, if I were imitating you I would, Bill. But there's a difference between imitation and emulation. Let me tell you the difference. OK? If you imitate someone, you owe them a royalty check. If you emulate them, you don't. There's a big difference. Check your lawyer.

O'REILLY: I will. I will. Now what is it exactly that you do on your program?

COLBERT: What I do, Bill, is I catch the world in the headlights of my justice. OK? . . . I shine my light no matter where that light takes me. OK? . . . And I want to bring your message of love and peace, which I understand that is your message.

O'REILLY: It is.

COLBERT: I want to bring your message of love and peace to a younger audience. People in their 60s, people in their 50s, people who don't watch your show. . . . Here's what I love about you, Bill. OK? You give.

O'REILLY: I am a giver.

COLBERT: You give and give.

. . .

O'REILLY: Every left-wing critic in the country loves you. There are no right-wing critics. . . . But every left-wing critic loves you. Why? Is it because you're French? Is that why?

COLBERT: That must be it, Bill. I'm using that to pull the wool over their eyes. . . .

O'REILLY: You must be doing something. . . .

COLBERT: I'm doing you, Bill.

O'REILLY: They hate me. The *New York Times* hates me, but they love you.

COLBERT: It's the *New York Times*, Bill!! They hate George Bush. Of course they're gonna hate you. They're haters, Bill.

O'REILLY: They are. They're scum. . . . OK. Now, your middle name is Tyrone.

COLBERT: It is.

O'REILLY: How could that possibly happen?

COLBERT: Because I'm Irish, Bill. . . . COAL-bert of the eastern rebellion.

O'REILLY: Now you're COAL-bert again. *(screams loudly)* Who are you? Are you COAL-bert or Col-BEHR?

COLBERT: Bill, I'm whoever you want me to be. I'm at the foot of the mat here. . . . You know what I hate about people who criticize you? They criticize what you say but they never give you credit for how loud you say it. Or how long you say it.

O'REILLY: That's true. There aren't many people as loud as I am.

What comes across quite clearly in the video is O'Reilly's bemused frustration with his inability to expose an ideological agenda behind Colbert's position in the way that he is normally accustomed to doing with his guests. Indeed, O'Reilly is not

alone—a recent experimental study has shown that many political conservatives take Colbert quite literally as a populist (LaMarre et al. 2009). Colbert's "Bill, I'm whoever you want me to be," his constant identification not necessarily with O'Reilly's message but with his method of messaging leaves the latter struggling to pin him down as part of the leftist–liberal establishment, which O'Reilly so effortlessly dismantles and negates on a nightly basis. Every one of O'Reilly's attempts to elicit the confession of a liberal identity from Colbert is thwarted by Colbert's renewed embrace of O'Reilly's populist positionality, in the end drawing an uncertain and uneasy O'Reilly ever deeper into conflation with Colbert's caricature, which, as in the NSK case from late-socialist Yugoslavia, ultimately exposes the self-caricaturing hypernormalization of authoritative discourse.

Although political satire clearly has a long history in U.S. and European media, we see an important shift in aesthetics and method under way here. To take a different example, the long-running segment "Weekend Update" on *Saturday Night Life (SNL)* has practiced imitative irony to poke fun at politicians for years (e.g., Chevy Chase's or Phil Hartman's brilliant presidential satires). But we would argue that Tina Fey's stunning performance of Sarah Palin in 2008 crossed from traditional irony over into American stiob both in terms of Fey's meticulous reproduction of Palin's overgroomed political performativity as well as in terms of her performance's media afterlife (thanks to YouTube, mainstream, and cable news) in which other pundits and media commentators seized on Fey's Palin for insight into Palin's (or, perhaps more accurately, Palin's Palin) character as a political actor. Like Colbert's nightly performances, Fey's intervention collapsed the gap between caricature and overformalized performativity in a way that is exemplary of stiob's core tactic of exposure through overidentification.

We would further argue that the public intuitiveness and popularity of Colbert's and Fey's methods of overidentifying parody reflects a shift toward hypernormalization in U.S. media and political discourse. Both Stewart and Colbert react to a certain "hegemony of form" (Yurchak 2003, 2006:36) in the mediation of U.S. political culture in which matters of the semiotic packaging of news content seem to have become more significant than the veracity and plurality of the news content itself. This shift is epitomized in a sense by Colbert's well-known neologism, "truthiness," a concept that he defined as something that one feels to be true "intuitively" and "from the gut," without having to relate it to facts or logic.[36] His argument is that whether a political claim is factually "true" or "untrue" seems less central for politics and news media today than whether such a claim can be represented to the public in a performatively "believable" and entertaining way.

*The Yes Men*

Turning to a different domain of public culture, we find that political activists in the West are also increasingly drawing on the parodic genre of overidentification, which further illustrates its political currency and its kinship with aesthetic and political subversion in late socialism. A striking example is a U.S.-based duo known as the Yes Men.

On May 21, 2002, in Sydney, at the meeting of CPA (the Chartered Practicing Accountants of Australia) an invited representative of the WTO, by the name of Kinnithrung Sprat, announced that on September 30, the WTO would be dissolved and replaced by a new Trade Regulation Organization or TRO. Here is an excerpt from Sprat's address:

> The new organization, which pending ratification will be referred to as the Trade Regulation Organization (TRO), will have as its basis the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the aim of ensuring that the TRO will have human rather than business interests as its bottom line. . . . The changes come in response to recent studies, which indicate strongly that the current free trade rules and policies have increased poverty, pollution, and inequality, and have eroded democratic principles, with a disproportionately large negative effect on the poorest countries. As of September, agreements reached under the WTO, as well as under GATS, TRIPS, and other frameworks, will be suspended pending ratification by the TRO.

