

LITERARY WEBLOGS? WHAT HAPPENS IN RUSSIAN WRITERS' BLOGS

Ellen Rutten

analysis

In their blogs, Russian literary authors mingle artistic and more pragmatic elements into one conceptual whole, without intervention from editors or designers. The result is a composition in which literary elements blend with other forms of communicative and creative expression. One can perhaps best summarize the genre, with its heterogeneous functions of literary, social-network and marketing tool, as a kreatiff - a post-Soviet neologism that conjoins notions of literary creation, commodification, and digitality.

In twenty-first century Russia, a major platform for literary production is the blog, a frequently modified webpage with entries archived in reverse chronological order. Among Russian Internet users, this online self-publication instrument attracted increasing attention ever since Roman Leibov entered the first Russian entry on February 1, 2001. Eight years later, the Russian-speaking blogosphere has burgeoned to a solid 6,3 million blogs, the most popular of which attract tens of thousands of readers on a daily basis.¹

If their authors range from enthusiastic school girls to right-wing activists, then a substantial group of Russian bloggers focuses specifically on literary writing. A literary orientation marks the Russian-speaking Internet in general, which has manifested a dazzling online literary activity from the start. At the core of this flourishing online literary landscape is the literary weblog, a belles-lettres genre which makes hearts beat faster especially in Russia. With (literary) blog research being in its infancy it is hard to give exact percentages, but that a substantial number of Russian blogs serves as a tool for literary creation is beyond doubt.

Or is it? When exactly can a blog be labeled 'literary'? If one believes the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, the term 'literature' has since the mid-twentieth century been reserved for 'creative, imaginative, fictional, or non-practical' writing. That definition is turned topsy-turvy by the weblog and its wedlocks of formal with informal, textual with graphic-cum-audiovisual, and esthetic with

practical or commercial elements.

Obviously, this blurring of borders between literary and non-literary creation is not unprecedented. Writers never confined themselves rigidly to literary spheres; literary scholars haven't hesitated to venture beyond them; and neither is the blog the spanking new discursive genre for which web utopians take it. Media theorists have convincingly shown just how variegated a list of long-familiar discursive genres weblogs remediate – from diaries and poetry albums to street talk, and from ship logs to kitchen calendars, or, to coin two Russian examples, from *samizdat* to *stengazety*.

What *is* new is the fact that in their blogs, literary authors mingle artistic and more pragmatic elements into one conceptual whole, without intervention from editors or designers. The result is a composition in which literary elements blend with other forms of communicative and creative expression. This process of hybridization, so some argue, is particularly intense in the Russian-speaking blogosphere.

This article zooms in on that Russian blogosphere – more particularly, on a selection of a) professional writers who live off literary and/or creative writing, and b) authors for whom that is not the case, but who do enjoy a high symbolic status in professional literary-intellectual circles and whose writing is singled out in quality journals such as *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* [New Literary Review] or *Novyi mir* [New World].

'WHERE TO FIND AQUAVIT?' THE BLOG AS LITERARY SAFETY ZONE

Visitors to the blog of writer-cum-essayist Tat'iana

¹ Figures based on Yandex' daily updated blog report of 26 January, 2009 (blogs.yandex.ru/).

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Tolstaia (*tanyant.livejournal.com*) are likely to stumble across a large number of literarily oriented posts.² One can hardly call her weblog a literary endeavor in the classical sense of the word, however: besides literary sketches and mini-essays, the author treats visitors to happy Easter wishes; recipees for cakes and salads; links to her own talkshow, or to films or pictures which the author deems funny; invitations to read or attend her interviews; or practical requests ('where do I find Aquavit in Moscow?').

This mongrel form – does one come here to enjoy literary writing? to watch pictures? to decide where to go tonight? – is not unique for Tolstaia's blog. On that of the poet Dmitrii Vodennikov (*vodennikov.livejournal.com*), poems and prose fragments alternate with pictures and cartoons, how-to-get-there information on performances, questions to readers ('which films do you recommend watching?', 'what will you devour sorry eat on New Year's eve?'), and links to interviews with the author, films of public readings, or to his writings in other media. The blog in no way indicates formally when a post contains practical information and when a carefully crafted poem.