The breaking news was reported by international news agencies and its effects resonated far from Sydney. The Canadian Parliament began an urgent discussion of the impact this change would have on current "appeals on lumber, agriculture and other ongoing trade disputes" in Canada. At the CPA meeting in Sydney meanwhile the announcement catalyzed genuine excitement. Many accountants participating in the meeting, after their initial shock became quite receptive to the proposed changes, offering suggestions on how to make the new organization benefit the poor. One accountant declared: "I'm as right wing as the next fellow, but its time we gave something back to the countries we've been doing so well from" (Hynes et al. 2007:108).

The next day the president of the WTO issued an official statement for immediate release to all media claiming that the WTO neither had a representative named Kinnithrung Sprat nor planned to disband. The conference address had been a clever hoax carried out by the Yes Men. To pull off this hoax they had created a sophisticated Web site that imitated the graphics and text of the WTO's site,

FIGURE 5.  A screen shot of the Yes Men's fake WTO Web site (http://www.gatt.org).

at the perfectly plausible Web address http://www.gatt.org (see Figure 5). The perfectly plausible look of this site resulted in the Yes Men receiving speaking invitations to several events like the CPA meeting; they attended these in stiob caricature of the discursive styles, ideology, and performativity of the WTO.

Perhaps the Yes Men's most spectacular and effective action took place in 2004, on the 20th anniversary of one of the worst industrial disasters in history— the explosion of Union Carbide chemical plant in the town of Bhopal in central India. The explosion caused thousands of human deaths and left many more thousands living with horrible diseases (see Fortun 2001). For comment on this sad anniversary the BBC World television sought to contact the Dow Chemicals Corporation— the current owner of Union Carbide—since Union Carbide and Dow Chemicals never accepted full responsibility for the disaster and successfully minimized the compensation they had to pay each victims to a purely symbolic sum of $500. The Yes Men had created another fake Web site for Dow Chemicals and intercepted the BBC's request. As a result, on December 3, 2004, the BBC set up a satellite link with a studio in Paris to interview Dow's "spokesperson," Jude Finisterra. The statement made by Finisterra during the live global broadcast of the interview exceeded all BBC expectations: Dow Chemicals was announcing the liquidation of its Union Carbide subsidiary and the transfer of that company's assets to the 12 thousand victims of the Bhopal disaster. The BBC anchor interviewing Finisterra was visibly happy to hear of this unexpected moral decision. Here is an excerpt form the interview:[37]

*BBC World television anchor*: Well, joining us live from Paris is Jude Finisterra. He's a spokesman for Dow Chemical which took over Union Carbide. Good morning to you. A day of commemoration in Bhopal. Do you now accept responsibility for what happened?

*Jude Finisterra*: Steve, yes. Today is a great day for all of us at Dow, and I think for millions of people around the world, as well. It is 20 years since the disaster, and today I'm very, very happy to announce that for the first time Dow is accepting full responsibility for the Bhopal catastrophe. We have a $12 billion plan to finally, at long last, fully compensate the victims including the 120,000 who may need medical care for their entire lives and to fully and swiftly remediate the Bhopal plant site. Now, when we acquired Union Carbide three years ago we knew what we were getting, and it is worth $12 billion. $12 billion. We have resolved to liquidate Union Carbide, this nightmare for the world and this headache for Dow, and use the $12 billion to provide more than $500 per victim, which is all that they have seen. A maximum of just about $500 per victim. It is not "plenty good for an Indian" as one of our spokespersons unfortunately said a couple of years ago. In fact, it pays for one year of medical care. We will adequately compensate the victims. . . .

*BBC*: . . . That's good news that you have finally accepted responsibility. Some people would say too late, three years, almost four years on. . . .

*Jude Finisterra*: . . . We should have done it three years ago. We are doing it now. I would say that it is better late than never, and I would also like to say that this is no small matter, Steve. This is the first time in history that a publicly-owned company of anything near the size of Dow has performed an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it's the right thing to do, and our shareholders may take a bit of a hit, Steve, but I think that if they are anything like me they will be ecstatic to be part of such a historic occasion of doing right by those that we have wronged.

The BBC had a completely unanticipated breaking news story and Reuters immediately circulated the Dow announcement on its newswires. Via digital media, the story quickly spread around the world. The announcement was celebrated in India and many others around the world were excited and shocked by Dow's evident turnabout. On the New York Stock Exchange, Dow's share price fell 4.2 percent in 23 minutes and Dow lost $2 billion in market value.[37] A few hours later, Dow Chemicals issued a disclaimer:

> This morning a false statement was carried by BBC World regarding re-
> sponsibility for the Bhopal tragedy. The individual who made the statement
> identified himself as a Dow spokesperson named Jude Finisterra. Dow con-
> firms that there was no basis whatsoever for this report, and we also confirm
> that Jude Finisterra is neither an employee nor a spokesperson for Dow.[39]

The corporation, continued the statement, did not plan to liquidate Union
Carbide, and could not transfer $12 billion to Bhopal victims because—although
concrete individuals in the company feel very sorry for the victims—the primary
responsibility of the corporation is to its shareholders. Dow Chemicals demanded
an immediate public disclaimer and apology from the BBC. The BBC was forced
to run the following retraction:

> The world's worst industrial accident is being remembered in India today.
> This morning at 9:00 GMT and 10:00 GMT, BBC World ran an interview
> with someone purporting to be from the Dow Chemical Company about
> Bhopal. This interview was inaccurate and part of a deception. The person
> interviewed didn't represent the company. We want to make clear that the
> information he gave was entirely inaccurate. We apologize to Dow and to
> anyone who watched the interview who may have been misled by it.

For the hoax to work, everything in the Yes Men's act had to be perfect to the
form of their intended targets: the language they used, the look, the tone of voice,
the design of the Web sites, the stylistics of texts and documents. As the Yes Men
later explained in an interview, "you put on the suit . . . you look it, you sound it;
you get a little of that gel for your hair; get a haircut; get a shave—whatever it takes;
pluck a nose hair or two."[40] To inhabit the language of your targets, they went on to
explain, you don't need to understand everything you say, as long as how you say it
is perfect. This language "is what we're surrounded with all the time. We see it in
commercials, television, reality-TV shows, and many people experience it in the
office-place."[41] The Yes Men exploit the fact that hypernormalized authoritative
language saturates the registers of mass media and elite channels of social
communication making it quite easy to occupy the discursive role and presence
of a media "expert." As the Yes Men remarked, "even if you make up your own
language—refer to acronyms that other people don't know, for example—they
are usually going to assume that you know what you are talking about."[42]

Much like the late-socialist cases discussed above (NSK and Kuryokhin), the
Yes Men's strategy of overidentification unfolded in stages. First, they engineered
a perfect mimesis of the hegemonic forms of discourse and norms of performance

that fooled even experts. Second, they pushed their mimesis over into caricature to provoke the inevitable revelation of the hoax. Finally, they goaded their targets (media, corporations, and governments) to respond by defensively rearticulating their ideological positions in ways that often made them seem even less sympathetic. This sequence of mimesis, revelation and rearticulation have allowed the Yes Men to achieve what a more literal, straightforward politics of opposition is often unable to do—for example, to generate events and messages that attract the attention of dominant media, and to use the circulational power of those same media to expose ideological principles that usually operate invisibly. For example, by forcing a global corporation to issue a disclaimer across all media channels, the Yes Men made Dow rearticulate publicly that its commitment to its shareholders transcended its responsibility to the Indian victims of the disaster it created.

The disclaimer issued by Dow Chemicals itself quickly became a hot story that was picked up by many news agencies. According to Andy Bichnbaum of the Yes Men, "The retraction traveled very, very far, and a lot of the articles were sympathetic and brought Bhopal and Dow . . . into the subject again and again and again. So I think probably dozens of articles that wouldn't have been written were written about it, which was the intention, really."[43]

The provocation also made visible an important fact about dominant international news media like the BBC: their practice of news objectivity normally steers away from making ethical or normative judgments about the behavior of corporations. The BBC anchor now said:

> "There is in the end a very painful sting in today's tale, though, in that the torchlit protest that appeared in Bhopal today thought for a moment that they had an extraordinary and unexpected gift from Dow. And it all turned out to be untrue and indeed there were many people in tears tonight. . . . At the end of the day, nevertheless, it is a pretty cruel trick to play on the people of Bhopal." . . .

> *Andy Bichnbaum* (aka Jude Finistera from the previous interview): "Well . . . let's get a little bit of perspective. Dow has refused to take responsibility for what they've done for a hundred and twenty thousand people who will need a lifetime of care, for twenty thousand people by conservative estimates who have died over the years because of this. Still one person dies every day because of this. . . . Dow has refused to clean up the site. Let's put this in contrast. We may have given people two hours of false hope. Dow has given them 20 years of suffering.

The speed of BBC's about face is striking. Earlier, the BBC coverage focused on the corporation as the perpetrator of a crime and praised its decision to remedy that crime as an ethical decision that should have been made much earlier. But a moment later, the BBC easily refocused its criticism from the corporation to the Yes Men, now calling them "a bunch of leftists" and accusing them of being unethical agents themselves by perpetrating a crime (of raising false hope) against the disaster victims.[44]

As with Kuryokhin and NSK, critics of stiob acts often equate the unethical use of overidentifying parody with the unethical character of the regime (or corporation) that it is imitating. But these critical reactions only seem to extend the stiob intervention in that the predictable public trial of stiob by "authorized dissidents" further exposes hypernormal investment in form itself.

### INSTITUTIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF AMERICAN STIOB

If we have managed to persuasively demonstrate a kinship between the aesthetics and practices of parody that were popularized in the last decades of Eastern European state socialism and current trends in political parody and satire in the West, then the pressing question is, of course, why? In this final section of the essay, we offer a brief analysis of two sets of conditions under which political discourse in the late-liberal West and in late socialism is produced: (1) the "internal" ideological conditions that structure political discourse epistemically and (2) the "external" institutional conditions that mediate political communication across multiple channels. These two sets of conditions, we believe, explain the uncanny family resemblance between the hypernormalization of political discourse in the West and in late socialism and the consequent emergence and popularity of stiob aesthetics and methods in both contexts in reaction.

#### Institutional Conditions of Mediation and Political Communication

Let's begin with the "external" set of conditions under which political communication is articulated and circulated through mass media and other channels. It is hardly controversial to assert that late-socialist public culture was highly institutionalized and monopolized. There is not a study of late-socialist media that has not emphasized how their apparatuses of production and circulation were strongly integrated by state and party institutions (Boyer 2005; Sparks 1998; Splichal 1994; Wolfe 2005). State committees on broadcasting and publishing, centralized state information and news services, pre and post facto surveillance mechanisms,

ideologically saturated professional training programs, expectations for the party affiliation and loyalty of media professionals, limits on the circulation of nonsocialist media, among other institutions, all helped to guarantee recursive normalizing pressure on and within political discourse in state-sponsored public culture.

Similarly, other instances of political communication in state socialism that were not transmitted through news media (e.g., the Central Committee's circulars to local party and Komsomol committees, internal party directives to speech writers and secretaries, systems of censorship in education, libraries, and other state cultural institutions) were also subjected to highly centralized forms of control and assessment by the party-state and, thus, to recursive hypernormalizing pressure (Yurchak 2006:47–59, 83–93).