A closer look at (the publicly available entries of)³ other writers' blogs learns that Vodennikov's heterogeneous posts are no exception either. In the weblog of Svetlana Martynchik, alias Maks Frai, literary texts and PR announcements are outweighed by numerous photograph-only posts (*chingizid.livejournal.com*). In that of Evgenii Grishkovets (*e-grishkovets.livejournal.com*) texts are also interlarded with photographs and audiovisual fragments, although here the diaristic-epistemolary function prevails, with most posts starting and ending with 'Hello!' and 'Your Grishkovets'. Dmitrii Baviľ'skii's

blog (*paslen.livejournal.com*) not only combines most of the functions mentioned, but in order to enter it, readers must scroll along eight entries with sizable pictures of his novel covers.

To these selected examples of professional writers' blogs, many could be added. Much could be said, too, about their design: rather than working with professional book designers, the authors devise their own pages, pick their own background colours and font types, and opt for a personal user picture that can vary from a classical portrait photograph (Grishkovets) to an intricate geometrical figure (Vodennikov).

In theoretical terms, how should one define the jumbles of literary and non-literary components that many blogs present? On the pages of this journal, in 2006 Gasan Gusejnov branded the blog post a 'new literary genre'.⁴ Four years earlier, the Russian literary historians Irina Kaspé and Varvara Smurova went a step further by rejecting the idea of a 'literary' blog altogether.⁵ To them, what makes Russian blogs unique is their 'near-literariness' (*okololiteraturnost*): the tendency to serve as a 'safety zone' where literature is not 'the centre of attention', where one can write 'according to the laws of the amateur literary community'. If Kaspé and Smurova do not provide any statistics, then Russian writers' blogs do tend to comply with their findings. Tolstaia, for one, openly starts her blog by marking it as a distinct discursive space, where she is entitled to '– writing with mistakes; – disobeying all grammar rules if I feel like it; – swearing'.

This preoccupation with amateur or 'non-literary literary creation' is far from unparalleled in literary history, and at the moment it ranks high on the agenda of Russia's literary community. In the poetry

² English translations of Tolstaia's fiction include *White Walls. The Collected Stories* (transl. Gambrell and Bouis), New York 2007; and *The Slynx* (transl. Gambrell), New York 2007.

³ Bloggers can opt for 'friends-only' posts, which can solely be seen by bloggers whom the author has formally accepted as readers ('friends').

⁴ See Gusejnov's article *Five Poets in the Russian Blogosphere* in *kultura* October 10/2006, available online at www.kultura-rus.de/kultura_dokumente/ausgaben/englisch/kultura_10_2006_EN.pdf.

⁵ Kaspé and Smurova focus on *Livejournal.com*, where the majority of Russian blogs is launched.

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journal *Jacket*, Moscow-born poet and translator Peter Golub recently wrote that especially younger post-Soviet poets ‘have an inclusive approach to poetry’, which makes older colleagues wonder ‘whether the writing counts as poetry at all’.

But if one must believe Kaspé and Smurova, ‘near-literariness’ has become a principal writing mode especially in blogs – or rather, in *Russian* blogs: only there, so they argue, are literary fragments so eagerly and persistently embedded in a mishmash of ‘emphatic reactions, mundane advice, literary instructions, offers to help out, to bring some tangerines, to adjust the second paragraph, or to rearrange a few words’.