In all socialist states there were clearly also a plurality of informal informational practices and networks, many of which operated outside the direct surveillance and control of the state (see, e.g., Pesmen 2000; Ries 1997; Yurchak 2006). But we are interested here principally in the dominant vehicles for hegemonic political discourse and propaganda—especially in state-run broadcast and print media and other forms of popular propaganda that were treated as central institutions of public culture. Boyer has noted elsewhere, for example, that even the highest ranking state and party functionaries actively participated in the day to day propaganda work of the East German mass media. These functionaries application of traditional party discipline to media representation (in the form of the hegemony of a "party line") both hypernormalized media discourse and eventually generated a semiotic wedge between an internal world of socialist political representation and an external world of "actually existing" socialism. Over the 1970s and 1980s, as the external world fit less and less the success conditions demanded of it by the communist party, external reference became increasingly inconsequential to the project of socialist media (Boyer 2003). In its more extreme variants, socialist media declared its mission not to represent the world "as it was" but, rather, "as it ought to be" in the self-imagination of the party-state.[45] Other forms of public propaganda during late socialism (ubiquitous speeches, slogans, songs, political placards) also became increasingly hypernormalized and dissociated from external reference to experiential reality (Yurchak 2006). This institutional environment was, as we have argued above, the perfect crucible for the aesthetics and methods of stiob parody to flourish because late-socialist media and public propaganda already cultivated hypernormalized discourse to the point of caricature. Under such conditions performatively inhabiting the forms and norms of state discourse constituted a purer gesture of invalidation than fencing with its literal meanings, because the

state media and other late-socialist modes of public messaging were less invested in literal meaning than the perfect reproduction of discursive form anyway. Put another way, to take an oppositional literalist stance against a political discourse that had largely come to view external reference or dialogue as irrelevant was itself an absurd, senseless gesture.

On the face of things, contemporary Western media might appear to be the antithesis of the centralization and recursivity of state-socialist media and public propaganda. Beyond the potent ideology that market-oriented liberal state-craft alone guarantees "freedom of the press" and a plurality of forums for open democratic conversation and representation, popular discussions of contemporary Western media and social communication now routinely emphasize an ungovernable explosion of channels, platforms and messages in the era of digital information and communication technology. The overriding emphasis on entertainment and consumer-oriented programming in Western broadcast media also represents an obvious contrast to the sober high-modern rationalism of late-socialist media. We certainly do not deny that there are significant institutional differences between late-socialist and late-liberal modes of media and social communication. Our argument is, rather, that discursive hypernormalization can occur under different institutional conditions so long as these conditions sufficiently guarantee recursive formalization and, furthermore, that hypernormalization can occur regardless of what specific epistemic or ideological content is dominant in the political culture in question.

*The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, The Onion,* and often the Yes Men focus their stiob interventions in the field of news media. This gives us a clue as to where to look in the spheres of late-liberal media and social communication for evidence of institutional conditions constitutive of discursive hypernormalization. In this respect, three important trends in Western news media over the last 20 years deserve our attention. The first is an intense concentration and consolidation of basic content production (Bagdikian 2004). The concentration of content production is widely recognized among news media professionals who usually offer economic, organizational, and technological explanations for the trend. Both broadcast and print news journalism, for example, have found the Internet and other new media eroding their audience and revenue base, causing advertisers to seek consumers elsewhere, and making both newspapers and broadcast media organizations increasingly vulnerable to the relentless profitability demands of institutional investors.

In response, even profitable news organizations have been forced to shed expensive correspondent staffs and newsroom layoffs have become common. Yet

these changes have also reduced their organizational capacity to produce unique news content and increased their reliance on news agencies (e.g., AP, Reuters) and other centralized content providers (incl. PR firms, as came to light in scandals concerning some U.S. television stations' use of unidentified VNRs, or, video news releases, in lieu of their own content; see Henry 2007). To take a striking example from the U.S. news media, with the collapse of its competitors, shrinking correspondent staffs and the ease of digital text and image circulation, the Associated Press has solidified a near monopoly over the production and circulation of breaking news content, a situation structurally analogous to the centralized news services of socialist era Eastern Europe (Boyer 2009). In virtually every small and medium-sized newspaper in the United States one can find the same national and international news coverage, indeed often verbatim the same texts, because of their common outsourcing of nonlocal news production to AP. Without any kind of state-sponsored institutional orchestration, a new technical ecology of news media and a profit-oriented system of media finance have combined in such a way as to concentrate content production, making certain media forms and genres more predictable and recursive than in the past. This has led to the familiar audience experience of thematic homogeneity in news, or, more specifically, of receiving frequent iterations of similar informational content across diverse media platforms.

A second trend, digitization, also contributes to discursive hypernormalization in Western news media in a different fashion. The institutionalization of digital media in newsrooms (in the 1980s but above all in the 1990s) has accelerated the temporality of media making, cultivating new standards of "real time" media work. Sociological ethnographers of digital news such as David Domingo (Paterson and Domingo 2008), Eric Klinenberg (2005), and Pablo Boczkowski (Boczkowski 2009; Boczkowski and de Santos 2007) have argued that the current institutional and technological environments of news journalism are engendering an increased tendency toward imitation and what Boczkowski calls "content homogenization" as media professionals draw on ideas and information already in circulation to keep pace with "real time" productivity demands. News media professionals themselves report intensified expectations for productivity both owing to newsroom layoffs and cutbacks, but also to the expectation that they deliver content not just for their primary medium (be that television, radio, or print) but also for Web sites, podcasts, and so on. Under such labor conditions, and often against their best intentions, journalists often find themselves cutting and pasting their own work and that of others, recycling extant segments of text to keep up. Even without the directive of a party line demanding lexical and thematic orthodoxy, we can thus

find mobilized blocks of imitative text circulating in contemporary Western news media that contribute to a normalized condition of communication.

Third, as a result of both production concentration and real-time digital interconnectedness, the institutional relations among news media organizations have become increasingly tightened and synchronized (Boyer 2009). Boyer's current research on the practice of news journalism and digital information technologies suggests that news media organizations use the Internet and other digital tools to monitor their competitors' news streams for cues as to what events and issues to deem newsworthy (Baisneé and Marchetti 2006; Boyer n.d.). Likewise, monitors tuned to 24/7 cable news channels are now standard in newsrooms across the country providing a continuous informational backdrop to the production of news content. It is impossible to say exactly how much discursive influence the environmental presence of competing news streams exerts over content production but two German media researchers, Carsten Reinemann and Jana Huismann, have found that German news agencies cited other news media four times more often in 2005 than in 1989 (2007), evidence of a trend that one senior journalist described to Boyer as "increasing self-referentiality" in news. News journalists, in Boyer's fieldwork experience, offered ongoing metacommentary on what their competitors were doing and continuously adjusted their own news streams to include events and issues that had appeared on peer news organizations' Web sites. This strongly suggests that newsworthiness is, at least in part, coming to be defined collectively in contemporary news journalism, not just by general professional or organizational ideologies of newsworthiness but also by real-time practices of cross-observation and -citation that align judgment in key moments of selectivity. Clearly, newsworthiness is not being actively directed here by anything like a Politburo department of Agitprop. However, as we have argued above, the phenomenon of hypernormalization even in late-socialist political discourse was not directly planned by socialist states. In fact, it was an unplanned mutation that contributed to undermining these states. So too in the late-liberal context, the homogenization of the content base of political communication seems to be an unexpected mutation driven by the institutional conditions of discourse production themselves and one that has led to the very kinds of repetitive "echo effects" and soundbites in news media that Stewart takes such relish in editing together as montages of overformalized messaging.

In addition to these three internal trends in news media, a fourth is worth mentioning: the transformation of late-liberal politics into a kind of professional performance culture (Bennett and Entman 2000; Cottle 2003; Davis and Owen 1999). Christina Holtz-Bacha writes, for example, of the professionalization of

U.S. and German political culture in reaction to the increasing importance of 24/7 news cycles and external experts for election campaigns, "The multi-channel environment has made it easier for the individual viewer to avoid politics on TV. These developments altogether challenge the political system, thus compelling it to make greater efforts to gain the public's attention" (2002:26). Holtz-Bacha argues further that the influence of "sales experts" like advertising and PR professionals in defining campaign strategy and "political marketing" (O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg 2002) has helped to invert the values of political communication, "depoliticizing" politics by emphasizing event staging, spinning, and images above political ideas and dialogue (cf. Jones 1996; Slayden and Whillock 1999; Velthuis 2006). This argument helps to account for the emergence and dominance of highly calculated genres of political media messaging, genres that in turn give Stewart, Colbert, Fey, and others the basis for their parodic performances. One could argue that contemporary Western political culture is trending toward the kind of highly expertized and insular political culture that characterized late-socialist societies, even though Western experts typically orient themselves toward market signals and performance, rather than toward party discipline and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, in both situations, the formalization of repeatable genres of political performance is valued and the circulation of formulaic political rhetoric is deemed equivalent to successful political messaging.

### Ideological Conditions of Late-Liberal Political Discourse

The aforementioned institutional analogies and trends are certainly provocative and consequential. However, it is important to emphasize that parallels in the economic, organizational and technical ecologies of late-socialist and contemporary Western media and political culture are necessary but not sufficient to account for the hypernormalization of late-liberal political discourse. We argue that a final and crucial generative element lies in a reorganization of political ideology that occurred in the West after the collapse of Eastern European and Soviet state socialisms in the years between 1989 and 1991.

As Claude Lefort argues, any political ideology seeks to verify itself with reference to an external "truth"—a truth that cannot be questioned by means of ideological discourse itself and that serves as a chartering premise for this ideological discourse. For Lefort, this external truth constitutes a paradox of political ideology, however, because it undermines the universality of ideological proposition. That is, although a political ideology must claim a power of universal representation (this being what makes it ideological), it cannot represent its chartering external truth by

definition, but instead must take it for granted. For example, in the political ideology of the Soviet Communist Party, the truth that Communism is the final outcome of human history occupied an external position to its ideological discourse—that is, that truth itself could not be questioned by means of party discourse; on the contrary, it functioned as a precondition for party discourse (Lefort 1986:ch. 6; Yurchak 2006:10–14, 46–47). And when the truth of Communism was finally questioned in the discourse of the party during the last years of perestroika, the Soviet political field and system quickly and decisively unraveled (Yurchak 2006:282–295, 2007, n.d.).

Late socialism faced such a dilemma in part because of the crumbling external authorial presence of Stalinism and in part because of the increasingly untenable gap between the discursive field of socialist ideology and the real world relations that it sought to organize. This gap emerged as a result of the above-mentioned "performative shift" (to reiterate: when performing normalized discursive forms became an end in itself, with less attention paid to the semantic meaning these forms might convey). Eventually, the gap created conditions for an internal, and for a time invisible, crisis growing within late socialism.

We see the emergence of an analogous ideological tension in post–1989–91 Western liberalism as well, because, as noted in our introduction, the ideological field of "the West" had been organized for decades through reference and con-tradistinction to the external presence and threat of communism. The evaporation of this external presence on a geopolitical scale magnified ideological tendencies within liberalism toward discursive self-referentiality and self-aggrandizement, just as happened under late socialism (after the external metadiscourse of Stalinism dis-appeared). This permitted, among other things, U.S. liberal political ideology to gradually refunction itself into a nonrelational, universal idiom. As a result, for example, the ideological slippage between the political imaginations of "Western life" and "human life" became more drastic after 1989–91, a phenomenon that can be seen everywhere in the imperial liberalism of the United States in the 1990s and 2000s, and even, to be more provocative, in the increasingly universalist ambi-tions of late-liberal rights discourses and Western social movements (cf. Agamben 1998; Ranciere 2004b; Žižek 2005). If the core liberal political virtue of "freedom" used to be defined in the United States, for example, in referential opposition to communist authoritarianism, in the post–Cold War absence of communist threat it could, and, in a sense, had to be defined largely with reference to itself. In other words, the performative repetition of discourse—in this case speaking constantly of freedom—suddenly seemed sufficient to guarantee freedom a substantive content

and presence in the world (as we recall from the propagandistic buildup to the two Iraq wars). Late liberalism, in short, has turned to recursive formalization to stabilize itself ideologically in much the same way that late socialism did. The result in both instances is a tendency toward hypernormalization of discourse. The combination of ideological totality and vulnerability in the contemporary United States should certainly remind us of the authoritative discourse and political culture of late socialism. Although the "war on terror" has been an impressive stopgap attempt to resurrect a negating and verifying external presence it has also struggled to find a stable object worthy of its ideological ambitions.