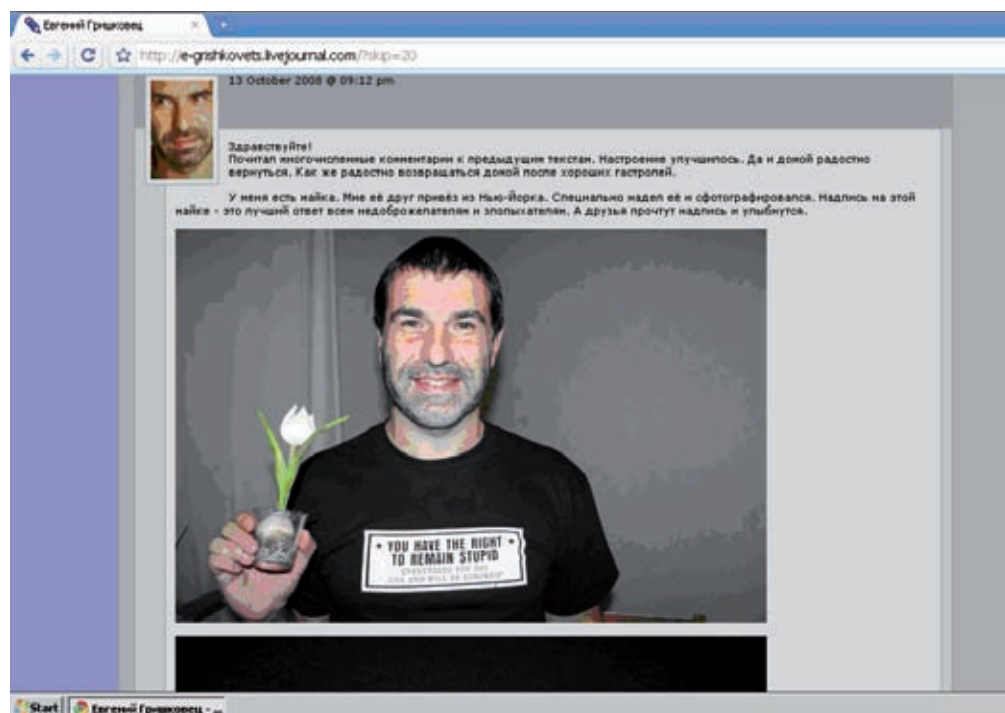
ADD TO CART. THE BLOG AS PR TOOL

As formulated in this last quotation, Kaspé and Smurova’s ideas open up questions about another distinctive feature of blogs, one which turns them into even more hybrid creations: interactivity.

A blog is rarely a product of one author: other blog-

gers can react to posts in comments which are appended to the original entries. Although, as surveys show, most blogs generate little to no comments, in Russia the relevance of comment threads to writers’ blogs is hard to overrate. Authors who were established public figures when starting their blog, such as Grishkovets or Tolstaia, receive hundreds of comments per entry. They often participate in the commentary process by entering into a dialogue with readers. Bewildering many a critic today, this shift in reader-writer relation makes it hard to establish where the original author’s voice ends and the reader’s voice comes in – particularly when, as has happened more than once, authors replace first versions of literary posts with new versions adapted by their commentator-readers.

The comment function is relevant, too, in terms of literary commodification. Rather than introspective diaries, blogs are a product designed to be consumed. Not coincidentally is *tysiachnik* – the word for bloggers which generate over a thousand read-



Blog Grishkovets: ‘And the friends will smile.’ – Return to the ‘virtual home’. (<http://e-grishkovets.livejournal.com/?skip=20>, screenshot fragment)

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ers – a popular neologism in twenty-first century Russia. The writers mentioned are all *tysiachniki*, with audiences varying from 2853 (Vodennikov) to 26330 (Grishkovets) readers.⁶

It is to these readers-cum-commentators that the literary and PR-related posts in blogs are addressed. If shunning commercial ads on their weblogs, most authors do employ their blog to promote their own work. And they do so avidly: Russian blog writers not only invite readers to public readings, but they also display pictures of new publications, link readers to their personal websites, or re-direct them to sites where their work can be purchased online. Some blogs turn into sellable products themselves: recently Grishkovets, following other cult bloggers such as Alexander Markin and Maksim Kononenko, reworked a series of blog posts into a book (*God zhzhizni*, 2008).

That the 'blook' or blog-to-book shift is not necessarily a successful one, implies the case of polumrak (real name unknown, *polumrak.livejournal.com*). Posting prose bits which were read by an unwavering few thousand readers in the mid-2000s, this blogger was invited by a publisher to rework his entries into a novel – but polumrak's online popularity dwarfs the 300-copy, meagerly-selling print version of *Nathaniel's Book* (*Kniga Natanielia*, 2006).

Turning a blog into a book product is merely one economically strategic move within a media genre where self-PR is all but the rule. According to a recent survey by search engine Technorati, bloggers are highly active in generating traffic to their blogs, which perceptibly enhance both their symbolic and material status.⁷ That this is true for Russia no less than other countries, indicates the fact that several post-Soviet writers started their career with 'a school of guestbooks and forums, and then

⁶ The numbers are taken from the authors' blogs on January 14, 2009.

⁷ For Technorati's *State of the Blogosphere 2008*, see www.technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere.

Livejournal', to quote Sergei Kostyrko. Apart from some of the authors mentioned, a prime example of such a 'blog-born' author is Linor Goralik: the claim to fame of this prominent writer and journalist lies primarily in the popularity of her blog (*snorapp.livejournal.com*).