This brings us finally to the relationship between American stiob and the ideological condition that Peter Sloterdijk (1988) calls "cynical reason." According to Sloterdijk, many Western subjects lead their daily lives as postmodern cynics who feel that although the ideology of market liberalism and its consumerist society misrecognize social reality, they are also unavoidable (cf. Yurchak 2006; Žižek 1989). However, although Sloterdijk's cynical reason is characterized by passive "pretense misrecognition" (Yurchak 1997) of ideology's false claims, stiob is characterized by actively performing overidentification with these claims. If indeed the hypernormalization of late-liberal political discourse in the 1990s–2000s has made the development of American stiob possible, then we may be seeing the signs of a shift away from the passive cynical reason identified by Sloterdijk and toward a more active and unstable ideological situation.

### CONCLUSION: STIOB AND THE POLITICS OF OPPOSITION

In the introduction to this essay, we suggest that our project emerged from the study of postsocialist transitions. However, it should be clear by now that the phenomenon we are really investigating is a recursive normalizing tendency within modern political ideologies and public cultures that cuts across the analytics of socialism–liberalism and pre–post. This phenomenon can and should be linked to other aspects of modern "social hypernormalization"—that is, the recursive normalizing tendencies evident within other areas of social experience ranging from technology, to commodity production and circulation, to the organization of social space and built environments, to the forms of life and knowledge associated with modes of specialized labor, and so on—to explore the rich life of hypernormalization beyond late socialism. But even without this broader contextualization, we find that the study of late-socialist political culture and the aesthetics and practices of parody that emerged within it offer a fruitful, critical lens into the constitutive

paradoxes and mediations of contemporary Western political culture, of which American stiob is an excellent example.

The cases discussed above, both socialist and liberal, share important characteristics: they perform overidentification with the dominant form of media and political discourse and they use official state, party, or corporate media to complete their performance, to publicize their interventions, and to confirm their caricatures. The outcome of these acts is also comparable: they all expose authoritative discourse's reliance on form, precisely because they do so, so to speak, "from within" the ideological field they are targeting. Although we find that stiob performs important critical work, sometimes with far-reaching political effects, it does not fit a common understanding of resistance or opposition.

The politics of opposition usually presupposes that resistance and critique are best served by challenging the language of authoritative discourse directly. The common procedure is to locate and expose deception and deformation in authoritative discourse and then to speak "truth to power" through the presentation of a counterexpertise (perhaps through an appeal to objective "fact," perhaps through the persuasions of argument). However important and successful the politics of opposition may be, they have trouble exposing those "unspeakable" features, assumptions, and relations within authoritative discourse that cannot be recognized and described "from within," in the language that this discourse makes available. We consider hypernormalization to be just such a feature of political ideology, an investment in discursive form that is so constitutive of authoritative discourse in the first place that it cannot be described from within its own language. The politics of opposition—which is at root a conflict between different modalities of political expertise—is unable to get critical traction on the discursive formalization that is part of political expertise itself. To expose hypernormalization then, a different kind of critical intervention may be necessary—one that focuses on breaking the frame of perception and on causing a sensorial rupture, making that which is invisible and unthinkable, suddenly recognized and apprehended. We feel that stiob is one type of political engagement that is capable of such an intervention and we see potentially important lessons in it for political activism and social movements operating in the late-liberal environment.[46]

Jacques Ranciere argues (2004a) that an effect of sensorial rupture can be achieved in aesthetic acts—by deploying simultaneously two incommensurable sensorial regimes: one, according to which we usually perceive the world of things and relations, and another, in which things suddenly stop making sense, become estranged from habitual perception, and are seen under unexpected and previously

unthinkable angles.[47] Such critical action, argues Ranciere, affects us on two levels simultaneously—on the one hand, it produces a familiar and understandable form of political signification; on the other hand, it produces experience that resists signification, creating "a sensible or perceptual shock." The negotiation between these two opposites—between the readability of the message and its radical uncanniness—may result in a political outcome for the audiences that experience it, which Ranciere calls "a re-distribution of the sensible" and that amounts to a radically new way of seeing, thinking and describing the world.

There are contexts when pure opposition may be inefficient, counterproductive, or impossible; and when another politics takes center stage. As we described at the outset, the parodic genre of stiob—based on overidentification with the dominant form of discourse and its performances—is an example of an alternative aesthetics and practice of political critique. And now it is drawing attention to important trends in the media and political cultures of late liberalism. We do not know yet whether American stiob will produce significant political effects let alone whether it could ever become the basis of a new, more familiar politics of opposition. But, we do know that it retains remarkable family resemblance to the stiob interventions that originated during late socialism in Eastern Europe; and, we also know that in that context the aesthetics and politics of stiob contributed significantly to the disenchantment of the dominant discourse and thus to socialism's sudden and spectacular end.

## ABSTRACT

*This essay asks what the study of socialism and its legacies still offers anthropology of the contemporary world and argues that studying late-socialist aesthetics and practices can provide unexpected insight into late-liberal political culture, communication, and subjectivity. In the first half of the essay, we concentrate on a particular mode of parody (known in Russia as* stiob*) that imitated and inhabited the formal features of authoritative discourse to such an extent that it was often difficult to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two. In the second half of the essay, we show that what seem to be archetypically late-socialist aesthetics of parody are actually becoming significantly more familiar in places like the United States as well (e.g.,* The Colbert Report, *the Yes Men,* The Onion*). Through an analysis of the institutional and ideological conditions of "hypernormalization" in late-socialist political culture that enabled the critical parodic potential of stiob, we argue that analogous trends in Western political communication and political ideology have contributed to the rising intuitiveness and popularity of stioblike interventions in late liberalism too.*

## NOTES

1. See http://savageminds.org/2010/02/16/why-not-neosocialism/.
2. For a successful recent analysis of this type, however, see Buck-Morss 2002.
3. This essay emerges from a collective effort, in the context of the 2008 annual meeting of *SOYUZ: The Postsocialist Cultural Studies Research Network,* to rethink the possible futures of postsocialist studies. The 2008 Soyuz meeting took place at the University of California, Berkeley. The theme of the meeting was, "Contemporary Critical Inquiry Through The Lens of Post-Socialism." See the meeting's program at http://soyuz.berkeley.edu/finalprogram.pdf.
4. Boyer and Howe (n.d.) define portable analysis as a theoretical procedure wherein anthropologists "develop analytic concepts from within specific ethnographic contexts, concepts that help us to objectify or to epitomize the forces and forms at work there, and then . . . dislocate and mobilize these concepts for experimental, analytical use in new research situations." They further argue that, as "peripatetic intellectual tools" often originating on the margins of dominant northern and Western theoretical traditions, portable analytics hold a special critical potential to "uncover the paradoxes and tensions in both northern and Western elite discourses" and thus to disrupt their pretensions to universality.
5. It should be noted that we are operating here with the original meaning of the term *stiob* when it first appeared in Russia in the 1970s. In the post-Soviet period the meaning of this term widened considerably, and today is often used in Russian media to refer generically to irony, sarcasm and absurd humor (see Yurchak 1999).
6. The neologism "talking point" stands for an idea that may or may not be factual, usually compiled in a short list with summaries of a speaker's agenda for public or private engagements (compare these with Boyer's analysis of East German "argumentation" meetings in which precise topical and rhetorical formulations were distributed to the heads of all the licensed media organizations in the GDR; 2003).
7. For example, a 2003 Pentagon memo states: "information is terrain and someone will occupy it, either the adversary, a third party, or US. . . . Information is an instrument of national power, just as military, economic and political. Like any weapon or tool, the United States Government needs to use it or cede the 'battlefield' to someone else." In October 2003, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld signed a secret order for the classified 74-page directive the "Information Operations Roadmap." The key assumption underlying the IO roadmap is that exploiting information for decision making has become critical for military success. Accordingly, it must be treated on a par with ground, maritime, air, and special operations."

8.  See Yurchak 2008a for a discussion of *necrorealism* as a particular aesthetic version of stiob and of the political effects that it had in the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

9.  This relation of neither for nor against makes "deterritorialized publics" a very peculiar case of "counterpublics" in Michael Warner's formulation—as publics that "try to supply different ways of imagining stranger-sociability and its reflexivity" than those supplied by dominant state publics" (2002:87–88).

10. Two bands in the informal rock subculture that were extremely popular with some youth at that time.

11. From Yurchak's interviews with Kuryokhin and other members of the informal music scene (1994–95).

12. From Yurchak's interview with the group "Irwin," Ljubljana, June 1995. See also Borozan and Ivaniškin 2002.

13. So, in fact the party jury did not make a mistake. On the contrary, it was right to choose the symbol with the desired properties—one that was most simplified, normalized, and repeatable. As the NSK artists later explained, members of the jury praised their poster for its clear form and for not being "abstract like other submissions" (Borozan and Ivaniškin 2002).

14. Such accusations were also directed at the music group *Laibach,* another member of the NSK movement, which prompted Slavoj Žižek (a NSK member himself ) to retort with an essay "Why Are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists" (1993; see also Monroe 2005).

15. The program was broadcast nationally by the 5th Channel of Leningrad Television.

16. Including most of the TV producers, with the exception of the journalist who invited Kuryokhin.

17. The next day after the broadcast a group of old party members went to the office of the Secretary on Ideology at Leningrad Party Obkom (Regional Headquarters) demanding a clarification on whether it was true that Lenin's nature was contaminated by mushrooms (Interview with Sholokhov in Mishenin 2008).

18. Interview with Raikin broadcast in the program "Tikhii Dom. In Memory of Kuryokhin," RTR television channel, July 1996.

19. The view that the phenomenon of stiob was relevant only to a small segment of the late-socialist population (e.g., artists and other savvy urban youth) erroneously assumes that hypernormalization of political discourse was experienced only by these people, whereas for others the form of authoritative discourse remained flexible and open to creative engagements (and that therefore overidentification with that form would simply have no effects).

20. "Chaser Non-Stop News Network." See http://www.cnnn.com.

21. There is also a tradition of activist performance known as culture jamming, which utilizes certain elements of the stiob genre. Among well-known recent examples of culture jamming are "Billionaires for Bush," "The Oil Enforcement Agency," and "Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping." The current protest movement of student and faculty at UC Berkeley against the extreme rise of tuition fees, staff layoffs, and attempts of the Board of Regents to effectively privatize the university's public and affordable education, have successfully employed strategies of overidentification to make their message heard by the mass media, university administration, and apathetic members of the student body. See, for example, activities of UCMeP (University of California Movement for Efficient Privatization) at http://ucmep.wordpress.com/. See also interview with UCMeP cofounders at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iC3SqHOH8Ls&feature=player_embedded#. (Both sites accessed March 21, 2010.)