LITERARY BLOGS AS *KREATIFF*

Outlet for literary creation, sales-strategy playground, career booster: writers' blogs are an undeniable treasure chest for literary pleasures, but they at the same fulfill other functions and rely on non-textual – visual, audiovisual – media. Given that variety in functions and media types, can one still speak of them as literary compositions? 'Near-literariness' is a productive notion, but it doesn't cover the weblog's socio-economic potential. The bloggers mentioned not only produce 'near-literary' content, but they also enact (with the exception, probably, of Tolstaia) an increasingly popular behavioral model among post-Soviet literary professionals – one according to which a writer doesn't need to hide that creative writing can be a means of financial subsistence. Rather than posing as Solzhenitsynesk 'voices of the nation', these writers openly aim at social recognition and financial independence with – literary or other forms of – creative writing in the market economy that Russia is today.⁸

They do so nowhere as openly as in their blogs. Perhaps the content of these blogs is therefore best represented with the notion of *kreatiff*. *Kreativ*: in post-Soviet Russia, that British loan word was introduced to distinguish commercial creative products from highbrow artistic creation. In the deliberate misspellings that mark Russian online slang, *kreativ* became *kreatiff*, its meaning shifted – and today, *kreatiff* is a popular designation both for those online texts which are considered to possess literary qual-

⁸ On socio-economic and professional coping strategies among post-Soviet writers, see, among others, Andrew Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant After Communism*, Chicago 2006.

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ities, and for any text that is published online. Encapsulating notions of literary creation, digitality, and commodification, *kreatiff* is a helpful theoretical concept in understanding the blogs of each of the authors mentioned here, together with many others. As a *kreatiff*: thus one could summarize the post-Soviet writer's blog, with its heterogeneous functions of vehicle for literary production, social-network instrument, and marketing tool. Conceptualizing this intellectual-practical crossbreed in terms of a *kreatiff* is theoretically fruitful, perhaps, more than defining it as 'literary writing', a phrase that covers part of, but certainly not all that happens in Russian writers' *blogi*.

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READING SUGGESTIONS:

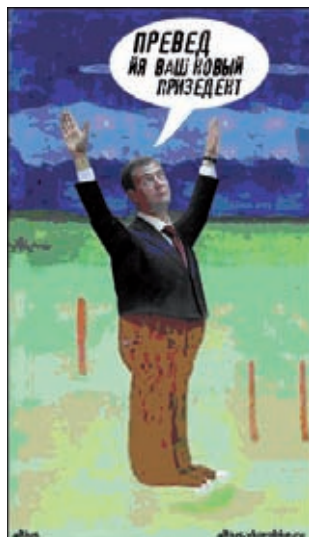
- Ellen Rutten: 'More Than a (Blog) Poet? Why Russian Writers Didn't Blog on the 2008 Elections'. The Russian Cyberspace Journal, issue 1; see <http://www.russian-cyberspace.com/issue/ellen-rutten.html>.
- russ-cyberspace.livejournal.com. Academic blog on (literary) developments in the Russian-speaking Internet, updated several times a month.

MEDVED THE BEAR. DIGITAL FOLKLORE AND POLITICAL MEDVEDIANA (HENRIKE SCHIMDT)

Medved the Bear is perhaps the most popular creation of the digital folklore flourishing in the Russian internet. The figure is based on a picture by the American painter and musician John Lurie: an anthropomorphic bear surprises a couple having sex in the forest. 'Surprise' says the friendly forest-dweller; this is rendered in the Russian version as 'preved' (a phonetic deformation of 'privet' = 'hello'). This gave birth to the cult greeting on the Russian internet and the start-



The original *Medved* (<http://onona.su/197-gavarit-medved-ili-uchim-albanskijj.html>)



ing signal for an autochthonous contemporary legend that is still developing.

The bear *Medved* became the subject not only of jokes and fairy tales but also videos and computer games. In contrast to the guided form of literary hypertext, this form of spontaneous, collective, cross-media storytelling has been a success. Beneficial to the figure's popularity has been the similarity to the surname of President Dmitri Medvedev, who himself is known as an internet freak. As a consequence, a whole range of *Medvediana* has come into being, which has even occasionally been channelled by the Kremlin's media strategists for political PR.

Medved: 'Preved. I am your new president.' (<http://vkorobke.ru/preved20.jpg>)