22. "Bill O'Reilly Calls Viewers of 'The Daily Show with Jon Stewart' a Bunch of 'Stoned Slackers' and 'Dopey Kids' during Interview with Jon Stewart on 'The O'Reilly Factor.'" PR Newswire, September 30, 2004; http://www2.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?acct=109&story=/www/story/09–30–2004/0002262661&edate; accessed February 16, 2010.

23. Nielsen Media Research (December 31, 2007–October 26, 2008).

24. The original broadcasts of certain popular episodes were watched by even more people. For example, the two episodes with the biggest audience in *The Daily Show's* history were Michelle

Obama's interview on October 8, 2008 with three million viewers, and Barack Obama's interview on October 29, 2008 with 3.6 million viewers.

25. See Baumgartner and Morris 2006.

26. In a recent book, Janine Wedel (2009) also analyzes the rise of the satire practiced by Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Tina Fey in relation to the current political culture in the United States. Her argument differs from ours in that she focuses her attention not on the hypernormalization of political and media discourse but on the alleged moral corruption of the U.S. political sphere.

27. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* may seem substantially different from our earlier examples of Kuryokhin's and NSK's provocations in that Stewart's and Colbert's viewers are aware that their shows are ironic. However, these shows are popular not solely as sources of humor, but also as serious political analysis. They thus blur the line between serious political commentary and ironic parody much as Kuryokhin's and NSK's provocations did.

28. *The Colbert Report* was cocreated by Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Ben Karlin. Karlin had previously written for *The Daily Show* and, before that, for the parody newspaper, *The Onion* (Finn 2006).

29. In a famous episode of the political program "Crossfire" on CNN (October 15, 2004) Stewart accused the hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala of performing political discussion in form only, at the expense of any real debate of issues: "you're doing theater, when you should be doing debate, which would be great"; see http://mediamatters.org/research/200410160003, accessed December 10, 2009.

30. *The Daily Show,* April 21, 2008.

31. Stewart says: *The Colbert Report* "is made of the same genetic material as our show. It freshened up our perspective and completed our thought" (*Bill Moyer Journal,* PBS, April 27, 2007).

32. *New Yorker*, July 25, 2005.

33. Nielsen Media Research (December 31, 2007–October 26, 2008, Persons 2+ Delivery. Most Current). Nielsen Media Research (September 29, 2008–October 26, 2008, Live + SD).

34. "Stephen Colbert," interview by Nathan Rabin, *AV Club,* January 25, 2006; see http://www.avclub.com/articles/stephen-colbert,13970, accessed December 10, 2009.

35. See full transcript on Fox News Web site, http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933, 244882,00.html, accessed December 10, 2009.

36. In 2006, Merriam-Webster officially incorporated Colbert's term *truthiness* into the English lexicon and gave it its "Word of the Year Award." Following Colbert, Merriam-Webster defined truthiness in two ways, as "truth that comes from the gut, not books" and as "the quality of preferring concepts of facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts of facts known to be true"; see http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/12/12/opinion/meyer/main2250923.shtml, accessed on December 10, 2009.

37. Transcribed from the video interview; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiWlvBro9eI, accessed on December 10, 2009.

38. Democracy Now broadcast, December 6, 2004; see http://www.democracynow.org/ 2004/12/6/yes_men_hoax_on_bbc_reminds, accessed September 2008. Dow's shares recovered these losses by the end of the day.

39. Democracy Now broadcast, December 6, 2004; see http://www.democracynow.org/ 2004/12/6/yes_men_hoax_on_bbc_reminds, accessed September 2008.

40. See Vale 2006:35.

41. See Vale 2006:35.

42. See Vale 2006:35.

43. See Vale 2006:35.

44. BBC Channel 4, December 3, 2004, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiWlvBro9eI, accessed on December 10, 2009.

45. In this, late-socialist media echoed the task of the genre of "socialist realism" in literary fiction (see Clark 1985 for a discussion of the latter).

46. Yurchak (2008a) investigates another political tactic, also emerging in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, which he calls "the politics of indistinction," that differs from stiob but that may achieve comparable results.

47.     This second part of the tactic is related to the concept of "estrangement" *(ostranenie)* developed by the Russian formalists (see Shklovsky 1990). Boym (1996) argues that the Soviet dissident intelligentsia in the 1960s and 1970s practiced "estrangement" as a strategy of survival within Soviet society. Stiob as we describe it differs from this tactic in important ways: instead of making things strange stiob's tactic of overidentification is based on making them more familiar and authentic than the real thing. This difference highlights the generational distinction between 1960s oppositional dissidents and Soviet youth of the 1970s and 1980s, many of whom neither supported, nor opposed, the "system" and who therefore practiced a different politics (see Yurchak 2006 and 2008b:11 n. 10).

*Editors Note*: *Cultural Anthropology* has published a number of essays on U.S. political culture. See, for example Joseph Masco's "'Survival Is Your Business': Engineering Ruins and Affect in Nuclear America" (2008), George Lipsitz's "Learning from New Orleans: The Social Warrant of Hostile Privatism and Competitive Consumer Citizenship" (2006); Casey Nelson Blake's "The Usable Past, the Comfortable Past, and the Civic Past: Memory in Contemporary America" (1999); and Gary Downey's "Risk in Culture: The American Conflict over Nuclear Power" (1986). *Cultural Anthropology* has also published extensively on the dynamics, cultures, and legacies of socialism. See, for example, Tomas Matza's "Moscow's Echo: Technologies of the Self, Publics, and Politics on the Russian Talk Show" (2009); Nancy Ries's "Potato Ontology: Surviving Postsocialism in Russia" (2009); Karolina Szmagalska-Follis's "Repossession: Notes on Restoration and Redemption in Ukraine's Western Borderland" (2008); and Paul Manning's "Rose-Colored Glasses? Color Revolutions and Cartoon Chaos in Postsocialist Georgia" (2007).

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